

1999 ORCV Melbourne to Hobart

Aboard 'Cadibarra 7'

By Nigel Jones, her Skipper.

Day 1 - 27th December

An early start to the day as the Melbourne based crew met at my place in Elwood at 05.30 for the drive to Mornington, where Cadibarra 7 had been left after the Cock of the Bay the previous day.

It was pouring rain as the gear was loaded into the car, a sure omen of things to come. We had a pretty good idea of the weather we were about to face for the next four days - a number of us had already been into the Bureau's website that morning and were wishing we heading off to go down the East rather than the West coast of Tasmania. At our crew briefing the night after the race briefing, we had discussed the possibility of a rough race and we weren't going to be let down! It has long been standard practice for the Cadibarra 7 crew to get together prior to long ocean races to review the course and work through some "what-if" scenario's for the race. However, this time, the weather forecasts for the following week cast a fairly somber mood over the discussion.

We arrived at Mornington at 06.30, still in rain but very little wind. We loaded the food on, got the boat ready for the ocean and left the pier at 07.30, motoring down to Portsea.

After a pre-race check around, and a brief stop-off at Portsea pier to get the latest weather info and pick up two crew, we pushed off for the start of the race.

The race started in a light SE with an ebbing tide that caught some boats over the line. A boat-end start at the outer end of the line saw us get off to a reasonable start. After the gun went, we hoisted the masthead gennaker and were away. We had a good run to the heads, rounding the turning mark in second place behind Helsal II (Sorbent), the line honours favourite.

After clearing the heads, we set a course for the top of King Island (K.I.). A course to the West of K.I. was part of a definite strategic plan, formulated before the start of the race, and settled on once we were reasonably confident of the weather to come for the next 24 hours or so. A major factor influencing our decision to head to the West of K.I. was the expected Southerly change due around 12 hours after the start. Being West would take us further away from the Low-Pressure system that affected the race for nearly the whole time. It would also enable us to avoid the tidal gate between K.I. and Tasmania, which potentially was going to be quite unpleasant.

Initially the afternoon delivered quite pleasant sailing in consistent 12-15 knot winds, with many of the faster yachts in the fleet still within clear visibility. A direct course the top of K.I. was readily achievable, but as the evening went by, a change of wind

direction gradually knocked us below the course. Before dark, with the wind continually freshening, we stuck to our pre race strategy of reducing sail early, putting in a reef and changing headsail down to the #2 (Cadibarra's smaller headsails making this the equivalent to a standard #4). After a hot pasta meal, ably prepared by Cameron, the crewmember with the "cast iron stomach", we rolled into our regular watch system – 6 crew on two watches, 3 hours on, 3 hours off at night, and 4 hours on, 4 hours off during the day. The wind was in the low 20s by now. The sea was not too uncomfortable as yet and it was by no means the worst night we'd had at sea.

Day 2 - 28th December

By sunrise the following morning, we had tacked and were heading towards the West coast of KI. We reached the coast about two-thirds down the Island around breakfast time and tacked back out to the West. The wind was blowing from the South at up to 25 by now with seas still fairly even at around 3m. We put a fairly long leg out West, not tacking back in until we were able to lay well down the Tassie coast. The ABC chopper caught up with us early in the afternoon, now sailing with two tucks and the #2, but still travelling reasonably comfortably given the conditions.

As that afternoon wore on, the conditions deteriorated considerably, and by that evening, we were down to three reefs and the #4 (the equivalent of a big storm jib). Clearly, having the third reefing point in the main was the greatest asset in our sail plan. We couldn't have held 2 reefs and would have been underdone with the trysail. Our Hood Spectra main set beautifully with 3 reefs and it was relatively easy to lead the first reef line through the third reef eye using our continuous VB cord mouse, a heavy weather must-have! Our first reef line has a loop in the casing at the end of the reef, through which the tail on the mouse could be tied without having to undo the mouse.

By now, the wind was consistently around the mid 30 knots, seas up to 5m and we were starting to bang off the tops of them. It was becoming impossible to head up any higher than close reaching, and for the next couple of days, we were sailing with an apparent wind angle in the low 30s doing 7.5 to 8kts, giving us a tacking angle allowing for leeway of over 100°. This slowed our progress down the course considerably!

