

Lake lore

Trailable yachts take on Canberra's challenging conditions.
By Vanessa Dudley, words and pictures.



DON'T GO RACING on Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin if you're not prepared to look like an idiot at least once every race. There's every chance you might also look like a legend. It can change by the moment.

The lake is quite small and surrounded by hills which profoundly affect the wind strength and direction. Although the locals will tell you about the great steady breeze they had all day yesterday, or all last week, or all last month, be prepared for it to be extremely shift; inexplicably so for anyone used to sailing in steady seabreezes.

Don't be surprised to see another boat on the opposite tack holding almost the same heading as you towards the windward mark. Or to find that when you get to that spot where you could see breeze on the water, there's nothing, while those guys who went over to the windless side now have good pressure and are leaving you in their wake.

When you're ready to put a poor result down to bad luck and the chaotically random nature of the conditions, that's when you can't help but notice that the same boats keep coming home at the front of the fleet. Is there more to this lake sailing than just good luck and bad luck? Well, that's the challenge of sailboat

racing in Canberra.

The NEC City of Canberra Regatta for trailable yachts in December was evidence of a new wave of enthusiasm for sailing at the Canberra Yacht Club. Occupying a prime position on the edge of Lotus Bay, Yarralumla not far from Parliament House, the CYC has a large clubhouse, grassy rigging area and lots of boat storage space. Over the years it has been a stronghold for classes like the 505, Lightweight Sharpie and Flying 15 and has hosted major events including the first national Youthsails back in the 1970s.

During the 1990s the Canberra Southern Cross Club took over the running of the club as a social venue, providing grants for the sailing organisation. This has allowed the CYC to flourish as a sailing school as well as a racing organisation.

Matt Owen, one of the lake's best sailors and manager of the CYC for the past five years, says: "We put 500 people through Yachting Australia courses in a year, we have 23 casual employees and good retention rates from people going through the courses. Our fleet size has almost doubled in the past year; we had 63 boats racing last weekend."

The club has Lasers and Flying 15s, plus trailer sailers of every denomination with

healthy one design growth in three classes: the Elliott 7, Castle 650 and Gem 550.

The Elliott 7s have become the flagship fleet at the CYC, with 10 boats racing regularly and several people talking about buying boats now that a new builder, Cameron Pryce in Gladstone (Qld), has acquired the class moulds.

The E7 class association convenor Neil Primrose, a CYC member, says: "There are 43 Elliott 7s in Australia. Modern Concepts started building them in the early 1990s. John Dean in Rathmines (NSW) took over the moulds up until about 1998, when he stopped building them. About that time we started the class association, with the strategy to get boats on the water rather than supporting the builder, which had been the previous focus.

"Now Cameron Pryce has bought the moulds from John Dean and has been consulting closely with designer Greg Elliott in New Zealand with the aim of becoming a licensed class builder.

"We're hoping that Cameron will be licensed quite quickly and the class will continue to grow. It's important that older boats retain their value, and Cameron recognises that."

Matt Owen, who now races an Elliott 7 in partnership with Greg Breen, after sailing it for two years with previous owner Don Walter, says: "They're perfect boats for Canberra. Above seven knots of breeze you're starting to ease things off.

"They're pretty simple boats, there's no real trick to them and they're not really tweaky to set up. They're pretty even in speed so the sailing side takes it all.

"They're only about \$30,000 so guys can get into them. They're light to tow; we all travel to do the regattas."

Neil Primrose adds: "It's not an extreme sports boat. And having five in the crew is a boon, it puts great emphasis on team work. And the boat is very suitable for women to sail."

The ten Elliott 7s racing in the NEC Regatta included two in the hands of relatively new owners. Peter Barter has owned *Escapade* for 12 months, after returning to the sport he enjoyed as a youngster, sailing VJs on Lake Macquarie. Barter's career in the restaurant and hotel industry took him away from the water for many years, but lately he has been able to return to sailing with a passion.

Angus Reid, the skipper of *Another Fiasco Too*, has been sailing for only two years, having been a highly competitive rower. He was introduced to the sport by



Dominant Elliott 7 keeps pace up in the first race.

lake on the Sunday. Heat two was abandoned when the breeze would not settle enough to allow a start.

The fleet was divided into three divisions, racing under the Trailable Yacht Association of NSW & ACT Class Basic Handicaps (Div 1 for boats with CBH of 0.800 and above; Div 2: CBH 0.700 to 0.799; Div 3: CBH 0.699 and below). Two of the races counted towards the TYA of NSW & ACT's annual Travellers Series.

