

## Sydney Hobart protest dismissed

WWOS staff and AAP  
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Maxi yacht Investec LOYAL has been confirmed as line honours winner of the 2011 Sydney Hobart after a race committee protest was dismissed.

An international tribunal took more than two hours to make its decision after LOYAL's crew was accused of using an ABC helicopter pilot to spy on rival Wild Oats XI.

Anthony Bell, skipper of LOYAL, emerged from the hearing clearly relieved, saying the jury did not believe his boat gained any benefit from the communications with the helicopter pilot.

"For the crew it's better to have a panel of our peers come up with the answers," Bell told reporters in Hobart.

Cruising Yacht Club of Australia Commodore Garry Linacre said: "We will continue to keep the governance of this sport at the highest level."

The race committee, and not the runner-up, lodged a protest against the stunning victory - the fourth closest in race history - under a rule which polices outside assistance to boats.

LOYAL was on Wednesday night declared the provisional winner after its captain Bell was handed the protest documents on crossing the finish line in Hobart.

But the news, delivered by Linacre, stunned the thousands lining the shore around Constitution dock as LOYAL lingered for close to an hour before docking.

The hearing took place at the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania at 10am (AEDT).

The race committee, chaired by Tim Cox, alleges the incident occurred at 6.30am on Tuesday, 30 nautical miles south of Merimbula on the NSW south coast.

The protest papers described the incident as: "Audio recording of conversation between ABC helicopter and Investec LOYAL.

"Crewman from Investec LOYAL seeking information from the helicopter of the sail plan in use on Wild Oats XI.

"In particular, information as to whether Wild Oats XI was flying a trysail."

Linacre said the helicopter pilot would be a witness at the hearing, to be heard by an international panel, and if the protest was upheld the sanctions could include time penalties and even disqualification.

Bell attempted to explain the situation on reaching the shore, saying it was a misunderstanding involving an ABC interview with crewman Michael Coxon, who is also the chief executive of a company that supplies the sails to Wild Oats.

"It was the ABC who actually asked for the interview off us, it wasn't actually the other way round," Bell said.

"It was just a question by Michael saying, 'oh geez, are they all right and I hope they haven't broken their mainsail'.

"These things cost a quarter-of-a-million dollars and of course he would be concerned as to his business reputation."

Bell said he was confident the victory would be confirmed by the panel.

"Michael (Coxon) is probably one of Australia's most decorated yachtsman and he's never had a skerrick in his whole career of any protest for improper behaviour," he said.

"It is a bit anti-climactic.

"One thing that can't be taken away from us, no matter what happens, no matter what's said, is we sailed one hell of a race out there."

"Win, lose or draw Michael Coxon had 100 per cent of our support," Bell said after the hearing.

LOYAL fought off a thrilling, last-ditch attacking onslaught from Wild Oats on the Derwent River to claim what would have been a first line honours victory for the boat.

Still eyeballing each other as they hit the river, LOYAL saw off some desperate manoeuvring from the five-time winner and race record holder to cross the finish line at 7.14pm (AEDT).

In one of the tightest finishes in the race's history, LOYAL won with a margin of 3 minutes 8 seconds in a time of 2 days, 6 hours, 14 minutes and 18 seconds.

The ABC posted audio of the conversation between Coxon and its helicopter crew on its website.

Coxon is heard to say: "Can you confirm, does Wild Oats have their trysail up? ... What colour is the mainsail they've got up?"

He is answered that both sails are grey and replies: "Copy that. That's great news. Thanks, bye."