

2017 Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race

Race Report – Will Oxley, Navigator, Overall Winner *Ichi Ban*

The long-range meteorological models get better every year. For the 73rd edition of the Rolex Sydney Hobart Race, the European Ensemble modelling was in very strong agreement about the race weather. Six days before the start of the 73rd race, these ensemble models were indicating another record year was on the cards. The models all settled on a start in light easterlies, building and going left to ENE then NE. For the 50-60 footers, 20-30 knots downwind sailing was predicted across Bass Strait. The only real uncertainty in the forecast, for this mid-sized yacht, was how the Derwent would behave on the morning of the 28th December.

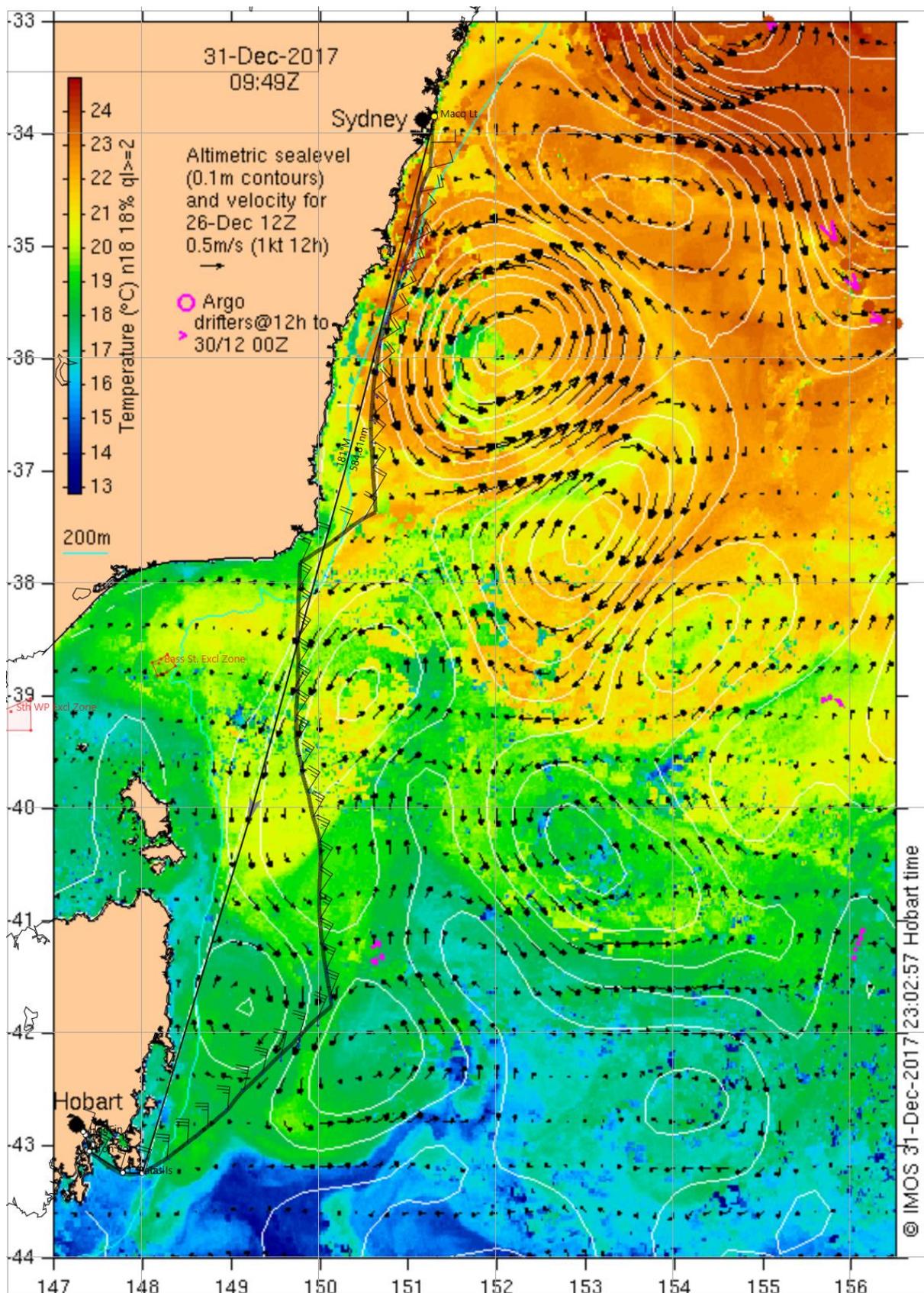
With such strong agreement in the weather models, 2017 was a race primarily about yacht and sail handling, with an emphasis on trimming and driving.