Quik Six, the leading local Elliott 7 skippered by Matt Owen and crewed by Greg Breen, Andrew Reed, Ollie Merz and Ian Davidson, managed to win every race of Division 1, in spite of having substantial leads whittled back to a boat length or two on the last leg of each race.

The first race provided a classic example of those challenging Canberra conditions, when Owen and his team had to sit in no breeze halfway down the final leg, watching the fleet bear down on them with pressure under spinnakers. Owen protected the right-hand side, thinking the new breeze would come from there, and eventually it did, allowing *Quik Six* to regain the upper hand and take the gun by just metres from another Canberra E7, *Casper*.

The only other boat to lead *Quik Six* home was the Thompson 7 *Anger Management* from Sydney, which took the gun in the Saturday twilight race, although the handicap victory went to the Elliott 7.

Owen says: "I've always been a Canberra person but started sailing Optimists in the Philippines; my father was a diplomat so we moved around a lot." His sailing career has included 18ft skiff racing, initially with fellow Canberra sailor Andre Webster (racing in the NEC Regatta on the Elliott 7 *Hippy Hippy Shake*), and later with Chris Nicholson, as well as a 49er campaign

Ian Ruff, a long-time Canberra resident who as crew with Ian Brown won the 470 bronze medal in the 1976 Olympic regatta at Kingston. "Ruffie" was looking for a crew for his Flying Dutchman and introduced the 6ft 7in Reid to the sport. Within five months Reid says he found himself as a grinder on John Kahlbetzer's *Bumblebee V* at the 2003 IMS worlds at Capri, Italy. He has embraced the sport and particularly the Elliott 7 class: "We have great racing twice a week here on the lake, and there'll be two or three more boats in the fleet within the next year."

Looking for wind

Four heats were scheduled for the NEC City of Canberra Regatta, three on the Saturday including two windward/leeward races and a twilight race around a triangular course, and a longer "passage race" taking in the western end of the



Peter Barter's Elliott 7 leads the Elliott 7.8 Triumvirate around the mark.

with Sean Langman.

Second overall in Division 2 was *Casper*, a family affair with helmsman Nick Faulk's father Howard, mother Anita, brother Robbie and girlfriend Alicia onboard. Third was *Hippy Hippy Shake*, Trevor and Debra Hippisley's E7 also from the CYC.

An interesting entry in Division 1 was the Thompson 590 *Motivation*, raced by John, Colin and Glenn Graham of the CYC. Designed by Steve Thompson in NZ and one of two built by John Dean in Newcastle (NSW), this sportsboat is cat-rigged with a large mainsail, no jib and a masthead asymmetrical. Having had the boat only since June, the Grahams are still learning to get the most from her and placed 11th overall.

Castle 650 country

Another focus of one design growth is the Castle 650 class, with seven boats

dominating Division 2 in both numbers and race results. Local team Peter Harvey, John Tracey and Craig Bryant in *Solitaire* managed to win the first race from another 650, *Serenity*, sailed by brothers Todd and Brad Curry from Port Kembla.

The next two races went to the visitors, giving them the overall victory. *Solitaire's* first, second and fourth placings secured second overall from another Castle 650, *Ting II* (Ian Brokenshire and Julian Walsh, CYC), and 650s took the next two spots on the final tally.

Todd Curry said he has had the Castle for three years, after owning a Spider 22. "This is more of a compromise for cruising and good one design racing. Normally we sail three-up, with my wife Rebecca. We usually do all the races; this is one of the big ones, and the state titles at Lake Illawarra YC is a big event. We have 10 or so Castles down there and more people

are interested in the class."

Peter Harvey also likes the Castle 650 for its cruising potential. Although based in Canberra, he said he and his partner like to take their boat to Metung (Vic) where they have a house. "We take our two cattedogs, it's glorious sailing on the Gippsland Lakes."

Harvey said the local fleet has about 10 boats and new ones joining the fleet, as there is still an active builder, Yacht Works in Mordialloc (Vic).

Gem collection

More one design racing was evident in Division 3, where six Gem 550s lined up to take the first three places overall.

Don and Libby Shortridge in *Dodgem* were the winners from John McDaniel and Steve Leicester in *Gem-a-tools*, followed by David, Grant and Sandra Denaby in *Gemini*. All are CYC boats.

