

# Shorthanded Ocean Races 2010. Big Bird update.

What is wrong with me! Wimp, pussy, scaredy cat, big girls blouse, lame, limp dick, faint hearted, no balls, no ticker, gutless, way too conservative.

Although, having already participated in quite a few of these SSAA races in my 9.2m (30ft) trimaran over the past few years and having usually thoroughly enjoyed them, the last 2 races (Newcastle and Port Stephens), which were downhill runs that I should have enjoyed, were thoroughly challenging (read: difficult. No, read: nerve racking).

So far, the 2010 SSAA season has had 3 well attended races. Namely Sydney to Botany Bay and Return, Pittwater to Newcastle and Pittwater to Port Stephens.

The first race was easy, fun and, although frustratingly light at times, never threatening.

Briefly, Big Bird started a touch late after my not setting the alarm clock properly which had crew member Dean, fortunately, eventually ringing me with a "Where are you?". "Um ah, in bed". That faux pas had us belatedly leaving Pittwater at 7.30 for a 10.00 am Balmoral start but at least we had an esky full of freshly caught Aussie salmon and Bonito by the time we got to Long Reef.

We waved to the other competitors as they sailed out the heads while we headed the opposite way at full steam towards the Balmoral start line and carried out our 720 degree prestart penalty turn which is obligatory for motoring after the warning signal. After sailing across the start line about 15 minutes late and setting the masthead kite we were in full catch up mode and fluked a little bit of breeze close to the coastal cliffs as the others headed out to sea and we established what we thought was a pretty good lead before stopping in our own brain-busting parking lot just shy of Botany Bay. This 'park up' had the race 'restarting' at the halfway mark followed by a lovely 8-12 knot nor'easter all the way back to the finish just inside the Sydney heads. Surprisingly, Big Bird reestablished a fairly handy lead on this return leg and we managed a 3rd on handicap despite the penalty for having 3 on board. Those nice conditions left me with a warm gooey feeling inside- I was loving ocean racing after that day out.

However, a month later, the Newcastle Race day was set right in the middle of this May's record rainy period, with recent gale strength winds, big seas and reports of early whale sightings and spectacular waterspouts off the coast. The weather reports in the lead up had me convinced I wasn't going to start but as race day neared the strong wind warnings were downgraded and I convinced myself it would be OK. Besides, I didn't want to let my crewman down, I didn't want the other multihull, Darren Drew's speedy catamaran, *Indian Chief*, to be the only multihull (although, unfortunately, *Big Bird* usually is), I didn't want to miss out on a nice sail and I wanted to fulfill my commitment to myself to do the races.

In fact, the optimistic forecasts on Seabreeze had a 15- 20 knot southerly predicted, and decreasing later which let me think that I'd be able to do the usual turn around at the finish and go straight back to Pittwater, although historically with some unplanned incident such as the motor lurching itself, or inexperienced crew nearly tipping the boat in while I'm having a snooze on the nets, but that's another story.

A healthy fleet started in 10 knots of sou'wester and we carried the masthead kite and full main. But within half an hour the kite was doused as we couldn't hold it in the 15 -20 knots that had now cropped up with over 35 knots being recorded later on in the race. Dark clouds were forming to the south, plenty of heavy rain was lashing us and soon we were down to 2 reefs and a number 2 jib. There were still a few kites up on boats around us and quite a few spectacular broaches too but I couldn't see what most of the other boats were doing. In fact, because of the rain, I couldn't see most of the other boats at all.

I was nervous, we were flying along and doing 10-16 knots was the norm. The slower we went the more comfortable I felt. The wind came up a lot when the low dark clouds arrived followed by lashing rain followed by a more peaceful period. As another low bank of dark clouds arrived, the cycle repeated it self, "Drop the bloody jib, would you!" So there we were, scooting along with just half a mainsail up surfing down 2 metre waves and I was hating it. The breeze at times was close to 30 knots, and the only thing I could do was hang on to the tiller, struggle to keep the boat with this unbalanced sail plan tracking down wind, try slowing the boat down when rushing down the steep waves too fast for comfort and watch the miles slowly wind down on the GPS which had mysteriously and worryingly not worked for the 1st hour or so. As we passed the moored coal ships a particularly low jagged cloud approached." Drop the jib again -here we go." Wind followed by driving rain. Looking back upwind it looked like the wind had dropped significantly. Thank god! Jib goes back up. Crewman Tony, not over dressed in canvas Dunlop Volleys tennis shoes, no socks, t-shirt and nylon spray pants and jacket, takes the opportunity to go below and get some wet gear off, warm up and have a sanga. Next thing I know, the water all around us is white with spray, and Big Bird is getting lifted into a terminal nose dive, what the f--k! I throw the mainsheet, the boat shakes as if a giant puppy has us in its mouth and then as quickly as the mayhem had started the boat sits back down and everything calms down. And there it is! Paralleling our path and not more than 50 metres away a willy willy is churning the water into white powder and sweeping it skywards. Wow! spectacular! It had come in on our port side and exited our starboard side. It had gone right through us! I start pulling the mainsheet back in convinced it will be a waste of time. Surely the battens are smashed and the old mainsail is shredded.