That night, the elements began to bite and we also started to lose crew. Here the benefits of another pre-race decision, to take a crew of 12 rather than the 10 or 11 we normally sail with, became apparent. This decision was not made however based on the weather we got for the race, but rather that the race normally involves quite a bit of reaching, where weight on the rail is important. However, with 12 crew, we had plenty of resources to keep the boat going.

By this stage, we had dropped three crew through sickness (in total 8 out of the 12 crew had a throw, however most were able to keep going). The remaining crew tried to ensure that, despite any periodic bouts of illness, regular fluid intake was maintained (water, Staminade or juice) as was small, but regular snacks (chocolate bars, muesli bars, chopped raw vegetables or fruit). We had been working on two watches up to that stage, but made the decision to split into a three-watch system of 3 crew, doing 2 hours on, 4 hours off. It caused some living issues downstairs, with the occasional foot in a sleeper's face, but it preserved Cadibarra's crew and was certainly one of the main reasons we made it to Hobart.

By that evening, the day's radio skeds had reported quite a few retirements, and the weather reports were not indicating any relief in sight from the trying conditions. However, our main competition for line honours, Helsal II, was still within striking distance ahead of us, so we knuckled down and pressed on.

Day 3 - 29th December

A sleep-in this morning caused us to miss the 0600 sked by a few minutes, causing some consternation back in Melbourne. We radioed Melbourne Radio as soon as we realised and reported our position and asked them to forward it onto ORCV, which they did.

Missing the sked also meant missing the positions of the rapidly dwindling fleet. A report from one of the crew on a night watch that he believed he saw a large yacht passing us inshore, heading back in the other direction, caused much discussion amongst the crew as to the possibility that it may have been Helsal II. At this stage, though, we could not be sure, and had to assume they were still out there ahead of us, still to be caught. The wind by now was regularly gusting up to 45, the seas were quite big but not threatening; overall it was quite unpleasant.

We had by now done several tacks and it seemed that whichever tack we were on, we would get knocked. Progress over the ground was very slow, it was cold, wet and uncomfortable and the "Bundy and Coke's" in Hobart still seemed a long way away. The weather forecasts were continually unfavourable, at one stage suggesting it was going to be on the nose all the way to Storm Bay. Thankfully that forecast didn't develop!

That afternoon, we had put a long tack back into the coast and found some slightly sheltered water about 10 miles North of Cape Sorrel. By this stage, we knew there were only two of us left in the race, our spirits having been greatly lifted when we found Helsal was out of the race at the early afternoon sked. With still enough crew to keep the boat going, we had no reason to stop. However, I raised the question with the crew as to how they were feeling, suggesting an option of stopping in the lee of Cape Sorrel for a couple of hours to tidy up, have a meal then head out again - retiring was not an option that was given. I was told in no uncertain terms to keep going! As several of the crew kept reminding each other, we had Sam Sabey's (Back In Business) promise of a slab of Bundy & Coke waiting for us at the finish line to drive us on!

We tacked out for a couple of hours, got knocked so tacked back in and got knocked again. We hit the coast again, finding we had only made about 10 or 12 miles down the coast since we were last inshore - somewhat disheartening.

The wind and waves stayed up all day and night and we encountered the worst weather that night. We were hit by some big waves, often with little more warning than a last-second shout from the helmsman to "Hang On!" but we were never knocked down. They were still nothing like we had encountered during the 1993 Syd - Hobart, which Cadibarra had handled very well, so apart from the monotony of continually thumping off waves and of being cold and wet, we were not particularly concerned.

Day 4 - 30th December

Daylight brought a nasty shock when shortly after sunrise, while still sailing along in 30 - 35 with 3 reefs and #4, one of our runner blocks blew apart. Thank God for Carbon-fibre masts. The block broke as we came down off a wave, just as we had been doing for the previous 3 days. We didn't hear the block go with all the noise you have when sailing in those conditions. However, from where I was sitting steering, I knew there was something wrong as I saw the forestay flexing off severely, and the main trimmer immediately felt the main sag as the mast bent severely. I looked up and noticed the runner floating around in the air above my head - PANIC! After luffing the boat up, Willi quickly worked out that we could get the leeward runner on without affecting the main too badly because of having three reefs in. We got out a spare block and a couple of shackles and jury-rigged the runner satisfactorily. We had been sailing with backed off runners since the first evening so were quite shocked the block had failed. It turned out that there is a fault in the design of the block, which my father, Cadibarra's owner and designer, has now modified. If our mast had been Aluminium, it is most unlikely that it would have survived.