Originally designed by Rob Humphries in England as a Micro Tonner and under construction in Australia by Central Boating Services in Adelaide, the small trailer sailer is providing reasonably priced sailing and competitive racing.

Other entries in Division 3 provided an abbreviated history of Australia's trailer sailing scene, with a couple of Hartley TS16s, three Careel 22s and two 18s, an Austral 20, Sonata 7, Farr 6000 and three Adams 21s.

There was also a Trailer Tramp trimaran, *Try'n* (Pat Farnham and Moe Kaldins), one of three multihulls racing in the NEC regatta. The F25a *Silkworm* skippered by Peter Withington raced in Div 1, while the Trailer tri 680 *Tekoa* (Roger Amos) raced in Div 2.

Flying the flag of the Wagga Wagga Boating Club from southern NSW was the 1977 vintage Careel 18 Mark 1 *Warian*, sailed by Geoff White and his 13-year-old son Vincent. The Whites, often accompanied by Vincent's 11-year-old brother Thomas, travel "two or three hours every couple of weeks to go sailing somewhere," Geoff says.

Their local waterway of Lake Albert is no longer deep enough for sailing. "There's only three feet of water at the moment, so for us these regattas are just bliss," Geoff says.

He bought *Warian* 18 months ago, having previously sailed dinghies and Maricats, always in Wagga. Now he and the boys travel to NSW and Victorian venues like St Georges Basin, Hume Weir, Lake Mokoan and Waranga to sail and fish. "It's excellent as a fishing boat, we put the swing keel down about a third to stop us drifting and we've filled the cockpit up

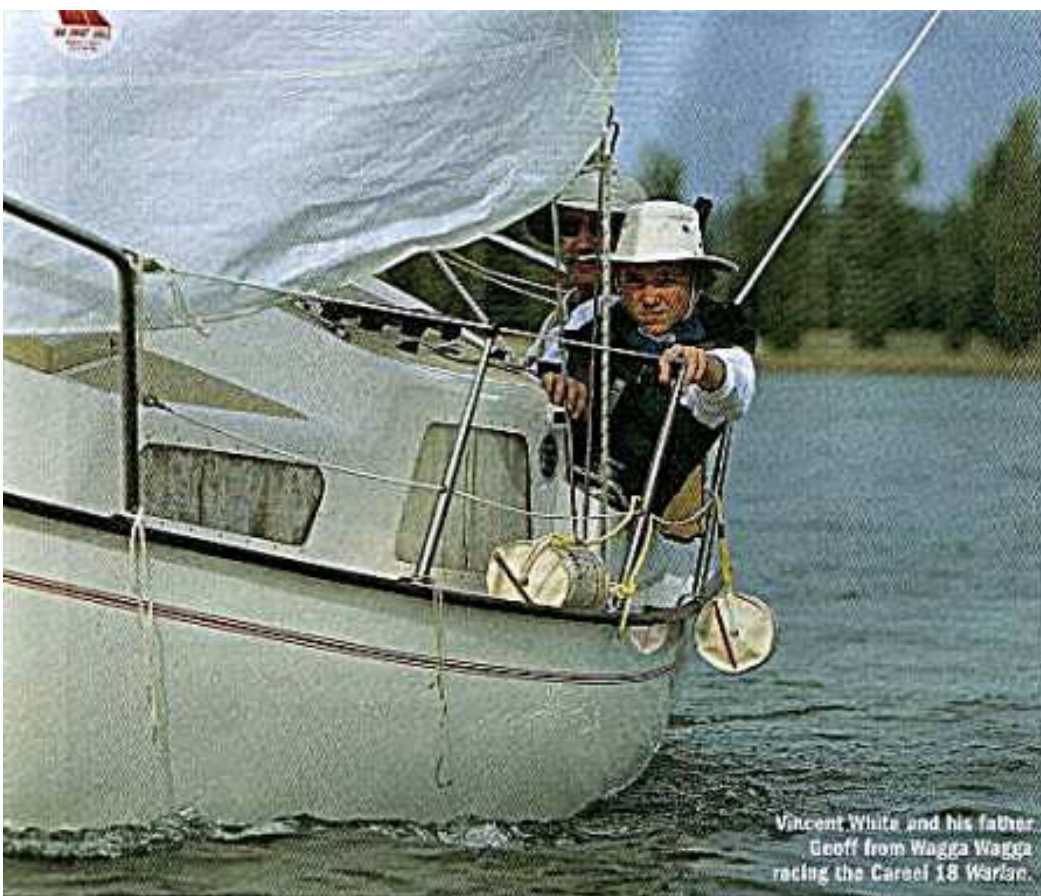


The top two Castle 650s look for breeze out of a Division 2 start.



