

Two Island Race Report – from Lee Condell on “Lik Lik”

There I was within an hour of the start of the final race of the SSAA’s calendar wondering if I was the only yacht to turn up! It always amuses me how suddenly yachts appear from every direction within such a short space of time and there we have fleet!

So on a fine sunny Sydney morning there we are with a nice 5 to 8 knots out of the South West; or rather that’s what it was when I checked outside Middle Head 30 minutes before the start. However, as we left our start off Balmoral at 10.00 on this Saturday morning with most flying spinnakers it quickly became apparent that the wind had literally just shifted to the SSW and we struggled to make North Head. Ian on “Alabaster” crewed by David Rooke went low and quickly took the lead to round North Head, quickly followed by Bruce McKay on “Wasabi”. I barely hung on with the main fully eased and luffing the masthead, but then a little pleased with myself I made it out of the harbour and turned north for the 35 mile leg to Bird Island and pressed the autopilot button. It beeped at me! That’s not good. That means it aint workin’. Now what the hell do I do? OK, don’t panic. There must be a way to sort this out. It dawned on me that there was no way in the World that I was going to be able to continue the race without the autopilot, so it was probably going to be a crash gybe and a disappointing motor back to Pittwater. I decided to hang on, so with the spinnaker sheet locked off I concentrated on keeping the boat moving fast and think it through. This issue had never happened before, but my guess was that it might just be a glitch and that if I could switch it off and back on it might be OK. However, the switch was down below and leaving the tiller with the masthead up in 15 knots with a 1 to 2 metre swell was going to get ugly quickly. With no other option I waited for a lull about an hour into the race and balanced the boat as well as I could and made a dive down the companionway. In less time than it takes to say boo I was back out and grabbing the tiller just as it started to round up, pressed the button and Yahoo it worked! The sense of relief was unbelievable because I was so determined to win this race having come second in last years epic.

Now down to business working on speed, so the next few hours were spent trimming the spinnaker. I could see that “Alabaster” was flying a symmetric kite and running deep close to shore, while myself, “Wasabi” and Peter & Don McCorquodale on “Torquil” were flying assy’s and sailing VMG and so were stepping out from the coast a little. This didn’t concern me as on my delivery down to the harbour the previous day there was no apparent current, and the forecast was for the breeze to back to the NE during the afternoon, so I felt that this would bring us back in as we approached the island. Maybe I shouldn’t be out here I thought, but still expecting the breeze to rotate I decided to hang in there. It just started to back in the last hour before the gybe and it was “Wasabi” first, then “Torquil”. OK, no pressure but I better get this right. And I didn’t. I watched the top of the assy collapse and roll inside the forestay as I turned, but I was already committed as I had set the autotack on the autopilot. I quickly gybed back and jumped forward with the halyard in my hand and grabbed armfuls of spinnaker and got it down quick smart. Then gybed back, head sail up and outboard sheet on. I think of the bigger picture and that though for the next few miles to the rounding I’ll be slow it’s an opportunity to get everything set up for a long 80 mile leg to Wollongong and Flinders islet. I had earlier set up the working jib, but now had second thoughts, so changed to the No.1, set the outhaul, Cunningham, car positions, backstay, the valves for the water-ballast, put my food back in the cockpit and fresh drinks, plus a dolphin torch, and taped the spinnaker sheets so they wouldn’t go over the side.

“Alabaster” proved that they had chosen the right strategy to stay inshore by rounding Bird Island first and I was disappointed at being last to round the island. I made a good rounding straight up to max’ non water-ballasted upwind speed and noted that the fleet

had split with some hardening onto starboard tack and heading offshore in what was still a south easterly, while others had tacked at the earliest opportunity and were heading south. I decided to step out a little way as I felt that there was more pressure due offshore, and I would get lifted earlier. Once onto port tack I hand-pumped the 300 litres of water-ballast and concentrated on getting the best boat speed. I fine tuned the autopilot settings, adjusted the trimming as the breeze eased and filled and took a break every hour for 5 minutes to lie down and rest. All in good shape and a hell of a lot easier than the 25 knots of breeze we faced last year.

