

Sailing Across the Paddock

For the crews taking on the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race challenge on Boxing Day, the past year has been one spent honing skills and steeling nerves in readiness to tackle the sailors' Everest

WORDS FIONA HARPER

Despite her youth, Jessica Watson knows well the mind-numbing fatigue that comes from coaxing a tiny boat over terrifying liquid mountains that tower above the mast. Screaming salt-laden winds that blow the moisture from eye sockets. The gritty, caking salt that acts like sandpaper against raw skin. The slap of cold water that gushes down the neckline of wet weather gear while grappling with flogging sails and dangerously whipping ropes in the dead of the night on a bucking, heaving foredeck.

All the while, trying to eat, sleep, navigate and keep your wits about you while being tossed about in an odorous, damp cocoon. For some, it sounds like hell. For hard-core yachties, it's what competing in the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race is all about. Crossing Hobart's Derwent River finish line for many is akin to conquering the sailors' Everest.

After stepping ashore at Circular Quay in mid-2010, having sailed solo, non-stop and unassisted around the world, on



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Jessica Watson; there are challengers aplenty; the *Patriot*; passing through Sydney Heads for Hobart



wobbly legs that hadn't touched dry land for seven months, 16-year-old Watson had already achieved so much, surprising many who doubted her ability. She wasted little time making it clear she was no lightweight sailor despite her slight frame, setting her sights on further adventures.

Denied the opportunity to compete in one of the sailing world's greatest yacht races last year due to her age, Watson will skipper a youthful team onboard *Ella Bache Another Challenge* (EBAC) in this year's Hobart race. All 11 crewmembers are aged between 18 and 21 years, only

two of whom have notched up a previous "Hobart". Sure, it's only 630-odd nautical miles, a mere drop in the ocean compared to a circumnavigation. But the course traverses one of the most fearsome stretches of water in the world: the Bass Strait, mockingly derided as the "paddock" by old salts since the race began back in the post-war 1940s.

"The Rolex Sydney to Hobart is every young sailor's dream and it will be an amazing experience. I'm confident our crew will be able to handle ourselves out there. We're realistic about the challenges. We know it's the toughest race in the



SYDNEY TO HOBART PHOTOS: ROLEX/DANIEL FORSTER; JESSICA WATSON: ELLA BACHE

Watson will skipper a youthful team onboard *Ella Bache Another Challenge*

world, but we'll give ourselves the best possible preparation," says Watson as the crew gathers in Sydney to begin an intensive 12-week training campaign.

EBAC will compete in the hotly contested one-design Sydney 38 division, a sort of Grand Prix race among similar yachts within the main race. Leading the fleet for line honours will be five-time winner and defending champion Bob Oats maxi *Wild Oats XI*,

though other contenders are likely to be *Investec Loyal* and *Rambler 100*. Fleet sizes vary each year, though about 90-100 yachts are likely to start this year.

The bragging rights that come from completing a "Hobart" are substantial. For more than 60 years, sailors have turned right after exiting Sydney Heads, destination Constitution Dock, Hobart. Many failed to make it. Mostly, boat or gear failure



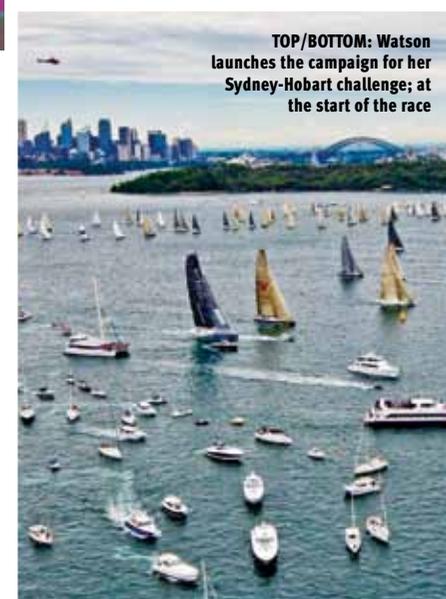


prevents yachts completing the course.

The tiny town of Eden on the southern New South Wales coast has become the unofficial “point of no return”. It’s the last safe harbour before crossing the paddock. Lives have been lost attempting to sail to Hobart. Who can forget the catastrophic race of 1998 when six sailors perished, five yachts sank and only 44 of the 115 starters made it to Storm Bay?

As Boxing Day dawns and crews mentally steel themselves for the sail southwards, tens of thousands of sightseers gather on headlands all along Sydney Harbour. For non-sailors, the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race offers the perfect excuse to pack a picnic lunch filled with Christmas Day leftovers and enjoy the spectacular harbour at its best.

Onboard the yachts heading to Hobart, however, the crowds are barely noticed as crews focus their sights firmly upon the challenging days ahead of them. For one young sailor making her Hobart debut, leading one of the youngest crews ever to take up the challenge, there’s no doubt she will rise to the occasion. ★



TOP/BOTTOM: Watson launches the campaign for her Sydney-Hobart challenge; at the start of the race

RACE INFO

The race starts at 1pm on 25 Dec, with staggered start times for each division. Start line location is determined on the day of the race, dependent upon wind conditions.

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順風満帆

船乗りたちの最高峰、ロレックス・シドニー・ホバート・ヨットレースは12月26日開催

臭気が充満する、ずぶ濡れの蚕みたいな船の中で食事と睡眠をとり、船を動かし、そして機転を失わない。そんな状況は人によっては悪夢かもしれない。しかし、心の船乗りを自認する人々にとっては、それこそがロレックス・シドニー・ホバート・ヨットレースのすべてだ。ホバートのダーウエント・リバーのゴールラインを駆け抜けることは、船乗りたちにとって、エベレスト登頂を成し遂げたに等しい。

サーキュラー・キーを出発したのは2010年半ば。それ以来7ヶ月、寄港することなく単独で世界を巡った16歳のジェシカ・ワトソン。体格は華奢であっても、その能力は決して他の船乗りにはひけを取らないということを証明し、さらなる冒険を目指している。

昨年のレースでは、年齢の問題により参加を断念。しかし今年、若さあふれるチーム、エラ・バッシュ・アナザー・チャレンジ (EBAC) に参加、スキッパーを務めることになっている。チームメンバーの年齢は、18歳から21歳。コースの全長は630海里。飛行機や客船の航路に比べれば、ほんの一滴ほどの距離とも言える。しかし、そのコースの内容は世界の水路の中でも困難に満ちたものだ。

EBACが参加するのは、単一デザインで競うシドニー38という部門。激しい競争が予想されており、そのメインレースは自動車レースのグランプリにも似ている。優勝の筆頭候補は前回チャンピオンでもあるボブ・オーツ率いるワイルド・オーツXI。出走数は上下するが、今年は90~100艘ほどで争われる予定だ。

このレースを完走したことは、十分に自慢になる。60年以上にわたって、多くの船乗りたちがシドニー・ヘッズからホバートのコンスティテューション・ドックを目指したが、その多くは辿りつけてはいない。ほとんどの原因は、船自体、もしくはギアの破損だ。中でも1998年のレースは悲惨なものである。このレースでは6人の船乗りが死亡、5艘のヨットが沈没した。出走した115艘中、完走したのはわずかに44艘だった。

出走の日を迎えた船乗りたちは、南への航海に覚悟を決める。

ホバートへ向かうヨットの上では、乗組員たちがこれから訪れる挑戦の日々を見つめている。その中には、最年少の乗組員の一人としてレースデビューを飾る少女がいる。18ヶ月前、16歳でシドニー・ヘッズを後にして航海に乗り出した彼女は、今回も必ずやその手腕を発揮してくれることだろう。