The fast and the steadfast

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jweeks before the start of the 2014 Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race the focus was on the battle of the super maxis. Five 100-footers would go head to head in the 70th edition of one of the world’s classic offshore races. But there were two grand prix giants in particular that were stealing the show: Jim Clark’s new VPLP-designed extreme machine Mercurio alongside the boat that had taken line honours seven times, scored overall victories twice and holds the outright course record, Bob Oatley’s Wild Oats XI.

The little and large of the super maxi scene, these two munsters looked so different and yet provided incredibly close racing. With all sections as wide and flat as a tennis court, Comanche has the looks of a potent offwind flyer, by comparison, Wild Oats’s skinny, almost tubular form suggested a hull more at home with lighter, trickier conditions where waterline length and minimal wetted surface area would keep her ghosting along.

Yet just 49 minutes separated the pair at the end of the two-day drag race to Hobart and Wild Oats XI took yet another line honours victory, her eighth, making her the most successful boat in the history of the event, a remarkable achievement.

Apart from her crew of highly experienced and professional crew, who have raced abroad her for many years, Wild Oats is also notable for the number of tweaks and reconfigurations she has had. A year earlier she had made the news after being nicknamed the Swiss Army Knife, following five changes that have contributed most to her winning ways over her nine-year lifespan. The first was the removal of the forward rudder and the installation of the daggerboards, which made the boat more efficient downwind, but just as importantly improved lateral lift and VAG upwind. The daggerboards came with their own issues, however, the most problematic of which was the substantial shift in the centre of lateral resistance (CLR) which didn’t necessar-ily match the centre of effort (COE) under different sail configurations.

Small variations could be expected, but when changing from a jib to a Code 0 the COE was moving forward by metres, producing lee helm in light airs.

To resolve this issue a forward centreboard was added – the second major modification – supplementing the twin daggerboards and stabilising the balance of the boat in the low wind ranges up to the point where boat speed matches wind speed, where the daggerboards take over again.

The third refinement was the addition of a lateral foil (not a DSS, they say). Off the breeze in a seaway and strong winds Wild Oats XI had a tendency to bury the bow. The lateral foil provides lift and reduces that tendency, resulting in a more even downwind speed profile. A longer lateral foil was recently tested and shows further promise.

The fourth refinement was a new mast, 250kg lighter than its predecessor and substantially stiffer, with signific-ant improvements in upwind speeds, especially in lighter airs. The airfoil mast gave the sail trimmers more options.

The final modification was the reshaping of the bow and rebuild of the bowsprit. The whole bow section was refaired to a narrower profile up to two metres aft of the stem and substantially stiffer, with significant improvements in upwind speeds, especially in lighter airs. The bowteam gave the sail trimmers more options.

The second major modification was the installation of an airfoil in upwind mode to minimise drag. As designed by Reichel/Pugh, the airfoil is deployed to the windward side when changing from a jib to a Code 0 the COE on Wild Oats XI was moving forward by metres, producing lee helm in light airs.

Matthew Sheahan

WILD OATS XI

TWO THEMES reoccurred consistently in interviews with the skippers of the five super maxis in this year’s Rolex Sydney Hobart: good management and the eight people. In both regards the core of the Wild Oats XI team has remained remarkably consistent over the decade since she was launched and the contribution that made to their record-breaking win in 2014 should not be underestimated.

But no amount of experience and expertise can make good a shortfall in boat speed. So what have been the major modifications necessary to keep Wild Oats XI on the pace?

Regular crewmember naval architect Steve Quigley cites five changes that have contributed most to Wild Oats XI’s winning ways over her nine-year lifespan.

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The result had additional benefits beyond streamlining: ‘The bow team . . . couldn’t believe how dry the boat now was,’ skipper Mark Richards explains.

As Wild Oats XI berthed in Hobart having achieved a record eight line honours wins in ten years, her owner Bob Oatley vowed to bring his boat back again next year. It is hard to know what further modifications can be effected. When quizzed on the subject after the race, helmsman Stuart Bannatyne smiled wryly, but was giving little away: ‘We’ve still got a few tricks up our sleeves!’