At the midnight radio sked it was “Wasabi” in the lead followed by “Wide Load” and “Alabaster” and in an almost copycat of last year the rain squalls started as we passed Port Botany. I had been watching what I thought was a prawn trawler just outside me also heading South a slowly converging on me when two things happened at once, firstly I watched a small fast boat approach it which I quickly realized was the pilot, then it suddenly dawned on me that my stern light was out. This light has never missed a beat, so I was stunned that it should choose a time when I’m being run down by a ship to not work. Realising I didn’t have time to grab the emergency light from below I shone my Dolphin torch up on the sails and, just as it occurred to me that it was actually entering Botany and therefore about to run me down, the pilot boat lit me up with their spot-light and I gybed out of the way and around behind him cursing my luck at having lost half a mile of progress. As the night wore on the squalls kept getting stronger and I wondered whether a sail change may be necessary, but after every squall there was a significant lull, so I reasoned that on balance what I had up was good and that and I would just depower to the maximum during the squalls and hand-steer. With 20 miles to go to Flinders the breeze became hard on the nose oscillating between 8 and 18 knots and “Torquil” appeared out of the dark. We ended up tacking some 8 or so times with them being faster and lower than I, but seemingly converging at the point of tacking. Tacking with water-ballast is an energetic exercise involving diving down below to open the dump valve, then on seeing the leeward riser start to blow water shut off the valves and dive out and tack the boat. Then top up the new windward tank as the process loses some water in every manoeuvre. I certainly wasn’t feeling cold!

Just as the first light of dawn showed I was admiring the 20 shades of grey with the sky, sea and land all multiple shades of the same colour when this enormous humpback tail appeared out of the water just ahead of me and whacked the water with a great thump to herald the new day. The next squall was stronger again with 22 knots registering and I was now struggling to hang on, so was relieved to make the last tack and round Flinders Islet. I started the race with a black band around my mast and the SSAA flag at half height in remembrance of the tragic loss of Andrew and Sally last weekend rounding this rock. It was a sobering thought and I had a quiet moment with them as I rounded the back of the island.

Shortly afterwards at the 8am sked it was confirmed that the only yacht ahead of me was “Alabaster” as “Wasabi” had had to pull out at Wollongong with gear trouble, and “Wide Load” did shortly afterwards. To my surprise once it was light I couldn’t see “Torquil”, but later discovered that they stayed inshore when I made my last tack out and sailed out of pressure, so were now some miles behind. I got the symmetric spinnaker up which I had in a sock and settled down for the final leg to the finish. Time to have some breakfast, clean up the mess of ropes in the cockpit, and consider the best strategy to the finish. I could see big rain clouds seemingly sticking to the Illawara escarpment, so I didn’t want to be too close to the shore. The forecast was for the breeze to back from south to south-west by about 11am and then flick to the North-East at midday, so I wanted to get this first. All went swimmingly well and I slowly made a little gain on “Alabaster” as we made good progress back up the coast. That is until Port Botany again

when the breeze suddenly eased. Was this the East change? There were still lots of clouds and squalls around and at first “Alabaster” gybed but had a problem and went bare-headed while I used the sock and made a clean gybe and started to mow them down. For a fleeting second it occurred to me that there was still a chance of line honours and through my weariness I realized how important it was to keep it together and not do anything silly. It was obvious that getting to pressure was the key, but where it might come from was anyone’s guess as one minute there would be a little SE pressure, then this would die out and a little would come out of the SW. With slow progress we had a gybing dual towards South head and I quickly honed a technique for one-man gybing without using the sock as it was too slow. We must have done 15 gybes and then I checked the tides and realised that there was still 2 hours to low water, so I decided that I needed to stay close to the shore even with the back-wash, so that I could duck around South head for the finish off Junction Bell. I watched “Alabaster” head too far towards North Head before gybing and make slow progress, so was happy with the decision I had made. I stayed as close as I dared and even got the first hints of Easterly as I ducked around South Head and made the last gybe to the finish crossing the line, just a little tired, at 14.54 after close to 29 hours of racing. Another great SSAA race and the satisfaction of doing well on my own as I hadn’t planned to do the race single-handed.

I’m now delighted to have been announced as the winner of this years Two Island race and would like to dedicate the win to the memories of Andrew Short and Sally Gordon, two people from our own sailing community who lost their lives doing what we love doing. To their families my sincere condolences.

Lee Condell