At that stage, we were on Starboard tack laying somewhere between Low Rocky Point and Port Davey, still a long way from laying course. We again got badly knocked down to 090°M or less, so tacked onto Port again, once again heading away from where we wanted to go.

The runner block incident was the most serious mishap we had during the trip. The main electrics, which have always been very reliable, behaved well again, with the exception of a battery terminal, which decided to start, coming off once it got rough. Luckily we worked out there was a problem before running out of batteries, though our emergency starting battery is totally isolated from the boat's main electrics. Another one for the ocean racing check list - Always check and tighten the battery terminals before the race.

Our Autohelm instruments, which have always been notoriously unreliable, partially failed again due to the leaking of one of the jumbo displays at the mast, which took the whole chain out. Our modifications to the instruments to make them waterproof had been very successful, so it was disappointing when they had problems. Unfortunately, our new chart plotter, which was installed not long before the race, also failed on the second day.

Out came the ever reliable hand held Garmin GPS, which worked without a hitch all the way to Hobart. Of course, the chart plotter problem turned out to be one wire that had come out of a connector that was a 2 minute job to fix in the flat water in Hobart - not so easy when bouncing around in 5m seas.

The other thing that fell apart was our stove, which had come off its pintles with all the bouncing on the second night. It was in bits and pieces in the galley area on the cabin floor. Now on day four, we hadn't had anything hot to eat or drink since the first evening.

By about 0800, the weather started to rapidly abate and we effectively went from 3 reefs and #4 to full rig with only some brief stops in between. It seemed quite amazing how quickly the wind and seas disappeared, after about 40 hours sailing with minimum sail before the storm sails. The forecast finally talked about South Westerlies. We prayed it would be as accurate as it had been for the last three or four days.

About 0900, we tacked onto Starboard again. Initially, we couldn't lay SW Cape. However, it was probably only half an hour after tacking we started to get lifted and were for the first time since turning at the heads 3 days earlier we were able to lay course. What a good feeling that was! Suddenly bodies started to appear from all places from the back of the boat as things looked up. We were now two sail reaching in about 12kts from the South. The ABC chartered chopper arrived at around 1000 and stayed with us for 20 min or so, filming and taking photos. It was good to see them given we were still a fair way from SW Cape. The conditions when they filmed us were not at all difficult and don't exactly reflect our memories of the race – in fact, a review of the video makes the race look quite pleasant!

We were all eagerly watching the Windex at the top of the mast waiting for it to go around far enough to get one of our big sails up. On the basis that the wind was going to continue to back around behind us, we set our fractional gennaker early, probably not quite laying SW Cape. Huey finally came good, and we lifted up and started to make good progress to the corner. Then, lo and behold, a few miles out from SW Cape, the wind died. For an hour or so, an odd mist settled inshore of us, often obscuring the land, so we headed up and out to sea somewhat to keep away from potential windless holes at the Cape. The sky looked like the wind was going to come, and it did, filling in and coming further around behind us prompting a peel to the fractional spinnaker after passing the spectacular sight of SW Cape. By this stage, we were becoming very conservative with our sail selection!

Around 1300 hours, we arrived at the Cape. During the lighter moments heading there, we found the pieces for the stove and, with the help of the most important boat repair item - duct tape - managed to get it back in working order. A meal of the World's Best Beef Stroganoff (as voted by all present) was prepared for lunch, and it was just about eaten out of the pots on the stove by the famished crew. I think the pots themselves were licked clean!

As we approached Maatsuyker Island, the sun was shining and we had the Chinese laundry happening in the cockpit. In fact, several of the crew were stripped down to only their shorts, and we wondered whether the residents at Maatsuyker might be watching us through telescope, wondering whether we might have "lost the plot!" For a while we debated the merits of peeling to the masthead kite, but the breeze was freshening and looked like it was going to continue so we stuck with what we had. A brief radio call came in from Maatsuyker, asking us "what took us so long to get there" as they'd been watching for the fleet, and wished us all the best for the remainder of the race and a Happy New Year – a welcome voice from the outside world having lost contact with race control and the radio relay vessel quite some time ago.

