

# 'Pretty girl' Brindabella still people's favourite

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Ocean going ... Jim Cooney on Brindabella. Photo: Louie Douvis

**Brindabella will always hold a special place in the hearts of sailing fans, writes Rupert Guinness.**

The days of Brindabella being championed as a line honours favourite for the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race are in her wake. But, when this year's 67th edition starts on Boxing Day, the 18-year-old 80-footer will still be the people's favourite in the spectator fleet.

However, ask its Sydney owner of two years, Jim Cooney – who has made his career developing wind farms – and Brindabella is sailing as fast and well as ever in a lifespan that includes a line honours win 1997 – and a still-standing 1999 race record for a conventionally ballasted boat.

Cooney rates the chances of bettering that record of 1 day 20 hours, 46 minutes and 33 seconds as slim – and reliant on having the perfect conditions like the ones that blessed the 1999 fleet when Nokia Volvo 60 virtually surfed southwards to victory in 1 day 19 hours 18 minutes and 2 seconds. But then he doesn't totally rule out the idea – or, as some may suggest, the dream. "It would be wonderful," Cooney said. "We would love to do better. It is a tall order. It is a goal for us to see if we can beat [it]. But we would need the same conditions, or better."

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Then again, the prospect of one day owning Brindabella was also a dream and one he realised when he bought the Scott Jutson-designed yacht off the family of the late Andrew Short, who had purchased it from George Snow, the man who had built and sailed it into sailing history.

Brindabella, with a kevlar hull that still bears the same white aeroplane paint that Snow applied, is very much an icon of Sydney Harbour. The sight of multimillion-dollar super maxis like Wild Oats XI, Investec Loyal, Lahana and Wild Thing on the harbour starting line before the 628 nautical mile race constantly raises interest. But it is the sight of Brindabella that touches the hearts of many Sydneysiders – sailing aficionados or not.

It does not bear the livery of sponsors of her multimillion-dollar opponents. And like "Old Faithful", it returns year after year to compete in one of Sydney's great sporting traditions. Today Brindabella not only represents sailing history but the image of an underdog that never surrenders. "It's one of the those boats we have grown up with and my kids have grown up with as well. She was always *the* boat – the prettiest boat in the harbour," Cooney said. "She is beautifully proportioned, very well designed and [owning her was] one of those dreams we had for a long time."

Cooney first thought of buying Brindabella in 2004 but then he and his family lived in the United Kingdom. So, he waited until moving back to Australia in 2009. "We thought we might kick ourselves in five years if we don't do this . . . she might end up at the Whitsunday carrying backpackers, which would be wrong for a beautiful boat like Brindabella," Cooney says. "It was a great opportunity to own what will be a lasting piece of Australian sailing history." Cooney has no illusion that Brindabella might beat the likes of Wild Oats XI, which reportedly can clock over 30 knots. Brindabella, he says, can still challenge the super maxis in a start: "There is no doubt the start line is competitive whichever boat you are in. Last year, we were the first over the start line [on Boxing Day]. Making a good start of it is within the realm of every boat. Of course, it all happens after that – who can accelerate, who can maintain their speed. And we are realistic about where Brindabella sits. She is an IMS designed boat. She is built of kevlar, so she is heavier [in the way she was built, not in mass] than the carbon boats and built with a different set of design rules. So, she doesn't rate as well in IRC terms. But she still has 80 feet of waterline length. She can still get up and fly. Our goal when buying the boat was to restore her to her best and get her going as fast as ever. Our stretch target was to see if we could ever improve on that. The 100-footers are beyond her. But because of the construction and robustness of the build, that she is kevlar and a little more flexible than carbon boats, we can press her when others are saving their boat from breakage. We can think about pushing her when others think of easing off. There's an opportunity to do very well in the right conditions."

Cooney is immensely proud that Brindabella goes as well as she does. He has sailed her at 18-22 knots "for sustained periods" and says she can nudge over 25 knots. And now, he adds, crews on more technically advanced and heavily budgeted rivals are even taking note. Cooney, who has invested \$500,000 into Brindabella's maintenance and upkeep over the past two years, says: "Some have commented that they feel she is closer to them than they have ever seen her. We haven't changed anything in the structure."

No surprise then that one person who has kept a close eye on Brindabella is the man who owned her in the first place – Snow. So much so, that Cooney says he may even take a cameo turn at the helm this summer.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/sport/pretty-girl-brindabella-still-peoples-favourite-20111217-1p069.html#ixzz1hDPMfjwK>