But no. No damage. Jib is a bit torn. The jib sheets are wrapped tightly around every other rope, which had prevented me releasing the jib sheet in the middle of the maelstrom. Now I'm really nervous. "I'm so over this bullshit! This is truly shithouse." We get the jib down again and I start thinking about pulling into Swansea. "Oh come on!" I tell myself, "Newcastle is only 12 miles further on and at this speed that's only an hour, just finish the race." Begrudgingly I carry on. But I'm not having fun! But I know it would feel awful giving up for no good reason.

As we approach the Nobbys Head finish line there's 6 boats in very close proximity. A little part of me thinks "Quick! Put up more sail, we can beat at least a couple of them. Oh hang on. We aren't doing any good here on handicap. Don't bother." I heave a huge sigh of relief as we finish and in this weather there is no way I'm turning around to head home and for the first time in my life I go into Newcastle harbour. Convinced it's going to be a crap night fending the boat off an oyster encrusted rickety old jetty, but at least we won't be 'out there' in the wind, waves and belting rain so imagine how happy I was when we were directed into a pen in a brand new floating marina in the very smart water front near the Newcastle Cruising Yacht Club. This is great! We throw some ropes to waiting fellow competitors and as I step onto the dock a big smiley face from one of the other boats greets us and hands us a shot of rum. God, it tasted good. And it really warmed the cheeks up.

A fabulous dinner and a few quiet drinkies at the Yacht club, and a couple more at the pub across the road had me nearly forgetting how I'd just spent over 6 hours being soaking wet and nervous as hell offshore. It was a lovely snug night in my sleeping bag with the rain beating down on the deck.

Getting home the next day looked unlikely. A couple of the boats left early into the teeth of the still robust southerly. I was never going to leave the protected waters of inshore again! The weather was predicted to ease, so I sat in the sun and ate a giant brekky at the water front cafe. We checked the weather forecast. Easing conditions tempted us to leave at 11.

A couple of hours of sailing into the southerly gave way to a fairly bouncy but productive motor sail in easing conditions. Despite the amount of water splashing over the boat I was determined to make use of the esky of ice that we had brought all the way with us. So out came the lures. I always convince myself that I'm having fun if the fishing lines are out. The propeller's rubber drive bush shat it self, but I was too busy pulling in Bonito, with Tony bringing in a very healthy Aussie Salmon, to do any thing about it any time soon. We put the jib back up and just sailed and fished for a while. I had heard about these props tearing the pressed rubber drive bush (as had happened on Darren's previous catamaran weapon, *Flat Chat*, a few years earlier on his return from a SSAA Newcastle race), and so I carried a spare prop on board. At Bird Island the sun dropped, the lines came in, the spare prop went on and the wind now had a bit of westerly in it and so we were able to motor sail at 8-9 knots which had us home by 10ish. Lovely.

The Port Stephens race was scheduled for 3 weeks later and despite the predicted easing of the prevalent strong, cold winds and big swells and with experienced crew Darryl being seconded I still felt a bit apprehensive. I know it's a long way, with an 8pm start I know I'm going to get tired, I know it's going to be cold, it's not a big boat, the sails are tired (except the new # 2 to replace the old one that fell apart in the Newcastle race) and really, despite huge recent improvements, Big Bird doesn't steer all that well. At least at night there aren't any whales to scare me. Well, you can't see them at any rate!

Friday's preparations took nearly all day and start time was approaching rapidly and as the sun set I climbed the mast to check the rigging and dived under to give the bottom a clean for maximum performance (yeah, really important!). The wind had lightened and had a fair bit of Westerly. "This should be really pleasant" I thought to myself forgetting previous promises never to jinx a sail with those words. We started in pitch darkness on the totally moonless night in the company of quite a few ghost-like navigation lights, 10 boats headed out to sea. Full main, furling screecher (like a code 0) seemed conservative but smart for the conditions. Within an hour I was urging Darryl to steer deep downwind, really deep! The wind had quickly become really strong and the waves were up quite a bit and Darryl wanted to have a conversation about how he hadn't seen 21's on Big Bird before! "Capsize" was more on my mind than "Wow, that's fast!". Fortunately, I had tidied up the boat and donned my wet weather and safety gear while the winds were light. Because now I was clipped on and crawling along the deck to the mast swearing under my breath and putting a reef in the main, "No, it's blowing a gale, I'll put in 2 reefs, no, this is ridiculous, I'll get rid of the whole thing!" Although the wind backed off a bit and with just the screecher set we were still flying along at a rapid rate. As we got control of the situation (or at least the boat), my heartbeat eventually calmed down. Imminent disaster seemed less likely now. Occasionally the wind came up a bit and I'd roll up some of the screecher and this conservative yet calming ploy allowed me to get a quick nap on a cockpit bench. Darryl wakes me with a "Oi, take over. I can't stay awake", and so slightly refreshed I grabbed the helm, and I really pushed myself for several hours to try to hang on to the stern light in front of us. With the New Moon the night was pitch dark save for the stars and my mood was fairly dark too. I was still nervous. "Why do I do this? Never again. I hate this feeling".

