

SSAA SAIL SOLUTIONS PITTWATER TO PORT STEPHENS RACE REPORT.

A mild winters night and navigation lights appear as if by magic under the headland at Barrenjoey. G'Day "Lik Lik" I hear out of the dark and identify Dave and crew on Rollercoaster. There's a light 5 knot breeze flowing out of the Hawkesbury across our start line between the Eastern extremity of Lion Island and the Barrenjoey lighthouse on a wonderful moonlit night. One by one I identify my competitors in the shadows and we manoeuvre around each other as the countdown to the start approaches. My game plan is to start at the Barrenjoey end of the line and to work my way offshore outside the rhumbline as the forecast tells me that there will be more consistent breeze further out and I've prepared the masthead asymmetric by putting in it my spinnaker sock with snuffer, so that later in the night as the breeze veers into the Northwest and I get overpowered I can get it down without fuss.

Our course takes us directly to Port Stephens with the finish line the transit between Point Stephens light and Boondelbah Island off the mouth of Port Stephens rounded to port. The code 2 headsail is hanked-on the bow and secured with a clip to stop it going over the side until needed and the water-ballast is ready to use with the valves adjusted to pump to the port tank when required. I expect that once I pass the Central Coast and close back in towards the rhumbline the pressure will be building and I'll need to progressively get the ballast in to keep the boat from both rounding up and working the autopilot too hard.

We have radio sched's at 10 after midnight, 4am and 8am, so mustn't forget those and both the hand-held and on-board VHF are set to the listening channel having done a radio check with Peter on "Torquil" on the way to the starting area. I set a waypoint to Point Stephens and set the instruments up to relay the relevant information that I need, make sure the emergency grab-bag is within reach and clip my harness on ready to go.

Before I know it there are 30 seconds to go I'm on port gybe 100 metres back from the line. I set the autopilot and go forward to 'unsuff' the asymmetric. Out it pops and we're off! I settle to course of 55 degrees and then concentrate on trimming the assy for the first few hours and it seems my gameplan is working as I notice that I make some gains on two yachts I can see inshore from me which I think are Dave Bonallo on "Rollercoaster" and "Torquil" the Adams 10. I see two yachts that have stepped out in front and just inshore of me which I think are Dave Farrell on the Radford 50 "Pekljus" and Bruce McKay's Sayer 40 "Wasabi" which already has a commanding lead. I've set the pole and used it to rotate the assy' around as the apparent is up to 110 degrees. I work hard trying to keep at maximum pace heating up a few degrees in the lighter patches, and then coming away when the pressure is up. Sure enough it's building progressively and I hand-pump the water-ballast in bit by bit until the tank is full and I've plugged the breather to stop it spitting at me. My pace is good with consistent 8.5 knots reading and I'm still on the outside of the fleet which also takes me outside most of the 40 or so ships anchored waiting for coal out of Newcastle. I take stock and take in the scene under the awesome moonlight and think how wonderful it is to be out here belting along up the coast on such a beautiful night. I don't normally compete single-handed, but my regular

crew Peter Gregg wasn't available and I thought what the heck, why not give it a go. I know it's going to get a whole lot harder as I get more tired later in the night and the winds funnels out of Stockton Bight, but I put that out of my mind for the moment. The gusts are getting stronger and I can hardly see "Wasabi's lights any more, but I seem to not being losing much distance to what I think is the Radford 50.

