

Rolex Sydney Hobart proves major drawcard



Ella Bache Another Challenge
Skipper Jessica Watson
Andrea Francolini

The 67th Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race has once again proven itself a major drawcard among the worldwide sailing fraternity with a fleet of 96 boats anticipated on the Sydney Harbour start line on Boxing Day, 26 December.

The majority Australian fleet will join with those heading down under and across the Tasman Sea to form ranks with the locals. Yachts are being shipped and sailed from as far abroad as the United Kingdom for the international sporting event with the formidable reputation.

At today's official race launch to announce the fleet and meet a panel of select skippers and crew, Cruising Yacht Club of Australia (CYCA) Commodore Garry Linacre said, "Once again there is extraordinary diversity among the fleet, which is what makes this event so unique.

"Nine metre yachts up against 30 metre super maxis to become only the 67th overall winner from the many thousands who have tried is a significant feature of the race's appeal.

"The lure of the anticipation and ultimate crossing of the notorious eastern Bass Strait and the camaraderie of the Hobart arrival is appealing in itself for most sailors," added the Commodore.

He also highlighted at today's launch, held at the host yacht club, a noticeable trend - young sailors taking up the helm and making key decisions as skipper.

Among the fleet, three offspring will be in charge of the family boat and solo yachtswoman, Jessica Watson, will lead her young crew, with an average age of just 19, across 628 nautical miles of open ocean following the 1pm start on Sydney Harbour.

"It's wonderful that Jess will be skippering the 38 footer Ella Bache Another Challenge and three new young skippers, two just 18, will embrace the role's significant responsibilities, said Commodore Linacre.

"Unlike most sports, the Rolex Sydney Hobart is truly intergenerational and this year in particular the younger generation is making its presence felt."

Watson and her full Hobart crew are headed off on a 'dry run' to Hobart today as part of their pre-race training. "A lot of preparation has gone into doing my first Hobart race. We are taking it very seriously. We've been training for the last two to three months and all of us have offshore experience."

Commenting on the weather predictions for their journey, Watson said "We've looked at the weather, and strange as it might sound, we're hoping for a bit of a shake-up, it'll be good to experience." Conditions are predicted to 30 knots and rough tonight and tomorrow, with the 18 year-old joking that "It will be a 'wet' run, rather than a 'dry' run."

At 84, Syd Fischer is the Rolex Sydney Hobart race elder as skipper of his lightning quick TP52 Ragamuffin, a moniker synonymous with the event. This year marks Fischer's 43rd race south and he will once again stand should to shoulder with crewman Tony Ellis for the pair's 39th blue water classic together.

Ellis was due to equal the record for most Rolex Sydney Hobarts for an individual - 45 -however the record holder, Tony Cable, is making his return this year aboard Damien Parkes' JV52 Duende. All going to plan, Cable will set a new record of 46 and stay a race out of Ellis' reach.

Each year organising clubs, the CYCA and finish club, the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania, recognise 25 and 40 races by individuals by presenting medallions at the race finish. This year there will be an amazing 10 recipients of the 25 race medallion - among them David Hodgson, crewman from the radio relay vessel JBW - the single largest presentation ever made.

At today's launch, Ragamuffin crewman Larry Jamieson represented the large group due to be awarded a 25 race medallion following the completion of the Rolex Sydney Hobart 2011.



Martin Power's 1978-built Peterson 44 Bacardi and Chris Dawes' Polaris of Belmont are readying to equal Phillip's Foote Witchdoctor's record 27 races, the most for an individual boat. Dawes' yacht once held the record, but a couple of missed races has left the Cole 43 playing catch-up.

Sean Langman's 1932-built gaff rigged 9.01m yacht Maluka of Kermandie is at almost 80; the most senior as well as the smallest yacht in the fleet.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the two 30.48m super maxis being groomed for what promises to be another thrilling line honours duel.

Both Bob Oatley's 100 foot Wild Oats XI and Anthony Bell's same sized Investec Loyal have been under the surgeon's knife this year, undergoing age defying modifications that have made Wild Oats XI more slippery than ever warns skipper and launch panellist Mark Richards.

Wild Oats XI is aiming for its sixth line honours win from seven starts and is still the current course record holder with a time of 1 day 18 hours 40 minutes 10 seconds, set in 2005.

Bell's Investec Loyal finished only nine minutes adrift of Wild Oats XI in this year's 384 nautical mile Sydney Gold Coast race, demonstrating the Elliott 100 can stay in touch with the champion Reichel Pugh design.

Investec Loyal will once again carry a crew made up of some of the world's best sailors and sports celebrities, including the likes of rugby greats and repeat performers, Phil Waugh and Phil Kearns, who have developed a real taste for the sport. Others will be announced throughout the coming month.

Joining the Investec Loyal crew again this year is world champion boxer Danny Green. "I'm mad and I'm a glutton for punishment," Green said at the launch today. "I've always been scared about being out in the middle of the ocean on a boat – so I went the first time to overcome that fear. When I was out there, I couldn't wait to get off the boat, but once I got off the boat, I couldn't wait to get back on it. There's a great camaraderie on Investec Loyal and I've missed that."

Unlike other sport majors, at the finish of the Rolex Sydney Hobart's gruelling 628 nautical miles there's no winner's cheque. The hand wrought sterling silver Tattersall's Cup, first presented to the winner of the second Sydney Hobart in 1946 and the promise of a Rolex Yacht-Master timepiece holds enough mystical appeal to keep drawing sailors from around the world.

On recent form, Darryl Hodgkinson's Beneteau First 45 Victoire and Stephen Ainsworth's Loki are being touted as strong runners for the IRC overall win, Victoire firming her chances with a corrected time win in last weekend's Cabbage Tree Island Race.

There are plenty more yachts and crews among the 80% of the fleet eligible for the IRC win capable of stealing the limelight.

All Australian states are represented on the starter's list, while six international entries will sail for the UK, USA, France, New Zealand and Hong Kong.

In the Rolex Sydney Hobart 2010, 87 runners and riders made the start line and 18 crews missed out on the celebratory drink in Hobart due to a blast of gale-force winds on day two, which knocked them out in quick succession.

The 96 boat owners who successfully nominated for entry for the 67th edition of the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race will now complete an entry form, due at the CYCA by 1700hrs on Friday 2 December.

By Lisa Ratcliff, Rolex Sydney Hobart media team



Rolex Sydney Hobart Media Launch Panel – L-R: Danny Green (Investec Loyal), Darryl Hodgkinson (Victoire), Mark Richards (Wild Oats XI), Jessica Watson (Ella Bache Another Challenge) and Larry Jamieson (Ragamuffin) Andrea Francolini



Mark Richards (Wild Oats XI) and Danny Green (Investec Loyal) were friendly rivals today Andrea Francolini