FAR LEFT: New Thompson 590 is cat-rigged with a masthead asymmetrical.

LEFT: Thompson 7 *Anger Management* about to get the gun in the twilight race.



Vincent White and his father Geoff from Wagga Wagga racing the Careel 18 Warlan.



Another Fiasco Too with Ian Ruff at the helm.

with fish, especially down the coast."

Warlan was one of four boats from Wagga contesting the NEC regatta. Geoff and Vincent slept onboard by the shore at the CYC during the NEC regatta. "I think it's a major part of the regattas to keep involved in it," Geoff says.

True confessions

Perhaps it's because Canberra is the seat of our national democracy that I too was given my chance to look like an idiot during the NEC regatta. Stuart Loft persuaded me to come sailing for the last race on the Thompson 7 *Anger Management*, because he was sailing only three up with Ben Piggott and John McDonald. They had taken the gun in the previous night's race, and when we led out of the start and around the top mark I could already

hear the next gun ringing in my ears and was planning to be humble in victory.

"We're going to kick their butts," I proclaimed.

"This is Canberra, don't forget," said John, having spent years sailing there.

On cue the breeze died where we were and freshened for the bunch of Elliott 7s behind us, rapidly closing the gap.

From then on we stumbled from one pothole into the next. The big masthead asymmetrical was hard to carry on the lake, while the E7s kept coming under their conventional fractional kites. Our deep bulb centreboard became wrapped in weed. We lost the lead on the second beat by heading left to where the wind was, rather than going right to where the wind was about to come from.

Instead of being humble in victory, I

had to be humble in defeat, which is much harder. It might have been easier to argue that lake sailing is all about luck, if it wasn't for the story told by the overall results table: *Quik Stix* winning all three races of Division 1, *Serenity* taking two wins and a second in Division 2, and *Dodgem* taking a win and two seconds in Division 3.

Training base?

Given the challenges of racing on Lake Burley Griffin, particularly in light, shifty winds, combined with its proximity to the Australian Institute of Sport, the idea of using the lake as a training base for Australian sailors preparing to race at international and Olympic level has been floated frequently.

In fact, Australian sailing teams attended training camps in Canberra on an annual basis during the 1990s, using a fleet of Tasars at the Australian Defence Force Academy's sailing base on Lake Burley Griffin.

Following the disappointing results of the Australian team at the 2004 Olympic regatta in Athens, where some of the classes were raced in extremely light and wildly shifty conditions, there is a push by members of the Canberra Yacht Club to promote the idea of training on the lake.

Working with the Canberra Southern Cross Club, the CYC has been in close consultation with the National Capital Authority which has created a master plan for the lake. Neil Primrose says: "Part of the plan is to put in a crane, finger wharf and hardstand area, designed for Olympic and international classes to come down and train here. The whole idea is to provide a top class facility for light weather sailing."

"We're looking for money from the ACT and Commonwealth governments. It would probably cost \$300,000. We would like to have something within the next three years."

Results

Division 1: 1. Quik Stix (Elliott 7, M.Owen), 1-1-1, 3pts; 2. Casper (E7, N.Faulks), 2-2-3, 7; 3. Hippy Hippy Shake (E7, T.Hippisley), 8eq-3-2, 13.5; 4. Aeolus (E7, S. Russell Smith), 5-5-5, 15; 5. Another Fiasco Too (E7, A.Reid), 3-7-6, 16.

Division 2: 1. Serenity (Castle 650, T.Curry), 2-1-1, 4pts; 2. Solitaire (C650, P.Harvey), 1-2-3, 6; 3. Ting II (C650, Ian Brokenshire), 3-5-4, 12; 4. Wisdom (C650, D.Bizant), 4-3-6, 13; 5. Eachanter (C650, A.Curry), 6-4-9, 19.

Division 3: 1. Dodgem (Gem 550, D.Shortridge), 1-2-2, 5pts; 2. Gem-a-tools (G550, J.McDaniel), 2-1-4, 7; 3. Gemini (G550, D.Denahy), 3-3-5, 11; 4. Pathfinder (Adams 21, P.Taylor), 7-4-3, 14; 5. Hydrogem (G550, L.Nielsen), 8-5-6, 19.