



ROLEX SYDNEY HOBART YACHT RACE

NEWS RELEASE

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Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race: Another record for Adrienne Cahalan

Ho hum, Adrienne Cahalan is about to break yet another yachting record – this time in the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia's Rolex Sydney Hobart - this is a woman who has been a finalist in four international Yachtswoman of the Year nominations, named Australian Yachtswoman of the year in 2002-3 and written a book on her exploits.

Cahalan has competed in a string of Whitbread/Volvo Ocean Races, was navigating the 125 foot catamaran Cheyenne in 2004 when she broke the round the world record, this after navigating and co-skippering another catamaran, Maiden II, two years earlier when it smashed the record for most miles covered in 24 hours.

The Sydney sailor was also watch leader on Nicorette when it broke the Transatlantic record in 1997 and took line honours on it in the 2000 Sydney Hobart. She has, in fact, broken eight speed records, skippered an 18ft skiff in the early nineties, having previously been a champion 12-foot skiff sailor, a boat she still sails.

And of course Cahalan has navigated Wild Oats XI to five line honours victories, including two trebles – line honours, overall and race record. She has six Hobart line honours and two overall Hobart wins to her name – more than most yachties.

This is a woman who recast the rough and tumble, macho world of Sydney 18 foot skiff racing in 1992 and 1993 at the tiller of the all-girl Ella Bache. In December she will become the first woman to compete in the milestone 25 Sydney Hobarts, this time on board Syd Fischer's TP 52 Ragamuffin, skippered by his grandson Brenton.

Seriously, 25 Hobarts is a fabulous achievement, and enormously important for a sport whose future rests as much on attracting young women as young men. When you have achieved as much in world ocean racing as the girl from a non-sailing family who started out knocking about in Hobies and Lasers on the Lane Cove River, where does this stand?

"I'm very excited, very proud," Cahalan says. "Just like there are milestones in your life there are many milestones in yachting, and this definitely has to be one of the biggest ones. A lot of things have to come together to get to 25, so it's a very special time. Mind you, I still have to get there. I'm getting nervous. I feel like I should wrap myself in cotton wool until Boxing Day," she says.

“It is a really difficult race to win, because so many things have to come together. The different conditions each year mean there is no guaranteed formula or type of boat. That’s what makes it interesting. A large percentage of the fleet has a real chance of winning.

“But you have to be in the right place to do it, and have a certain level of skill and preparation to be in the hunt.”

As a navigator, Cahalan is to be found at the back of the boat, crafting the next move on a 628 nautical mile chessboard.

Before the inception of GPS, the internet and constant weather feeds capable of predicting a boat’s optimal speed in any specific weather - back when Cahalan crewed her first ride to Hobart in 1984, 90 percent of a navigator’s time was spent working out where the boat was and what the other boats in the fleet might or might not be doing. This based on whether they told the truth or fibbed a bit about where they were at the last sched.

These days everyone knows where they are and where everyone else is every minute of the race. The humble nav table perched over a sea bunk has given way to a dark cubby-hole, usually under the companionway, bristling with screens and Internet and satellite connections. It is a collection and analysis centre for a phenomenal amount of real time data.

For weeks before the race, skippers and ‘naviguessers’ pore over sophisticated weather models developed in the US, Europe and Australia, as they plan a race strategy. The navigator has become the person who turns all this data into usable knowledge.

“The most crucial decisions early in the race are how far offshore you go to find wind and current. Current is the big thing.” Cahalan says.

The shortest route to Hobart is down the Rhumbline, not far off the coast, but often it is not the quickest. If you are on a boat doing, say 10 knots through the water but the current down the coast is 2 to 3 knots, your real speed over the ground is boosted by up to 30 percent.

Unfortunately, nothing ever comes free. If there is a big southerly blowing against that 3 knot current, the waves will be big, steep and potentially boat breaking. And even if the fleet starts in a nice, brisk northerly, the wind won’t be from the same direction all the way to Hobart.

“This is a latitude race. You start at 33 South and finish at 43,” Cahalan explains. “In a lot of races you are going across a latitude, so you ride one weather system all the way. In the Hobart, you actually cross from system to system, so timing the changes is really important.”

“Not only are there a couple of systems to navigate, but there are transition zones between each system. Often a race is won and lost in those transition zones.

“So you have to constantly set yourself up for the weather pattern ahead, not just manage the weather you are in,” she says.

“Race 1 is down the NSW coast and across Bass Strait. Race 2 starts as the fleet approaches Tasmania. Where do you close the Tasmanian coast, and when, and at what angle will you reach Tasman Island?”

“Do you want to go close? Is there a wind shadow from those big cliffs?” Each year the answer is different because the wind direction and strength is different, and if you can’t get round Tasman Island by midday, you may not reach the merciless Derwent River before it goes to bed like a country granny.

“There are an enormous number of decisions to be made in this race. As much as you can agree on a plan before the race is better. Because if the conditions are bad, it isn’t a great time to talk collaboratively, so you try to go through all the scenarios on the dock, based on the forecasts.

“A lot of my job is assembling all the information we can get and working out what the priorities are, because you only have a limited amount of space and time out there. Prioritise what is going to win you the race, and sometimes what is going to stop you from losing the race, what you need to focus on, and what you can ignore because it isn’t a deal breaker.

“With the experience I have, and all the races I’ve sailed around the world, I have a feeling for what has worked in the past.”

At 52, and with two kids now, Cahalan doesn’t have the option any more of disappearing for two years on a Volvo 70 project, but there is still a lively international circuit to keep her engaged. And she has a career in international maritime law to fall back on. By co-incidence the year of her 25th Hobart is the 25th anniversary of her admission to the Bar.

Really? Law? If sport is a tough gig for a woman, the legal profession remains famously Neanderthal. But Cahalan was never going to be the sort of person to be put off by grumpy old men.

“When I was young and inexperienced I never saw anything as a barrier. I just bowled in, said ‘here I am, this is what I can do, let’s get on with it’.”

But she was always ground-breaking.

“The main thing is to get more women into the network and encouraging people into the sport; it’s important that women can see opportunities there.

“Ludde Ingvall, (of Volvo 70 and Nicorette fame and skipper of the radical CQS this year) has always been a champion of women. When we broke the Trans-Atlantic record, the two watch leaders were women. When we broke the 24-hour distance record, I was co-skipper and we had an equal number of men and women in the crew.

“Ludde has had an enormous impact. If you look at all the top names in Volvo racing you’ll find at some time they sailed on Ludde’s boats.

“The word diversity is often used but it is an important word. It makes a team more flexible and workable. We’re all individuals bringing our own unique inputs, and women are different from men,” Cahalan ends.

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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Photos and captions:

Adrienne Cahalan after line honours in 2015 Giraglia - credit ROLEX/Carlo Borlenghi
Mark Richards, Adrienne Cahalan & Rolex's Patrick Boutellier after Wild Oats past success in Rolex Sydney Hobart - credit ROLEX, Carlo Borlenghi

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