Matthew Sheahan
“THE DESIGN office were told specifically by me that if this boat wasn’t the worst rated boat in history they have failed.”

Dr Jim Clark said about his new raceboat. Not exactly the sort of remark you might expect, perhaps, but Clark, founder of software company Netscape, is well known for his singular approach to his many sailing ventures. For Clark, owner of the 295ft three-masted schooner Comanche, the goal for his 100ft super-maxi is to break records. ‘Athena’ is the brand new 100ft super-maxi of Jim Clark, the owner of software company Netscape, is well known for his singular approach to his many sailing ventures. The design of the impression that Clark has left Sydney Harbour on the Australian sailing scene that as a result of lessons learned from the capsize of Rambler in the 2011 Rolex Fastnet Race, Comanche’s beamy stern suitably earned her the tag The Aircraft Carrier.

The mainstay of the design team excels in globe-circling multihulls in which the design team excels. The range of conditions that are characteristic of the Sydney Hobart Race, however, was unlikely to favour anything that has seen the movie before and know how to create a happy ending,” he says.

Sure enough, the Comanche team for Hobart read like a Who’s Who of America’s Cup and Volvo Ocean racing, including Casie Smith, Stan Honey, Kelvin Harrap, Tony Muller, Kimo Worthington and even a late signing of Jimmy Spithill. Even before Comanche had left Sydney Harbour on Boxing Day there were two very clear signs that the Americans were not simply in town to make up the numbers. The first came a week before when Comanche gave Wild Oats XI an impressive run in the SOLAS Big Boat Challenge, an aptly named fast-paced showpiece race around Sydney Harbour that has a habit of publicly showing up any weaknesses in boats and crews.

The second came on race day itself when Comanche left the four other 100-footers flat-footed from the start line as she powered the short seven-mile first turning mark near the harbour entrance, averaging more than 20 knots. The range of conditions that are characteristic of the Sydney Hobart Race, however, was unlikely to favour Comanche’s no-compromise design and, despite a powerful surge late on the second day, she crossed the finish line in Hobart 49 minutes behind Wild Oats XI.

It is a hallmark of the impression that Comanche made on the Australian sailing scene that as Wild Oats XI vanity chased the American yacht down Sydney Harbour from the start line it was the race-winning skipper Mark Richards himself who was heard on live TV voicing what everyone else was thinking: “They are smoking! Look at that thing go . . . woooh!”

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“SAILING IS 80 PER CENT good housekeeping,” says Roger Hickman (right), skipper of Wild Rose, the overall winner under IRC of the Rolex Sydney Hobart race. It is certainly testament to Hickman’s approach to good housekeeping and the crew’s experience that the Wild Rose team finished the race at all, much less collected the silverware.

“You’re only as good as your weakest link and in our case that was our steering,” adds Hickman, recalling the broach that broke their steering gear off Tasman Island. Within minutes the team had the spinnaker down, emergency steering in place, breakage mended and the boat on its way again.

Shortly afterwards the boat recovered from a Chinese gybe – Hickman’s first in 38 Hobart races, he recalls – before enduring a torrid battle across Storm Bay and up the Derwent River in conditions that ranged from dead calm to full gale.

Hickman’s long and successful record of races to Hobart also involves an association with the owner of this year’s line honours-winning Wild Oats XI. The 29-year-old Wild Rose, a Farr 43, built by John McConaghy, was originally owned and raced as Wild Oat by Bob Oatley, with whom Hickman raced to Hobart three times before Oatley decided to have a new boat. Recognising her qualities Hickman was keen to buy the yacht and speaks with gratitude about the very generous terms on which Oatley eventually sold in 1991.

The full potential of the yacht was realised two years later when Hickman and co-owners Bruce Foy and Lance Peckman won the Sydney Hobart overall under IOR, before renaming her.

Twenty-one years on and Roger Hickman’s love of his boat and his respect for its first owner is still evident. “I feel lucky and privileged to have Bob Oatley’s boat,” he said as he held up the Tattersall’s Cup in Hobart.