We have the first sched' at 10 after midnight, so I've set the autopilot away a few degrees and slightly over-trimmed the assy so that I don't lose it while I'm down below. My position shows me that Ian Westlake on his Adams 13 "Alabaster" and "Rollercoaster" are virtually due West and close inshore, while "Pekljus" and "Torquil" are 1 mile ahead and "Wasabi" is 3 miles directly in front of me. Not too far behind is Tim Montague-Jones on his Swarbrick 40 "Wideload". Almost exactly as I appear to pass Newcastle I start to get overpowered and "Lik Lik" rounds up, but not aggressively and the autopilot copes easily as I ease the vang. It happens again and this time I ease mainsheet as well. I'm getting surges over 10 knots at times and steering away in the puffs, but it's getting hard to keep her on her feet and I realise it's time to change down. I raise the headsail set up to an outboard sheet and go forward to lower the snuffer and douse the assy. All goes to plan and as soon as it is doused I turn the boat closer to the wind to heat up under the reduced sail while I lower the sock and tidy things up. I'm anything but cold as I complete this task and then realise that my speed has dropped a dramatic 2 knots and I need more power. I decide to fly the fractional assy which goes well until I try to lower the headsail and I realise I must have crossed the halyards. The next 30 minutes everything goes pear-shaped as I struggle to get the headsail down and then realise as I've been making these changes the breeze has built and veered further and as soon as the headsail is out of the way I'm overpowered with the fractional, round up and somehow inexplicably the sheet flicks off and the sail is flogging. I now have to sit on the bow with halyard in hand and gather the sail which thankfully comes down quickly without dropping in the water, then headsail up and I settle down and gather myself just slightly tired! I curse myself for not waiting longer before flying the fractional and then when I think I've had my bad luck for the night the autopilot alarm comes on for no explainable reason as I've recently run the engine to recharge the batteries. I try changing any setting and nothing works and then it lets go and won't lock back on. I try the remote and for some bizarre reason that won't pick up the sensor and realise that now I'm in a pickle as the 4am sched' is coming up in 1 hour and its definitely beyond me to steer and make a radio call down below.....

I put that conundrum aside for the moment and the next hour is a blast as the waves are now getting bigger and my windsurfing days help me to pick the best of the waves and surf from one to another as I reach at 80 degrees apparent with surges of up to 12.5 knots. I notice now that what I think is "Pekljus" is stepping away but heading further to the East, "Wasabi" is out of sight and the only other yacht I can see is what I think may be "Rollercoaster" gaining from behind and on the outside. I was obviously very tired because it should have been obvious that I had forgotten about "Torquil" who turned out to be the yacht in front of me while it was "Pekljus" gaining on me. I realized that I had no choice but to let "Lik Lik" round up and lie ahull while I made the radio sched', but I had to take my position 10 minutes prior, so that meant I had to do it twice and lose more

distance. I leave it to the last second and take my position and get her back on course quickly, but the second time doesn't go quite as well as I'm below for longer making the radio call and I curse the time and distance I've lost. As I round the lighthouse I realise that I've passed it much more closely than "Torquil", but still at a safe distance and I hope that this has recovered some lost time. It's difficult to pick up the Eastern end of the island as others blend together and I can't go below to set a waypoint! I quickly reach down below and pull out the chart and bring it on deck to check while I steer. I think I'm heading to the right place when this is confirmed by a tinny out for some dawn fishing who conveniently passes to the North of the island and shows me exactly where the Western and Eastern extremities are as his nav' lights disappear and reappear. "Pekljus" passes to seaward of me and then all of a sudden I see his port light change to starboard and wonder what has happened? I'm now hard on the wind and manage to pop through the wind-shadow on the island as the first light begins to appear over the horizon. I manage to get the pole down without leaving the tiller extension for more than a few seconds but find that "Lik Lik" is beautifully balanced, so I set up for the tack and dive below to dump the water ballast. As soon as I can lay the North Western tip of the island I tack without any fuss and after a very short starboard tack the lighthouse appears to the South of me and I've finished! I dive down below to record my time and then sigh with relief at a fun but very tiring race. The scene on the finish as the moon set and the sun began to rise with the dramatic entrance of the harbour outlined was simply stunning and rather than motor I continued to sail in through the entrance wondering whether I had lost too much time in the last two hours. Up to that point I feel that I was in a strong position.

I pack up on the way into the marina and am welcomed by Peter and his crew Shane from "Torquil" on the dock in the emerging morning light. Unfortunately "Wasabi" has had to turn and head immediately for home, so we can't congratulate them on their line honours win, but we toast them with a rum and welcome the others as they arrive. It turns out "Pekljus" has had a serious problem with his furler which was why I saw him tack and head for home. We help each other tidy our yachts and tell tales of the night and later in the day the handicap results are announced with "Wasabi" the winner from "Torquil" and "Lik Lik". I'm satisfied, but wonder if I could have made up enough time had I not tried the fractional and had the autopilot not had a hiccup, but then there's always the reasons why. To my surprise and delight I'm contacted on my return to Sydney to say that a mistake was made in our tiredness and in fact "Lik Lik" has won on handicap from "Wasabi" and "Torquil"! Thanks to my fellow competitors for a great night of sailing and if anyone else should read this, come and join in the next race of the season, you'll thoroughly enjoy the challenge.

Lee Condell