

Bumper field for Sydney to Hobart

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- From: [The Daily Telegraph](#)
- November 22, 2011

A SAILING starlet, two aging ladies and a bevy of sporting celebrities will be the focus of attention when a fleet of around 90 yachts set sail in the 67th edition of the famous Sydney to Hobart yacht race.

Line honours contenders Wild Oats and Loyal have been given makeovers in the lead-up to the 628 nautical mile race, while solo sailor Jessica Watson has assembled the youngest crew in history for her tilt at winning the overall honours.

But when it comes to star power, Anthony Bell's 100-footer Loyal has already won the race with the likes of boxer Danny Green confirming he will return to the race alongside other celebrities still to be revealed.

Wild Oats XI skipper Mark Richards and Bell have both given their yachts an overhaul in a bid to squeeze more speed out of them for the expected two-boat race south starting on Boxing Day.

Both have modified their keels and will be sporting new sails.

"There's no question (that) with the modifications we have done and some pretty exciting new sails coming on as well, the boat is going to be as fast as it has ever been," Richards said at today's launch.

"It's certainly going to give us every chance of giving it a good shake-up.

"They (Investec LOYAL) are a big threat and we've got a lot of respect for each other and we are looking forward to a great race.

"I think it will be a close race."

Just nine minutes separated the pair a year ago, with Wild Oats now chasing her sixth line honours win in the race and Loyal her first.

Further back in the fleet, round the world solo sailor Watson will be at the helm of a 38-footer with crewmates boasting an average age of just over 19.

"I'm nervous, yes, but I can't wait," said Watson, at 18, only just old enough to compete in the classic for the first time.

The fleet will also boast a number of veteran sailors, including 84-year-old Sydney Fischer.