

Investec Loyal skipper confident protest against race win will be dismissed

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INVESTEC Loyal skipper Anthony Bell remained supremely confident this morning that the race committee's protest against his yacht's line honours in the Rolex Sydney-Hobart race would be dismissed and his historic victory over Wild Oats XI would stand.

Bell will front the five man international jury at the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania at 10am today for the protest hearing. The jury consists of two Australians, Japanese, a Briton and a New Zealander.

The race committee has alleged Loyal tactician Michael Coxon sought to obtain information from an ABC helicopter pilot about rival supermaxi Wild Oats XI's sails.

In an audio recording, Coxon is heard asking: "Can you confirm, does Wild Oats have their trysail up? What colour is the mainsail they've got up?"

A hearing will take place at 10am to determine the provisional winner's fate, with race boss Garry Linacre conceding a guilty finding could mean disqualification.

Bell said this morning that he would not take a big team of lawyers but would go with just himself, tactician Michael Coxon - who allegedly sought to gain information from an ABC helicopter pilot during the race - and his ace American navigator Stan Honey.

The international jury has only two options. It can dismiss the protest and allow the line honours win to stand, or it can find against Loyal.

If it finds Loyal breached the rules, the minimum penalty is likely to be 10 per cent added to its race time. Such a penalty would move Loyal well down the finishing order.

The jury is expected to make its ruling before noon.

Bell explained to sailing website, [thedailysail.com](#) that the reason Coxon asked the question is that he is CEO of North Sails who provided the mainsail to Wild Oats.

Bell said that Coxon was "concerned, as if there had been a breakage that might have had an effect on his reputation as a sail provider. And the news came back was that it was okay and he said that was great news.

Elsewhere in Hobart, Sydney businessman Stephen Ainsworth was settling in for a long wait to see if he has finally achieved his long held goal of winning the race on handicap.

Ainsworth's Loki crossed the finish line at 3.20 this morning but some of his handicap rivals have up until 8.30 tomorrow morning to arrive to beat him on corrected time.

Last night Bell's crew celebrations were cut short after they beat Wild Oats XI to the line in one of the closest Sydney-Hobart finishes after the race committee lodged the protest against Investec Loyal for allegedly soliciting information about its rival's sails.

But Bell said they were "pretty comfortable" and "confident about the outcome", as his crew celebrated their provisional line honours victory over the five-time winner on Hobart's Constitution Dock.

"To achieve this outcome in the greatest race in the world, and then to have this protest, is a bit anticlimactic, but this is an amazing team," he said. "And no matter what happens, we know we did everything by the book."

Wild Oats owner Bob Oatley and skipper Mark Richards were among the first to commiserate with Bell after news of the protest spread. Oatley said he believed the race committee got things wrong last year when it lodged a protest against his boat, which was dismissed.

"They can't keep doing this," Oatley said.

Cruising Yacht Club of Australia commodore Garry Linacre said the protest related to a request by a crewman on Investec Loyal later revealed to be navigator Michael Coxon for information about the sails Wild Oats was carrying from the crew on an ABC helicopter.

Such behaviour breaks the international yacht racing rule about soliciting help from an outside source. The incident allegedly occurred at 6.30am on Tuesday off Merimbula on the NSW south coast.

The drama unfolded after Investec Loyal with celebrity crewmen aboard including Nine Network Today host Karl Stefanovic, former Australian rugby player Phil Kearns and rugby league star Anthony Minichiello sailed across the line after two days, six hours, 14 minutes and 18 seconds at sea to the cheers of thousands of spectators on both the land and water. The two boats had engaged in a tight duel as they sailed up the Derwent to Hobart, crossing the line just three minutes and nine seconds apart.

The exhausted Loyal crewmen leapt around the deck hugging one another in joy as small boats ran alongside offering them congratulations.

But a big crowd gathered at Hobart's Kings Wharf and Constitution Dock descended into stunned silence when the protest was announced.

The two supermaxis remained out in the Derwent River for more than half an hour while officials visited the boats.

Later, as he stepped ashore, an excited and exhausted Bell said the win was "unbelievable".

"It feels even better than I had imagined, the greatest experience of my life," he said.

He said it had been a really tough race and that he was nervous all the way to the end. "But I was lucky to have one of the world's greatest navigators, Michael Coxon, on our team.

"It was one hell of a race and one hell of a contest. But we kept pretty cool under considerable pressure. We could see Wild Oats for a lot of the way, but we decided that we would just sail our own race. And we did; we just kept sailing the boat as fast as we could, and knew not to make changes to the way we were sailing regardless of what Wild Oats did.

"I didn't believe we were going to win, even when I could see the buoys on the finish line. But the win feels even better than I expected."

Further back, the 19m Loki and the elderly supermaxi Lahana were both staking claims for handicap honours.

The majority of the fleet was crossing Bass Strait last night.