

## Who was Len Duke?

By his niece Megan, with his sister Jenny (nee Duke), July 2014

*When recently working on our family history, I realised Mum had more stories about Len, which we'd love to share with the skating community - to honour Len, and to provide some personal insight into this remarkable athlete, in the hope that it will inspire others to skate and shine.*



He was an unlikely champion, my Uncle Len. A young man from a humble but loving home, with no formal training in the sport as far as I know, who rode to practice on a pushbike, and ignored his heart doctor's advice to give up skating, Len Duke the 2<sup>nd</sup> went on to create and break records, and set a precedent of passion and dedication to the sport of speed skating.

"My brother Len just had such a love of skating. He was very likeable, and also enjoyed the great friendships with mates who also shared his enthusiasm for the sport," Len's youngest sister Jenny, and only surviving sibling (my Mum), recalls.

**Len Duke with trophies, circa 1951. Courtesy Jenny Duke.**

Midway through World War II, just before Christmas 1941, a nine-year-old Len, along with his parents Len and Lil Duke senior, sister Lil and brother Fran, moved from South Melbourne to North Caulfield. In 1946, as the family celebrated the birth of Jenny, a 14-year-old Len began to take up skating, along with 12-year-old Lil. The sport dominated the family home, with Lil senior looking after the skating uniforms, and the family going along to support the champions-in-the-making.

"I can remember seeing Len going to and from his skating practice (at St Moritz Ice Rink on the Upper Esplanade at St Kilda), or whenever there was a race on. Len had black wool skin tight "tights" as we'd call them - there was no stretch fabric in those days - and a long-sleeved wool top. And there he'd be with his skates hanging around his neck, laced together, jumping on that pushbike of his, and perhaps meeting with Dave Morgan, another skater who lived around the corner from us.

"Len wasn't home much as I grew older as he went to skating practice at St Moritz and the Glaciarium, or committee meetings etc, but when he was a younger skater and still living at home, he would do funny things like run down the corridor and shout "Track!", and we'd all jump back, he'd jump over a table he'd put in the hallway to practice his skating moves! I think that was about jumping over barrels on the ice - I do remember he was asked to join an Ice Skating Show and go touring, but he didn't take up the offer.

"I attended some of his races as a little girl, and I was just so proud. Len was only about 5 feet 7 inches tall, slender build, dark black hair, and had the brightest blue eyes you could imagine. At the beginning of a race,

the skaters would all be lined up at the starting line, the Go gun would go off and Len, like a rocket, would be a great starter and shoot out front and skate so fast it was hard to follow him.

“He’d be right down with his hands touching the ice as he flew along, and he looked so strong and healthy. I was breathless every time I attended. He was probably only 18 years old at the time, I was about four years old. He was so good that he actually raced in more senior races and won them too. I suppose in today’s language you’d call him a pocket rocket.



**Jenny Duke with brother Len’s infamous pushbike, circa 1951. Courtesy Jenny Duke.**

“He also enjoyed the social skating sessions which weren’t competitive, in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

“When I was about six, Len was riding on his bike with his skates around his neck on the way to practice, and was hit by a car. He suffered from a broken neck, and was in plaster from his forehead down, over his shoulders and down his chest and back. Only his face, the top of his head, and his arms were visible.

He had that cast on for months, but Len always had a way around things, and when he was itchy he would take a spoke from his bike and put it down his back and chest to scratch away!

“I loved skating too, but was not interested in speed skating for myself. I was attracted to the pristine white figure skating boots!! As young teenagers, my best friend and I would catch the Dandenong Road tram to St Moritz, on public skating days. I learnt to skate steadily, but not fast, and we would go as often as possible. I took to roller skating like a duck to water. I used to put on a satin skating skirt, a beanie, and go out on to the road near our home (it was in a cul-de sac) and glide along on one leg, jump in the air and turn, and do all sorts of fancy steps. I loved it. Even though Len and Lil had been very successful in speed skating, I never really thought of taking lessons to improve or even compete. I was just happy showing off because I went past eight houses up and down! I can’t remember ever falling over.

“I don’t know where the family interest in skating came from, although a paternal great-grandfather of ours was Norwegian, so skating of some form must be in that branch of the family tree!

“Despite his skating career coming to a halt, Len continued his interest in sport, and was asked to be a judge for athletic events in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.

“Before he began racing, Len was in the Monarchs ice hockey team, I remember the gold crown logo emblazoned on his shirt. As he got older, he became interested in keeping detailed records of the speed skating competitors, competitions, and times etc, all handwritten in a little book, which one of his peers showed my sister Lil and me when we attended the Duke Trophy in Brisbane in 2008. It was wonderful to be so well received, and be able to talk to people who knew Len. I was so proud of my big brother being so well respected. I’m hoping to attend another Duke Trophy in the future.

“My mum and dad (Len and Lil Duke senior), my brother Fran and sister Lil and myself were (and I still am) so very proud of him. Mum kept all the newspaper clippings and photos from his skating days, which I inherited when she died a few years after Len, who died in 1984. I still have them and treasure them to this day.



Skating champion Len Duke (centre) in action, pre 1952. Courtesy Jenny Duke.



“Thank you to Australian Ice Racing for all your hard work, and to all the skaters for following your passion, and to the families for their support, just as the Duke family supported Len all those years ago.”

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