

17 May 2008 – All Marine Pittwater to Newcastle Race Report from Funnelweb

The alarm went off at 5:30am. A little early for a Saturday. But we were determined to be ready on time. I had brought the boat down from Newcastle the day before, and although it started off cloudy and very cold with drizzle here and there; it ended up being one of the nicest Sydney deliveries for a long time – a NNW that had us going at an average of 10 knots and into Pittwater and docked up at the RPAYC by 17:30. Now it was time to get up. The sun wasn't up yet and there was no time to waste on cooking breakfasts etc – a quick duck to the loo and we were on our way.

As planned we were on the start line an hour early, and had the whole boat set up. Shackles, blocks, sheet ropes.... Everything that needed doing just in case, and we had plenty of time to suss out the wind direction, start line, which end to start and pull up the sails.

I had calibrated the mobile phone by the 1194 number and we decided to pull the sails up about 20 minutes before the start. We had decided to start on the Barranjoey end, as this gave us the best line out the heads and was most ideal for us with the angle. We knew we couldn't get a kite up, but had still prepared for it just in case. I had made mental notes the day before, when coming in from Newcastle, how the headland was affecting the wind and I had told Ivan, that given that there was some significant westerly in it, we were probably better away from the headland as much as we could given the day before's observation.

We were counting down to the start. At about 5 minutes to go, we headed down the start line towards Barranjoey, so at start all I had to do was turn the boat north and for us to tighten up the sails. I was watching the other 50 footer above us doing the same thing... were they copying us or was I copying them? Hard to tell what they were doing, but they were a little closer on the start line, but I did not want to risk drifting over the line, I knew if we set the sails right straight away, we would make up for it within the first 200m.

About less than a minute to go, I asked Ivan what was happening. He thought we were racing and asked me the time. I told him, looking at my mobile phone time, and it appeared as though the others down the Lion Island end of the line were approaching the start line. It was always hard to tell of course; it's a perception thing depending on where you are on the line. We double checked the time and decided it was time to race – we turned the boat and tightened up the sails and crossed the start line right on time.

She was sailing beautifully and right from the start we made sure, there was the right tension on every halyard and the sails were set right. We methodically went through all the things that needed adjusting including leaving the halyards on the winches to keep the tension throughout the race. She started sprinting, and we were grinning at each other knowing she was about to stretch her legs!

Every gust I made her climb up towards the headland, knowing with the knocks I would lose everything I was working for. Within 10 minutes of the start we knew we had made the right decision on which end of the line to start. We overtook the other 50 footer within the first 15 minutes, and slowly clawed our way to the front of the fleet. We had decided to be out wide enough, to not be affected by the headland with the westerly aspect in the wind, and yet not get caught out too far, however, knowing that forecasts had predicted it would swing to the NNE later, in which case, if we were in the right position we could 'reach' into Newcastle later in the afternoon.

There were a couple of lulls here and there, but overall she was doing an average of 10 to 11 knots. There was a few inconsistencies in the wind strength and direction but overall we managed to keep a northerly direction for most of the way, slowly increasing the gap between us and the rest of the fleet.

The sea was flat, slowly building with a big swell from the north, the sun was awesome, the sea was blue and the wind was giving us what we wanted. The key was, to in the lulls to keep the boat moving regardless, as we could not lose too much of the distance we had made on the rest of the fleet – I knew, that if we got slack in the lulls we would soon lose the distance we had made earlier on in the race.

We weaved our way through the ships as we worked our way up the coast. More and more I was losing my bearing and I knew eventually it would swing around more to the East.

Then there was this big splash in the distance – almost like a waterfall, about a mile away or so towards Norah Head light house! I screamed immediately: “a whale!” – to which Ivan replied, that it was too early for whales. But there it was again; a big splash and this time a tail flapping, playing and it was huge! I kept screaming out for joy. There appeared to be several of them, but definitely a very large one, occasionally jumping right out of the water with its whole body and falling sideways back into the blue sea! I was so excited, I kept screaming and jumping around at the wheel! It was as if the day couldn’t get any better and there they were; to celebrate our lead with us and the sunshine and the ocean and everything that went with it! We came within about 100 meters of them and they kept jumping and flapping their tails, and right at the end, as we were just about to sail past them, one of them lay on its side and waved his fin at us! I couldn’t believe it! I had tears running down my face; it was like he wanted to say goodbye and good luck to us! What an unbelievable experience! It took me a while to calm down and re-focus; it was such a buzz to have such a perfect sailing day, and then have the whales join us on part of this journey!

And all of a sudden it came; the wet moist and cool smell that comes with the easterly aspect in the wind. I knew immediately, and told Ivan it was time to tack; the wind had swung. We were out far enough and up the coast far enough, that it gave us a distinct advantage to tack. We lost about 60 degrees bearing or more in this wind change. Furthermore, when I looked behind us at the mass of cloud cover with no distinction, I knew that there was less wind in it, and we had managed to stay at the edge of this system with the fluffy white strips of cloud, that also brought with it the wind.

The tack had us heading in towards Redhead. We decided to stay on this as long and as far as it took us, as this was the tack that would bring us in; almost like a big arch, and if it swung further east, we would gain more north. It was almost as if ordered. We couldn’t have planned it better with being in the right place at the right time!

It was on this tack, that the yachts behind us simply disappeared into no-where. The tri-maran that had been relatively close until now, was suddenly zooming madly from east to west and back again, but appeared to make little headway, and one of the other 50 footers, which had been reasonably close until now, or at least been in site on the horizon suddenly disappeared also!

The same thing happened again with the wind change, when we got into Redhead; the wind died down, then swung from east to west and back again, and then swung around again to the NNW. Again, the change in bearing almost immediately lead us to tack, and we were heading straight for Nobby’s! We were laughing and smiling and joking about the fact, that this was either a case of ‘being far enough ahead of the fleet to be caught in the right wind system in the right time and place’ (like we normally observe some of the Sydney Maxi’s experiencing in the bigger races, whilst we get caught in the next weather pattern!) or it was ordered specifically for us!

We were on the home stretch and the wind, although having died down a little bit from earlier on, was blowing us in the right direction straight towards Nobby’s lighthouse at about 8 knots or so speed.... We were counting down the miles, whilst debating how far the rest of the fleet was behind us.

As we got closer to Nobby’s and could see the Port Lateral Marker outside the break wall, we radioed into NCYC, got the mobile out for time keeping, and watched the bearing of the compass as it slowly crept around to the designated finish line, as we approached the lighthouse.

We were finished! And far enough ahead of the fleet to perhaps make a difference in the handicap placing. What a race! An experience we will treasure forever! We acknowledged the fact, that this had perhaps been the end result of a lot of practice and training on other people’s boats in races all around the place over the last 12 months, and little things we had picked up through trial and error and association with other crews on other boats. All the practice and experience paid off! What a fantastic experience and what a result!