For the TP 52 type yachts and larger, the race period lined up almost perfectly with the weather systems. A weak front passed through Sydney on Christmas Day and a following high-pressure, moved east of Tasmania on the morning of the 26th. This situation produced an easterly gradient. As the high-pressure system continued east, this set up strong running conditions on the western side.

Given the fast, downwind running speeds, the East Australian Current played a relatively smaller role this race. There was a large counter current eddy butted up against the main stream, positioned approximately 60nm South East of Jervis Bay.

As predicted, the race began in a light E-ENE around 10 knots. Once outside the heads, the breeze stayed quite light for a few hours, while slowly backing into the NE. After around 1600, the wind built to 15-20 knots. This resulted in the maxis averaging speeds into the 20's while the chasing 50 footers averaged speeds in the mid-teens. The Clipper fleet and the fast 40 footers were averaging low teens by this time. The Volvo 70 *Wizard* excelled in these conditions and was an early leader, with the TP52's, *Ichi Ban* and *Quest*, also high up in the handicap honours.

Twelve hours into the race the 100 footers were already off Green Cape with the fleet continuing to enjoy great running conditions. The weather models suggested stronger breeze on the western side of the race course. The Sea Surface Temperature imagery also showed a counter-clockwise current eddy to the east of Bass Strait, with more favourable southerly current on the western side (See Figure). There was also some wrapping of the breeze around the South Eastern corner of mainland Australia. All these circumstances led to most of the top 30 yachts gybing soon after getting south of Gabo Island.



With the fast running conditions, over half the fleet were east of Green Cape by around 0900 on the 27th, while the leading maxis were already east of Flinders Island. *Ichi Ban*, the

leading 52, was around 53nm south of Gabo by this time. On IRC handicap, *Wizard* was again leading the fleet with *Beau Geste* in handicap contention.

For the leading 50 footers and above, the 27th produced the most difficult sailing conditions. It was hard downwind running in 25-33 knots with a building sea state. Many yachts suffered significant sail damage as chutes blew out. Conditions eased later in the day.

The afternoon and evening of the 27th was a key decision point in the race. Some yachts gybed into towards the Tasmanian coastline, while others continued south on port gybe. The wind was forecast to back into the NNW overnight and to build. The leading 52 footers gybed towards Tasman Island around 2000 hrs on the 27th. At this time, *Ichi Ban* was 85nm east of Bicheno and 133 nm NE of Tasman Island. Incredibly, at the same time, *LDV Comanche* and *Wild Oats XI* were entering the Derwent in light winds. 20% of the fleet were already east of Tasmania.

On handicap, *Chutzpah* had moved into first place, with *Quest* in second and *Celestial* third. That evening, after passing *LDV Comanche* in the Derwent River, *Wild Oats XI* crossed the finish line at 21:48 with *LDV Comanche* close behind at 22:15.

By the morning of the 28th December, the next low- pressure system passed south of Tasmania with a trough across the state. Prior to the passage of the trough, a maximum gust of 40 knots from the North was recorded at Tasman Island (0607am). *Ichi Ban* passed south of Tasman Island around 0330am with gusty northerlies of 20-25 knots. As *Ichi Ban* passed Cape Raoul the wind veered, and she was able to beam reach all the way to the Iron Pot, entering the Derwent just after 0500. Meanwhile, *Chutzpah* was still ripping down the east coast of Tasmania doing 14's and in with a chance of overall honours on handicap. Over half the fleet were now across Bass Strait.

Ichi Ban crossed the finish line at 0810am after a nervous time in the light winds of the Derwent. *Patrice* was ripping across Storm Bay and leading on handicap with *Quest*, *Concubine*, *Smuggler* and *Chutzpah* still in contention.

By the afternoon of the 28th though, the passage of the trough had disrupted the strong running conditions off the east coast, and the chances of a smaller yacht taking the overall honours, leaving *Ichi Ban* with the overall title.

Another front passed over Tasmania on the 29th December. This was followed by a third front on the 30th which, this time, had very strong SW-W winds in its wake. Tasman Island reported a max gust of 47 knots from the South West at 1006 on the 30th.

There were 96 finishers and 6 retirees. Two of the retirees did so because of rudder issues; one due to a broken boom; one due to a broken mast; one due to sail damage and one yacht had to retire when their HF radio stopped working.

History shows that the 2017 race was indeed another record year. Unfortunately, a protest, resulting from an incident in Sydney Harbour, impacted on the line honours result. The media attention on this marred the great performances by both *LDV Comanche* and *Wild Oats XI* crews. In the end, whilst *Wild Oats XI* posted the fastest race time to Hobart ever achieved, their one-hour penalty meant that the record books for 2017 will forever show a new open race record was set by *LDV Comanche*, in a time of one day, nine hours, 15 minutes and 24 seconds. *Ichi Ban* also set a new conventionally ballasted race record in a time of one day, 19 hours, 10 minutes and 20 seconds.