We passed Maatsuyker doing about 10kts on a starboard gybe, unable to lay SE Cape. We gybed shortly afterwards, still unable to lay SE Cape but deciding to get inshore a bit. The wind blew up and before we knew it, we were doing 15 - 16 knots in the right direction with the wind now blowing 25 from behind. When we started to do 17 - 18 knots, we decided it was a bit too exciting for that stage of the race and we took the kite down and went to a poled out #2.

We had to do a couple more gybes, which turned out to be grannies, to get to SE Cape and headed off to Bruny at good speed. We started to get hit by rainsqualls blowing over 30, and began to think that "discretion might be the better part of valor". We dropped a reef in and were now surfing at over 20 knots (estimated – our instruments were not doing very well keeping up with us). Even though it was still light when we arrived at the Friars off South Bruny, we chose not to go inside them, a popular decision amongst the crew! Since we were very aware that we were one of only two yachts remaining in the race, with Jubilation some 120 miles behind us, and despite the excitement of going downwind fast for a change, we had to continually remind ourselves that we still had some way to go, and we had to get the boat there in one piece.

We rounded South Bruny at dusk going very fast, passing a floating mass of kelp that looked like it could stop an oil tanker, escorted by a huge pod of very large and very active dolphins. The sky looked like the Millennium bug had hit a day early and the world was about to end! The second reef went in shortly before rounding and as it got dark, very threatening looking clouds surrounded us. We decided to take the main down and let some of them blow over, which they did dumping rain on us as they went by. However, the expected wind squall never came, and after 10 minutes of sitting there, going nowhere with just a jib, we started to feel just a little overcautious, so we put the main back up with a couple of reefs. As soon as it went up, the wind blew up and we were shooting off in the pitch black at 15+ again.

As we past Cape Queen Elizabeth, the wind had eased and the sky was a little bit clearer. We threw the reefs out and contemplated a change of foresail. I had been down below for an hour and when I came up and joined the discussion about changing sails, I asked the question if we had been hit by any squalls recently. No, haven't had any for ages was the answer! We therefore decided to put up the fractional gennaker again. We had been doing around 8 - 10 knots before putting it up.

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As soon as it was up and set, we were hit by a squall and we accelerated to 16 in what felt like less than a second, nearly causing half the crew including the helmsman to fall out the back of the boat. Once again, it was quickly decided that it was a little too exciting for that time of the night and that it might be nice to cross the finish line with the mast still vertical, so we pulled it down and put the #1 up.

Cadibarra 7 hit the Derwent with the wind still up, doing 14 knots while two sail reaching. The wind didn't really start to falter until two thirds up the river, but thankfully it held in till the finish. We finished at around 0200 of 31st December, a time of 3 days 14 hours. We arrived at Elizabeth St pier in rain and freezing cold weather and a crowd of family, friends, TV cameras, and Sam Sabey with his slab of Bundy & Coke!

Of the 10 (Sydney and Melbourne) Hobart races I have started in, it was by far the best feeling I've had at the end.

In hindsight now, we believe the main reasons we finished the 1999 Melbourne to Hobart Westcoaster, despite atrocious conditions, were:

- Having a very well designed, built and maintained boat
- Going West of King Island
- Mainsail with 3 reefs - changing between main and trysail is best avoided if possible
- Having third reef moused with a continuous mouse system
- Having a #4 or large storm Jib (we also have a small one)
- Changing to a 3 watch system to preserve the crew
- Sufficient crew with good stomachs to keep the boat going
- A balanced crew in terms of ages and experience, ranging from 19 to 60 something, with around 60 Hobart (Sydney and Melbourne) races in total, including 4 Westcoaster first timers
- Sam Sabey's commitment of a slab of Bundy waiting on the dock in Hobart
- Persistence/Madness - haven't worked out which!

The Cadibarra 7 crew included Nigel Jones, David Ash, James Bacon, Nathan Edwards, Scott Esler, Werner Foik, Cameron McKenzie, Willi Mehrmann, Greg Patten, John Petkovsek, Barry Pollock and Clark Swan

Nigel Jones