We were sitting on 8- 12 knots and sometimes we would rush along at 14's to 16's, and occasionally Big Bird would point its bows down a wave and we'd shoot along at 19, 20, 21. "I can't believe how fast these monos are going!". Because I can't see any nav lights behind us I conclude they must all be in front of us which, as it turns out, they are except for one and yet I thought I was going plenty fast enough. Long lines of white water were streaming off Big Bird's transom, we weren't going slowly by any account.

These guys ('n' girls) must be full nut jobs! (or excellent sailors!)

At about 30 miles from the finish I was really wanting to hang on to the yacht just in front because I hadn't before gone around the Boondelbah Island off the Port Stephen's heads that formed the finish line. With only the crudest of navigation gear onboard I didn't feel confident and hoped the yacht in front could show me the way around and between these little rocky islands with lots of white water breaking on their shores. Unfortunately, it had sailed away from us but there were enough red port lights from some other competitors in the distance to give us a fair bit of guidance.

As we approached the islands the wind increased and got more westerly. We weren't going to be able to hold the screecher to the finish. It wouldn't roll up properly - of course, and so I rigged up the #3 jib and it formed a bit of a wind shadow to help get the screecher down and let us sail upwind for the finish.

Hooray, we finished! I sighed with relief. "Let's go home." So we rehoisted the double-reefed main and as the dawn began to light the eastern sky we started the long 15 hour bash into the 18 - 25 knot southerly back to Pittwater. Pitching to a stand still at times I was hating how much stress this whole event must be putting on the complicated trimaran structure. I'm surprised it doesn't rip itself to bits. It certainly feels solid. After a port float pump out and pit stop breather at Swansea at about 2 in the arvo, and waving "Hello!" to the high-performing SSAA competitor *Rampage* who was heading to her mooring in The Lake, we headed back out to motor sail the rest of the way home and we arrive back at Barrenjoey by 8pm. 24 hours for the round trip- not too bad. But what a trial! Even if the boat falls apart next week I definitely have renewed my respect for her strength. It was a pretty tough 24 hours, I reckon. Anyway, all's well... A couple of well-earned bevies had me ready for some delicious peaceful sleep in the cabin with the boat tied up to the jetty in the calm conditions at Royal Motor.

So, another last place on handicap, but a sense of utter relief of finishing with no damage and despite muttering about never doing these races again in my precious boat which I like so much, despite it's compromises in speed and comfort, I am looking forward to the next few shorter races. Of course, just because they are shorter races doesn't mean the weather won't be atrocious. If so the monos will, no doubt, will be out there, some solo, have full rag up and be going hard at it. I reserve the right not to go. The looming season ending 200-miler "2 Islands Race" is something that is already making me nervous. Maybe I will have some more "guts" by then.

Certainly, these last two races have got me thinking about what it would take to feel more at ease out there and being able to push a little harder. I'm thinking an access hatch (required on recently built multies) with an 'upside down light' attached next to it so a trapped crewman or outside helmsperson could find and open it in the upside down chaos following a capsize would be a good idea. Also, an easily removed 'cargo net' over the companion way to stop all the stuff inside sinking away and a compartment accessible from both the cockpit and the outside of the hull (standard in a popular make of production trimaran!) in the event of capsize with all necessary emergency gear such as flares, epirb, flippers, goggles, handheld VHF, food, water, space blanket, V-sheet, sunscreen, righting ropes etc makes a lot of sense too.

Also, going out with a rescue boat for re-righting and a huge budget and training one self to push the boat (and oneself) in strong conditions in the ocean and seeing how different sail configurations, sailing techniques and finding out how hard it is to capsize would be good too.

Meanwhile capsize, not to mention a broken mast, split centreboard case, broken beam, broken rudder and torn sails are all nightmares that I want to avoid at all costs. With that conservative attitude maybe I should be paying cruising fees not racing fees.

Stephen Barton  
(Big Bird)