



ROLEX SYDNEY HOBART YACHT RACE

NEWS RELEASE

18 December, 2016

Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race: Remembering Roger Hickman

There will be excitement and adventure in the 2016 Rolex Sydney Hobart - there always is - but there will also be a little melancholy, as this will be the first Hobart post-'Hicko', Roger Hickman, one of the most respected and admired ocean racing yachtsmen in Australia.

Hickman steered his beloved 30 year old Wild Rose to victory in the 2014 race, revelling in the accolades and prestige that goes with holding the Tattersall's Cup for the next year. He sailed Wild Rose to sixth place in the 2015 race, a remarkable result, delivering yet again a master-class in boat driving and the arcane arts of the East Australian current.

And then, out of the blue, he collapsed dockside in Hobart. A brain tumour would take Roger two months later.

The Australian sailing fraternity, already mourning the loss of Bob Oatley of Wild Oats fame, was deeply shocked.

Derek Sheppard, who often raced his Beneteau 45 Black Sheep in the same division as Wild Rose, says the most striking thing about Hicko was his generosity. "When I bought Black Sheep he was so helpful, helping me understand ocean racing and how to be competitive.

"He's raced at the top level among the pros, but he also knows about racing on a tight budget like we do. He used to say 'leave no stone unturned', he was always tinkering, but he taught me which of the thousands of stones you needed to turn first," Sheppard says.

"Even though we became rivals, he would ask me to race on his boat sometimes, and I'd learn what he was doing. Not many competitors would do that. After we raced against each other there would always be the inevitable two hour debriefing call the next day."

Jenifer Wells, who navigated Wild Rose to victory in 2014, sailed with Hickman for 10 years: "This will be hard for so many people. He gave so many of us a start; was generous with his time, knowledge. Everything. "Everyone loved him. This would have been his 40th (Hobart)."

Sheppard jokes that one of the greatest challenges Hicko faced was navigating from the car park to the Club. "It could take him hours." Dockside, Hickman was always ready with a self-

deprecating one liner. It seemed there was a permanent grin tattooed across his face, and if anyone needed a good quote, you could always rely on Hicko.

Wells remembers often stirring in her bunk to the sounds of Hicko singing at the helm, or cracking everyone up with a joke when things were going well. "He was a lot of fun," she says, "but he was also very tough on the boat, demanding the highest standards, and the more you learned, the more he expected of you.

"You were never in your comfort zone. He just couldn't lower his expectations. 'When we're racing, we're not out here for a good time,' he'd say, 'you have to do your best because every second counts. You can lose by seconds. One mistake can blow the race.'"

Hickman was very good at winning ocean races, but his outstanding contributions to ocean racing goes well beyond the podium. After the disastrous 1998 race, he headed the CYCA investigation committee. Out of that he wrote a new curriculum for the Safety and Sea Survival course that has since been adopted worldwide.

And he brought many women sailors to a sport that for too long had been a very blokey affair. In recent years Wild Rose' crew was split 50/50 between the sexes. Hickman frequently declared he preferred women who were starting out, over men, because they were more resilient, listened and brought less ego to the boat.

"He reckoned women brought the bulls**t factor down. He used to say there was only room for one ego on the boat, and that was his," Wells laughs. "He just saw us as crew – not men and women. He made sure we got the opportunity to do it all on the boat. We weren't just pigeon-holed into a job. He didn't like it when young guys hogged the more physical jobs.

"That's the great thing about yachting - men and women can compete equally. It's all about individual strengths and weaknesses, will and attitude, not gender."

Sheppard has taken over Hicko's mantle on this one. Three of Wild Rose's crew have joined the Black Sheep crew this year: "The women make up for any lack of strength with personal discipline. You show them once, they listen, and they don't forget. They bring very high energy to the boat, but also a nice calmness," Sheppard says.

"We've found that having women on board encourages the partners of the sailors to get involved. It makes it a bigger social activity, and the more everyone integrates into the program, the more complete package it becomes."

It has taken a long time, but these days every sport in Australia is beginning to realise that its very survival will depend on attracting as many young women as men. Hickman got it.

"For a number of us this will be our first race without Roger," Wells says. "We'll have fun along the way, shed a few tears, and be thankful for what he's given us over the years. It'll be very emotional to get there without him, but his family will be there to welcome us."

Entries in the race are now at 90, following the withdrawal of the Victorian entry, Avalanche.

The start of the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race will be broadcast live on the Seven Network throughout Australia.

By Jim Gale, RSHYR media

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Photo Captions & Credit:

2014 Overall Winner Wild Rose (Roger Hickman holding Rolex timepiece) - Credit ROLEX Daniel Forster

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