

## **CLIFFORD ROY STAFFORD**

Cliff Stafford was born on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1922. By the time he had reached his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday he had become a member of the National Skating Association of Great Britain. His interest and dedication to the sport of roller speed skating would last another 70 years.

It is fair to say that his competitive skating career was not considered “illustrious”, although he was part of the Leicester Roller Speed Club that won the 1939 Inter-Club Relay Championship. In fact, it was his younger brother, Dennis, who shone in the early days when the Staffords took to the rink and he was duly rewarded with an international call-up in 1958. However, it was Cliff who always seized opportunities and made the most of his organisational skills to make his mark on the skating world.

In 1948 his attentions were turned towards ice and subsequently he founded the Nottingham Ice Speed Club as a result. The club has continued to flourish and in fact this year celebrates its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday! A fitting tribute to Cliff and an achievement of which I am sure he would be proud.

Despite his involvement with ice speed, Cliff continued to support roller speed, and in fact was named captain for the Birmingham Roller Speed Club in the mid-1950's.

By 1959 and at the age of 37, Cliff was looking to wind down his competitive career and maybe take a well earned rest from the tenures of the speed skating world. But the arrival of two New Zealand skaters to these shores put any thoughts of a break firmly on hold. Mervyn Wybrott and Ian Hughes travelled half way around the world to meet and train with the Birmingham Roller Speed Club, of which Cliff was still captain. Being a relatively new nation to the international roller speed skating scene, Cliff took these guys firmly under his wing. Over the next 3 years Cliff would officially become recognised as the New Zealand national Team Manager. His greatest accolade came when Wybrott won the gold medal for New Zealand in the 1960 World Championships in the 20,000 metres on the road in Wetteren, Belgium. In doing so, Wybrott had become the first New Zealander to win a World Championship gold.

When Wybrott and Hughes returned home Cliff found himself at a crossroads in his skating career. He was still involved with the club but his involvement was becoming less and less. Also, the travelling to training from his Leicester home was beginning to become more than a little tiresome. By the early 1970's Cliff's interest had all but vanished.

Then, in 1975, a new club was born! Mercia Roller Speed Club. Out of the ashes of what was once the Midland Olympic Roller Speed Club, which had its base firmly planted in the centre of Birmingham, came Mercia. The idea was to create a club that had more of a “regional” feel rather than a local one. The idea took off immediately and with Leicester skaters such as Len Law, Geoff Mattock and even Cliff's brother Dennis donning a Mercia jersey, it wasn't long before Cliff, too, found himself unable to resist the lure of competition once again. With regular training sessions also taking place in Leicester's Granby Halls this suited Cliff down to the ground. Cliff had also been good friends with the landlords of nearby Mallory Park motor racing circuit and

sure enough he did some of his persuasive negotiating and that, too, became an ideal regular venue for club training.

On 9<sup>th</sup> February 1975, aged 53, Cliff did his first race for the Mercia Roller Speed Club. Over the next 7 years, Cliff continued to enter events for Mercia – his last for the club being in the Northern & Midland Counties in 1982. In those 7 years Mercia had firmly established itself as the most successful club in the country. With international stars such as John E.Fry, John Mullane and Patrick Feetham to name but a few, Mercia was the envy of the skating world – and at the helm as Club Chairman and President, was none other than Cliff Stafford himself.

By the mid 1980's Mercia had given way to a new club, Birmingham Wheels RSC. Effectively, the members were still the same, but the club had changed names to coincide with a new project being opened in the centre of Birmingham that was dedicated to wheeled activities. Cliff continued to be Chairman of the club and in fact donned his skates for them, one last time, on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1994 in the British Marathon Championships held at Skegness. Aged now 72, Cliff secured second place in the “over 60's”. A remarkable achievement for a remarkable man.

Shortly after, Cliff announced that he was stepping down as Chairman, feeling that the sport had moved on considerably with the introduction of in-lines just a few years earlier and that his role was now more of a figurehead rather than anything of practical value to the club. Despite this he continued to support the Birmingham Wheels club and it wasn't often that a Wheels race meeting was held where Cliff was not in attendance.

1994 was also another milestone for Cliff. It was the year that his son and only child, Chris, became an international speed skater, representing Great Britain for the first time at that year's World Championships in Gujan-Mestras, France. Chris's success breathed new life into Cliff and his support of his son in achieving his goals was reminiscent of that he had given two young New Zealanders nearly four decades earlier. With his father's support and knowledge passed down to him, Chris has become one of the most successful roller speed skaters this country has ever seen, with well over 20 national titles and an international career that has taken him to every corner of the globe over the past 14 years!

In 2005, Cliff fell ill and soon after was diagnosed with cancer. Over the next three years he continued to battle the disease, and battle he did. Despite his illness Cliff continued to come to races and socialise with his friends at events. In fact, only last July he could be seen, sticks in hand, dancing away at my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday bash – surrounded by his family and friends who know him so well and who admired his strength of character and wise words. Cliff was certainly one for enjoying life to the full. If it wasn't roller skating it was ice skating, and if it wasn't ice skating it was skiing. Cliff continued to do the things that many people less than half his age are prepared to do. And this alone is testament to what a character Cliff really was.

Sadly, on the morning of 8<sup>th</sup> June 2008, Cliff passed away. He leaves behind him a doting wife, Carol, and a loving son, Chris. But more importantly he leaves behind a legacy amongst his friends and those who knew him best. A legacy that life is there to be lived, so enjoy every minute and embrace every moment.

Clifford Roy Stafford – the kindest of men and the truest of gentlemen.

John Fry (Junior)