

The biggest and best boats and claimed a classic, record books were rewritten and there were some remarkable results. Some of the ingredients that made up the 62nd running of the Rolex Sydney Hobart Race, and showed yet again why it is one of the world's most challenging offshore contests – all 628 nautical miles of it.

It was also a contest that showed the IRC rule really does work: that old boats can beat the new. This time the modern boats were no match for a 33-year-old timber sloop, *Love & War*, when it came to the corrected-time results. And it was a historic win – her third after taking the Tattersalls Cup in both 1974 and 1978.

Prior to the start the interest focused primarily on the developing weather pattern, and the challenge facing Bob Oatley's 30m CBTF supermaxi *Wild Oats XI*, the winner of the triple crown in the previous Hobart – line honours, handicap honours and the race record. Could she do it again?

Given a strong northeasterly, or powerful westerlies across Bass Strait, the big boat could sprint the distance in well under 24 hours, and probably be unbeatable on time. However, three hurdles loomed in her bid: the weather, plus the similarly sized but radically different pair of *Maximus* and *Skandia*. Also lurking in the wings were two other boats with the potential to be first home in a hard race: the Volvo Ocean Race winner *ABN Amro One* and Matt Allen's modified Volvo 70 *Ichi Ban* (ex-*Brunel*).

There was a widely held feeling that *Wild Oats* had it easy last time and wouldn't go the distance in rough weather – a feeling that led to skipper Mark Richards taking the yacht offshore every time there was rough weather in the weeks leading up to the race, just to make sure...

And there was one other element of intrigue – in the form of Sean Langman, the man who, having spent years trying to be first into Hobart, would this time be battling not to be last. Instead of being at the helm of his high-speed 20m offshore skiff *Xena*, Langman and his crew of five would this time be bobbing along sedately aboard the oldest and smallest entry, the 9m 74-year-old gaff cutter *Maluka*, which he has fully restored. Nostalgia seems to have overtaken a need for speed.

A glorious Sydney summer day ensured that the latest Sydney-Hobart would be its usual grand spectacle. Thousands of spectator boats flanked the race fleet of 78 as they charged away from the twin, parallel startlines inside Sydney Harbour.

Helmsman Mark Richards and his tactician Iain Murray executed the perfect start for *Wild Oats XI* on the western side of the harbour. Then, after two-sail reaching at 22kt, the big boat was around the first turning mark at Sydney Heads in record time – 6m 51s – and heading for open sea.

The vast majority of the spectator boats could not keep pace. *Wild Oats XI* and her



# Yer wrong!

The many critics who suggested that a big CBTF maxi could not survive a head-banging beat to Hobart have been silenced. In fact it was the Volvo 70 of Mike Sanderson that came apart while Bob Oatley's slender CBTF 100-footer *Wild Oats XI* barely paused for breath. Rob Mundle reports on the 62nd Sydney-Hobart Race

immediate pursuers, *Skandia*, *Maximus* and *ABN Amro One*, were gone in a blur. In fact, the conditions were so ideal for a fast exit that the entire fleet were clear of the harbour in under 30 minutes, also a new record.

There were early fears that the weather would be horrendous – some 'experts' even venturing to revive memories of the tragic 1998 race. But it would be far from that, even though it was upwind all the way for the frontrunners. Interestingly, a pre-race prediction from Ray Roberts, skipper of one of the handicap favourites, the Cookson 50 *Quantum Racing*, would ring true: 'Sometimes people misunderstand and think Bass Strait is the hardest part of the race, but often the hardest part is the New South Wales Coast.

'You've got a relatively shallow continental shelf, and with a hard southerly

pushing against a strong current you get very steep waves. You could see a few boats damaging their gear in the first 24 hours. The trick is to nurse the boat through this period so that you get through the night and can take advantage of opportunities later.'

That was exactly how this particular race developed. The southerly wind that was countering a fast-flowing southerly current created big waves that were as steep at the back as they were on the face – and the crash landings that came as a consequence brought obliteration for some.

While *Wild Oats* stayed inshore in smoother water on the first night Sanderson stood by his pre-race strategy with *ABN One*: 'This isn't like the round-the-world race where we have to save the boat. It's just one race, and we can afford to go for it. We know our boat better than

Here we go again, as current race record holder *Wild Oats* passes Sydney Heads en route to Hobart. The sophisticated CBTF maxi – built by McConaghy – enjoyed a trouble-free run in tough upwind conditions

anyone so we can push her hard. I think the others might be forced to come off the pace when we will still be sailing to the max.'

It was 3am when *ABN Amro One* found her 'max', in 38kt of wind while approaching Bass Strait. The world champion racer, which was then further south than *Wild Oats*, launched off a big wave and smashed into the trough that followed like a car crashing off a cliff. The impact was massive. And the rig exploded into three pieces.

