

SAILING

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Forecast and handicap on the nose for Icefire owner

Rupert Guinness

ALAN MATHER is resigned to the likelihood that Icefire won't be seen among the leaders in this year's Sydney to Hobart yacht race.

But the Sydney property investor who co-owns the 45-footer with three mates says he would be indicating otherwise two days out from the 628 nautical mile race were the weather forecast and IRC handicap ratings more accommodating for his 23-year-old Allan Mummery-designed carbon fibre yacht.

"The forecast was not on our wish list," Mather said of the Bureau of Meteorology report on Thursday that tipped 10-15-knot north easterly winds for the Boxing Day start, followed by a southerly that was likely to build up until Wednesday, after which westerlies were due for the crossing of Bass Strait.

"This boat is a downhill flyer and goes well off the breeze. But on the nose it's much more difficult. We lose our advantages of the design of this old boat. We will do our best and slug into it. Things may change. Who knows? But things are not looking the best for us. And unfortunately, with the IRC rulings, [Icefire] doesn't really fit in well.

"The new million-dollar boats we are competing against are designed sympathetically with those regulations, whereas we are penalised. We're handicapped worse than brand-new boats, which is ridiculous. But in the right conditions we can still kick arse."

Mather, who has raced in seven Sydney to Hobarts, bought Icefire last year with Peter Tucker, Thyge Trafford-Jones and Malcolm Griffiths, who will all race as part of a 13-strong crew in this year's ocean bash. They also raced her in several regattas leading up to what will be her first Sydney to Hobart since

2005, when she had Victorian owners. The owners plan to sail her in many east coast races over the next two years.

Mather predicted a three-day trip for Icefire, based on her Lord Howe Island performance, during which similar conditions prevailed and she covered an average of 200 nautical miles per day. "We're hoping for three days but these conditions could change that, extend it," he said.

By then the race for line honours between the likes of the five-time winner and defending champion Wild Oats XI, Investec Loyal, Wild Thing and Lahana should be well and truly over. Meanwhile, the fight for the prestigious Tattersall's Cup for overall victory should be hotting up very nicely.

Despite the winning odds for the latter being stacked against Icefire, Mather is quick to reiterate that she was "revolutionary" when launched in 1988. "The design element of it is quite modern in many aspects - even now. The design of it ... it's a very safe sea boat, as solid as a rock," he said.

Mather laments the financial drain of the Sydney to Hobart race, though. He won't say how much it will cost him, but estimates that a campaign will set back "weekend warriors" \$15,000 for food, drink, entry fees and insurance cover. Little wonder Mather is grateful for his one sponsor - Hempel Paints.

"We believe the high cost of going to Hobart these days with these safety requirements - which are all very necessary - is putting the cost of the race out of the scope of many," he said. "I'm not counting the figure ... we haven't even totalled that yet. It all adds up. I wouldn't put a figure on it yet.

"The world economy is certainly a hindrance. We are down to 88 yachts, which is pretty small, a bit disappointing. But understandable."



Sea legs ... Erik Brockmann swings from a halyard during a lighthearted race up the mast on Sydney to Hobart entrant The Goat yesterday. Photo: Dallas Kilponen

BASKETBALL

Relentless Crocs sink their teeth into Kings

Sydney Kings 93
 Townsville Crocodiles 100
 Fleta Page

THE Sydney Kings have again failed to overcome the Townsville Crocodiles, going down 93-100 last night at the Sydney Entertainment Centre.

The Kings haven't beaten the Crocs since they re-entered the NBL, their last win against the Queenslanders coming in November 2007.

There were plenty of eyes last night on centre Julian Khazzouh, fresh off a plane from a trial with NBA side Golden State Warriors.

The Kings captain was up against former NBA big man Luke Schenscher in a match-up that tested Khazzouh's jet lag and the fitness of Schenscher in his fourth game back from a hip injury.

Despite five players scoring in double digits for the Kings, including 18 apiece for Anatoly Bose and Jerai Grant, it wasn't enough to overcome the solid Crocs, who had three players score more than 20.

The first quarter saw tight inside defence, particularly from the Crocs, forcing both teams into long range shots. The Kings showed they hadn't lost their touch during their 12 day lay-off, starting with five from five from outside the three-point line. The 15 outside points made up for the fact they could shoot only 33 per cent from inside, and kept them within two points of the Crocs.

It was fitting that it was a three-pointer that eventually put the Kings in front in the second half, a lead they couldn't sustain, with the Crocs going on a nine-points-to-one scoring spree to take an eight-point lead into half-time.

Both teams came out pumped up in the second half, the Crocs registered three quick fouls, with the home fans wanting more. The Kings started to set up some plays to separate Khazzouh from Schenscher, which allowed him to amass 12 points for the quarter.

With the big man's confidence soaring, he brought the house down when he scored from a rebound stolen from Schenscher, and backed it up with a block at the other end.

It was Jerai Grant providing the entertainment value for the crowd of 5435, with athletic dunks off a seemingly effortless vertical leap. The Crocs kept plugging away at the other end, with Jacob Holmes (21 points) their main weapon in the quarter, and still had the lead at the break, albeit reduced to two points.

It was a direction from Crocs coach Paul Woolpert to his point guard, Eddie Gill, to get Peter Crawford more shots that proved the difference in the fourth quarter. Crawford downed 11 points in the final term, including the three-pointer that put the game beyond reach of the Kings.

CYCLING

GreenEDGE riders pitch in to devise team tactics

Rupert Guinness

RIDERS on the new GreenEDGE team have played a big role in devising their race tactics for their debut season, which starts next month, says head sports director Matt White.

When the 30-strong roster assembled for the first time for a training camp in Canberra early this month, riders were asked for input into the team's philosophy on racing, said White, who confirmed to the Herald that he will be GreenEDGE's head sports director from January 1.

His team of sports directors includes Belgian Lorenzo Lapege, Frenchman Lionel Marie and Italians Vittorio Algeri and Daniele Nardello. Australian Neil Stephens

is also a sports director, but because his main position is technical director, his time directing teams in races will be limited to 75 days and in Spain, where he lives.

Asked how the six directors would work together in a season in which three GreenEDGE teams could be racing in three events in any one week, White said: "We all have our own individuality in the way that we look after a squad, but the basic plan is always the same. That is something we developed or will be developing with our riders as well.

"We want them to have part-ownership of how we race. There is no use me barking orders down the microphone or telling them at a meeting unless they really want to do it. They have to really believe in how we are racing as a team and we

have begun that at our training camp in Canberra."

White said he called on his riders to draw on their observations of how the British Sky team and the now defunct but highly successful US-registered HTC-Highroad team set up their sprinters.

"We asked, 'How did you guys see how Sky rode their sprints? How did you guys see HTC ride their sprints? What's going to be our ethos in how we tackle sprint stages?' We threw it back on them, asking, 'How do you want to be seen?' They came back with some answers.

"We all agreed on it and that's how we are going to do it. We want to be seen as being aggressive. We want to be seen as being entertaining ... a combination of things."

White would not divulge how the

GreenEDGE "train" - or lead out - would operate. "We have the ability to have a train ... but there are also different variations of trains and how people attack that final couple of kilometres," he said.

"HTC would take the race by the neck and lead from the front, stick together and not move. No matter what other people were doing, they would stick on that line. Sky would not use much energy in chasing, make one swift move in the final couple of kilometres and come over the top of everybody. We'll take what suits our guys' ability ... but you must be adaptable."

However, White said GreenEDGE would not "rob" wins with negative tactics that exploited others' hard work.

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