



Tailending the fleet?

The last yacht to finish the 1999 Telstra Sydney to Hobart was the little sloop *Berrimilla*, skippered by Alex Whitworth from the Royal Australian Navy Sailing Association in Sydney, crossing the line less than hour before midnight on January 2, 2000.

Berrimilla's skipper and crew displayed prudent seamanship in sheltering from the southerly gale that battered the smaller boats in the fleet, but with grit and determination they resumed racing to finish the 630 nautical mile rhumbline course. But it took them 920 miles of sailing and seven days 10 hours and 6 minutes to do so.

Here is *Berrimilla*'s story of the 55th Sydney to Hobart:

Just south of St Helen's on New Year's Day, 2000, the captain of a small merchant ship, the *Iron Sturt*, called us up on channel 16 and asked us, very politely, if we were tail-ending the fleet to Hobart.

"Well yes, actually, we are," we replied and after exchanging New Year greetings, we both continued on our voyages. Our's was on to Hobart, still many miles away. As we signed off, we agreed that the fact *Berrimilla* and her crew were still competing in the 1999 Telstra Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race was no small achievement, all things considered.

Berrimilla is a Brolga 33 designed by Australian Peter Joubert in 1964 and built in 1977. She has done nine Hobart races including the very rough 1984 and 1998 races, and this hard race of 1999, at least for the second half of the course. In the 1998 race, *Berrimilla* won PHS in



Alex Whitworth, owner/skipper of *Berrimilla*, bruised and battered but happy to finally reach Hobart. (Pic - courtesy "The Mercury", Hobart)

both the Hobart and the Lord Howe races which is a unique double.

Onlookers at Hobart's Constitution Dock, where we finally berthed around midnight on January 2, may well have described *Berrimilla* as looking rather daggy beside all the modern high-tech hardware in and outside the Dock. So she does, but get up close and you may get a feel for the passion, dedication and care that has gone into getting her ready for the big races over the past six years. She is enormously strong, seaworthy and quite basic and she goes to windward as fast as much bigger boats, particularly in a blow. We have tried out everything in the boat in atrocious weather and it works.

The regular crew is a loose bunch of eight or ten people who sail the boat all the time. We are all friends, we know and trust each other and we have confidence in the boat. Who is on or off for any race depends on family, work and other commitments, but the maxi-

mum for a Cat 1 race is six.

This year, we were better prepared than ever before when we motored to the start and relieved that at last we were away. We worked the start and, for us, got a beauty, just to leeward of *AFR Midnight Rambler* and with relatively clear air.

This was ruined later by spectator boats all over the course near South Head and out to the sea-mark.

The first two days were just like last year, chasing the big kite downwind at close to *Morning Glory*'s record pace of 1996 Routine, except that we found the only hole on the entire east coast just off Eden and almost parked for a couple of hours.

Several sail changes later we opened our celebratory Cascades at half way, almost exactly two days out. *Nokia* had finished and we were waiting for the forecast 40 knots from the south. A final meal of chilli prawns and we watched the change move in. It came at first at 35 knots, directly up the rhumbline, then 40, then 50 by nightfall!

At this point, with three reefs and the #4, the boat was going very fast and pounding into a short steep breaking sea. We decided to go for the storm gear. The tri-sail slowed the boat from about 8 to 7 knots and the storm jib should have completed the job, but Alex got his face wrapped around the inner forestay while setting it and we decided to stick to the tri-sail and reassess the situation.

Alex's face looked a mess and we sent him below to his bunk, but he seemed OK. "Absolutely no helicopters please and bloody well keep racing" came the order, so we set the storm jib on the inner forestay and took a long tack westwards into the lee of Flinders and Cape Barren Islands where the seas were a bit easier and we could make a little better progress.

A night and a day and a night later, about 45 short tacks through the shoals around Cape Barren and North Eastern Tasmania down to Eddystone Point and we were abeam of St Helens

around midnight. We had lost our ability to charge the batteries a day or so earlier because water had got in through a partially open mushroom vent left open to accommodate the aerial lead for the Comsat 2, as a last minute compromise to avoid drilling the deck.

From St Helens we tried a long tack out to sea and came back in at Scamander with minimal gain. At midday on New Years Eve we used the handheld VHF to get a forecast from Scamander Coastal Patrol - 36 hours more of 35 to 50 knots from the south. A short discussion and we agreed that the mathematics did not add up. We had three people with more or less serious injuries, no charging ability, intermittent problems with the engine starter and the prospect of another two days bashing into the gale. We needed to stop and fix things and get some rest.

The alternatives were Bicheno, about a day upwind, or Skeleton Bay, about 14 miles astern. No choice really and we surfed back to Skeleton Bay with 50 knots apparent at times in 8 metre seas and dropped anchor.

With everything hung out to dry, we fixed the electrics, which was simple in calm water with no green ones breaking over the boat.

New Year's eve in Skeleton Bay. Appropriate for a millennium sleepover. We had some lamb curry given to us by Jack Kristofferson after his brave attempt to get away in time to make Cape Horn before the window closed, and just a little OP rum to round it off. Several replays of Monty Python, a passable imitation of Pete and Dud doing Jayne Mansfield's lobster and everyone was asleep by 10. Bugger the millennium!

At 0700 on New Year's Day we were off again, into a 20 - 30 knot southerly which at least allowed us to move south down the coast. We reached the point at which we had turned back the day before exactly 21 hours after turning back and the last three boats had sailed past us while we were anchored.

This was when the *Iron Sturt* called us up and asked us how we were going. Happy New Year all round.

The rest was routine. Calm, blow, furious sewing of a huge tear in the #1 while the kite was up at Tasman Island and the usual busters at the Island.

And the opportunity for the definitive photo of the race: as we rounded TI. *Mari-Cha III* was at Cape Raoul on her way back to Sydney a week or so after she had finished and we crossed south of Port Arthur. They were estimating Sydney in one day and 19 hours. Isn't technology wonderful?

So up the Derwent in the dark in a dying breeze, the first time we have finished at night and into a very quiet Constitution Dock. About eight other boats and some backpackers who shared their fish and chips with us.

We had sailed 920 miles to get there, 600 odd since passing half way, into a constant southerly from Bass Strait to the Hippolytes. The Brolga was undamaged but the crew were exhausted, battered, thirsty and exultant - we were in Hobart, later than usual but with honour intact.

In relative terms this race was harder than 1998, but maybe not as hard as 1977. In 1998 we had 60-70 knots full on for 12 hours and the rest was easy. In 1977 we had six days of southerly winds reaching 60 knots, with an 80 knot gust at Tasman Island.

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