It was only 30 minutes later, sailing in similar conditions, that disaster also struck *Maximus*. Almost the entire crew were in the cockpit preparing for a tack when the forestay failed. The deck-stepped wing mast crashed back down the centreline on top of the crew, injuring several. The three most seriously injured were lifted off by a rescue helicopter while another two were transported ashore by a police launch that was shadowing the fleet. 'It's a miracle that no one was killed,' said one of the injured crew, Ian Treleaven. 'It was like a war scene. There was blood everywhere and all you could hear was guys moaning and calling for help from under the rig. It was only because the mast and boom landed on a winch and so were held just off the deck that no one was completely crushed.'

A few hours later, 60nm off the south coast of NSW, came another shock. The savage seas claimed the yacht affectionately known as 'The Floating Steinway' – the 1968 race-winner, *Koomooloo*, known across the sailing world for her role in the 1969 Australian Admiral's Cup team. 'We crashed off the first wave really hard, but everything at first looked OK,' said the yacht's owner, Mike Freebairn, from Brisbane. 'Then there was an even louder bang off the next one and we knew we were in trouble... the water was pouring in.'

With the water waist-deep in the cabin the eight crew knew the fight was lost. About 90 minutes after the damage was sustained they abandoned the 38-year-old yacht and took to the liferaft from which they were picked up by the British Army entry *Adventure*. And quite possibly the toughest part of the story, just prior to the incident the timber-hulled *Koomooloo* was leading the fleet on corrected time.

With *ABN Amro* and *Maximus* out only *Skandia*, and possibly *Ichi Ban*, were any threat to *Wild Oats* becoming the first yacht since the classic schooner *Astor*, 42 years earlier, to score back-to-back line honours wins. And *Skandia's* challenge had soon disappeared with a bang when her carbon forward canard snapped off. She was then hamstrung by having to use minimum keel cant and small sails.

Meanwhile, an intriguing battle for handicap honours was by now developing off Tasmania's east coast. Geoff Ross's impressive new Reichel-Pugh 55, *Yendys*, was very

much in the hunt alongside Stephen Ainsworth's R-P 60 *Loki* and *Quantum Racing*. And back in the northern sector of Bass Strait many of the older boats, including *Maluka*, were still in with a chance.

With more than 80nm to go *Yendys* looked like being the boat to beat. She, along with *Loki* and *Quantum Racing*, were pushing hard to the southeast in search of the forecast southeasterly change. Suddenly it arrived – big time.

'I struggle to remember a change quite like it,' said *Quantum's* tactician, Dee Smith. 'It was a real face-plant – an unannounced auto-tack.'

All three were then on the layline for Tasman Island, at the entrance to Storm Bay, and looking famous... until the wind went against the forecast and slammed back into the southwest. It then became a 60nm upwind slog to the Derwent River. Their chance was gone.

Ahead of them *Wild Oats XI* had rounded Tasman Island and for the first time since leaving Sydney the crew could ease sheets. *Oats* then scorched across Storm Bay at 20kt and into the Derwent where the spinnaker went up for the first time. She crossed the line to a tumultuous welcome just after nightfall – but more than 14 hours outside her own record time. Four hours later *Ichi Ban* crossed the line in second place, having managed to overtake the winged *Skandia* in the closing stages of the contest. The conventionally ballasted *Yendys* was fourth into port.

*Ichi Ban* looked the likely winner on corrected time – especially if the breeze softened overnight as expected. But it didn't, and suddenly the older boats at the back were fighting each other for the podium. The end result would be the next best thing to a fairytale. The beautiful old Sparkman and Stephens 47-footer *Love & War* became only the second yacht to win the classic three times. The only other member of this exclusive club is the Halvorsen brothers' *Freya*, which scored three consecutive wins between 1963 and 1965.

*Love & War* was entered in the Hobart race by prominent navigator Lindsay May and a team of friends from Sydney as a tribute to Peter Kurts, the owner of the yacht who had passed away 12 months earlier. Kurts commissioned her from the designers and had kept her in pristine condition from the day she was launched.

'She just loved the hard upwind sailing,' said May, on his 33rd consecutive Hobart. 'Plus we had around 4kt of southerly set when we were way offshore and heading into Bass Strait; that's where we won it.'

Another older classic, the 1978 vintage Cole 43 *Bacardi*, owned by Graeme Ainley and John Williams, from Melbourne, was second, 58 minutes off first place. And much to everyone's delight, the legendary Lou Abrahams, also from Melbourne, was first in class and third overall with his Sydney 38, *Challenge* – another exceptional result for a man who has previously won twice in his 44 Hobarts... to date. □

# THB

## TWIN HALYARD BLOCKS



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