

Melbourne Weekly 21 Feb, 2011

Max Walker: From wickets to widgets

Max Walker is showing me a painting of himself that arrived in his Hawksburn office this morning. Expecting something similar to the dozen or so illustrations, watercolours and other prints hanging on every wall showing the former Test cricketer in action, I am a little taken aback when Walker presents a framed and mounted gumleaf with a tiny portrait. "Isn't it great?" he says with genuine enthusiasm. "I've been painted, I've been illustrated, I've been sculpted, but I have never been captured on a gumleaf. And it's a real gumleaf."

Walker was using the painting to illustrate his point about being positive so as to attract the power of the universe and its gifts (including gumleaf art).



It's not the sort of conversation you'd expect to have with a man who is most remembered as a sportsman, TV sporting commentator and Aeroguard spruiker who spoke for a lot of Australians when he said he was only bothered by two things: "batsmen and flies." That Max Walker, it seems, is only one of the man's many sides. "There's sports Max, speaker Max, book author Max and media Max – and now multimedia Max," he explains.

Let's not forget "Tangles" Max. The nickname he earned as a cricketer is the name of the website for the 14 books he has written and just one example of how smart this guy is. After all, he took what some people would have seen as an insult and turned it into a term of endearment that cricket fans embraced.

"Some nicknames can be an embarrassment," he says. "I probably got lucky. Mine came about because of a newspaper photograph with the headline 'Victoria's tanglefoot bowler about to play first shield match'."

The photograph showed the 193cm, pigeon-chested medium-fast-pace bowler's unusual style ("my right arm over the left ear and legs that crossed on the point of delivery"), but it was a style that worked, and Walker went on to play 34 Test matches for Australia. Along with Dennis Lillee and Ian Chappell, he was part of a golden era of Australian cricket. It was also an era when sports media changed.

Media mogul Kerry Packer bought the broadcast rights to Australian cricket, creating a breakaway competition and repackaging the game as one-day matches for Channel Nine. But Walker recalls that not everybody was as willing as he was to embrace the change.

"It was like, wow! Uncomfortable. Bizarre. Challenging and supposedly wrong," he says. But Packer's vision was ratings gold and it introduced the world to Bay 13.

“Bay 13 was an ecosystem in Australia,” Walker recalls. “A whole lot of people. A whole lot of sunshine, not much tanning cream – but they had a whole lot to say.”

Bay 13 was also where Walker started to connect with the fans, becoming one of the most popular men in the sport – made even more so with the catchphrase “Avagoodweekend, Mr Walker” (from the Aeroguard ad) becoming part of the Aussie vernacular.

By the time he retired due to injury and became a commentator, Walker was well and truly a celebrity, but he says he never tried to change who he was – “The slow-talking Tasmanian” – even after 16 years as host of Wide World of Sports.

“I didn’t become a Jana Wendt cut-out,” he says. “I never came out of my pigeonhole, and it was the contrast of me next to my co-host [Ken Sutcliffe] that worked.”

You could say that television was where Max Walker learned to sell Max Walker. His instincts for giving the viewers something they could relate to with his easygoing and entertaining storyteller style had already sprouted two other careers – author and public speaker – as well as creating demand with charities.

So when the axe fell on Wide World of Sports after 16 years, Walker, then 50, “refused to have a pity party” and instead saw an opportunity to reinvent himself – this time as The Max Walker Company.

“It turned out that Max is the brand,” he says, adding that it all took place in the days before people knew much about branding.

Now 13 years and 14 books later (with 1.4 million copies sold), Walker is a fixture on the speaking circuit, with at least two engagements a week, and his marketing skills are highly sought-after.

Although it’s been a great ride, it hasn’t been without its challenges – particularly now with Generation Y as part of his audience. That’s partly what led him to focus on the digital side of his business.

“They’re thinking, ‘Hang on, who is this grey-haired old rooster?’,” Walker says. “You’ve only got three, four minutes to be relevant to these kids. That’s why I like to talk about Facebook and YouTube marketing applications.”

Teaming up with partners in their 20s, Walker combined his ideas, skills and network of contacts with Gen Y’s “unlimited imagination”.

Slowly the team has developed multimedia and digital applications, including an iPhone app for the VRC and the Melbourne Cup, and a new project with multimedia group Bhive, which he describes as a media gateway accessible from mobile phones and other platforms. “It will be only limited by your imagination,” he says.

Walker has taken to digital like a duck to water and can not only speak geek, but has an understanding of it that would put most people to shame. As his personal assistant Elaine Dickson says, he makes digital technology accessible and easy to understand.

“He has his iPhone and his iPad and all the bits and pieces,” Dickson says. “But he also knows how all the bits and pieces work and the jargon and he brings that to everyone else. That’s what I’m excited about: that digital is not a secret society for young people.”

For his part, Walker says he has a foot in both camps. He still uses the personal approach for business (the hand-written note with one of his many fountain pens on his business card), but says that with digital people are only limited by their imagination with the number of ways they can get their message out there.

“Imagination plus association equals possibility. That’s both fantastic and terrifying,” he says.

“But my message is that if a grey-haired old bloke from Tasmania who used to bowl up the hill and into the wind can actually make a reasonably fierce footprint on an iPad, or develop apps, then I like to think other Boomers in particular will have a go.”

With all that he has going on, one suspects Walker may never pick up sticks and join the legions of grey nomads travelling Australia with their caravans – but only because he’s too busy being a silver surfer in cyberspace and living as global citizen.

“Look, I’ll probably die with a Montblanc pen in one hand, in front of big flat TV screen, looking through very thick reading glasses and not sure if to say ‘We’ll be right back’ or ‘Goodbye’.”

But for now you can follow Max on twitter.com/maxxing and www.maxwalker.com.au