



Profile



When the fleet lined up for the start of the 2007 Rolex Sydney Hobart Race on Boxing Day, internet entrepreneur, Graeme Wood looked on with pride from the helm of his Nelson Marek TP 52, *Wot Yot*. His other yacht, the Sydney 47CR, *Wot's Next* boasted five girls under 25 among the crew list, with four of them making their debut in one of the world's toughest ocean races.

For the second year running, Wood handed *Wot's Next* over to sailing master and 19-time race veteran, Bill Sykes, who leads a young team that has risen through the ranks of the CYCA's Youth Sailing Academy.

For Wood, it was a 'no-brainer' getting behind youth sailing. His altruism is paying off too, with another TP52 and the Farr 40, *Wot Now* recently added to the fleet.

"It's such a valuable thing for young people to get involved in offshore racing. It's a rapid maturing process for them because they become really responsible for others and the boat and you don't get as much of that from being inshore," says Wood.

WOT A GREAT IDEA

That level of responsibility is escalated for the youth crew, the members working collaboratively on the boat with kids with learning difficulties from the school Sykes manages at Blacktown.

After meeting at Hamilton Island in 2006, Wood and Sykes hatched a strategy that supports



both youth sailing and a program for the disenfranchised kids Sykes works with.

"We are using the *Wot's Next* youth sailing program to expand their experiences in the real world. Many of these kids had never experienced being out on the water before, so I incorporated a practical learning course whereby completing their school work earns them a place on the boat," Sykes explained.

By Lulu Roseman

A young woman wearing a dark cap and a red jacket is smiling and looking back over her shoulder from the deck of a yacht. The background shows a calm sea and a sunset sky with soft orange and blue tones. The title text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Youth and yachting – an investment in the future

A combined vision is not only supporting and nurturing talent, but making a difference to the lives of young people who are discovering yachting for the first time.

As part of a behavioural management and health plan that includes activities, exercise and teamwork, the kids sail on Sydney Harbour every couple of weeks aboard *Wot's Next*. They learn to leave the dock, hoist sails, sail and steer the yacht around the harbour.

Sykes says both programs are very rewarding, with the young CYCA youth sailors helping his charges set goals and gain a better understanding of team dynamics.

"Many of these kids are from a lower socio-economic background and have experienced trouble at school and in their community," he said. "As a team, we are helping them to reconnect.

"The enthusiasm is infectious. These young sailors are pushed beyond their comfort zones and their minds are exposed to other social environments. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved. It's a cycle of success and that's why Graeme and I are so enthusiastic about the

Opposite: Bill Sykes and Graeme Wood.

Above: Darryl Smith, Tiffany Fulde and Stacey Jackson enjoy an unusually calm Bass Strait crossing.



Right: Stacey Jackson on the helm, Nic Dallen and John English.

Below: Girls on the rail (left to right), Catherine Trew, Tiffany Fulde, Amanda Scrivenor, Rebecca Dunn and Stacey Jackson.

*It's a win-win situation
for everyone involved*



program and why I wanted to take the boat to Hobart.

"We trained solidly for the two months leading up to the race. After competing in their debut Hobart, many of the CYCA youth sailors will return as watch captains or primary trimmers, who can then pass that knowledge on to the other kids."

TOUGH STUFF

The girls included Amanda Scrivenor on the bow, who, at just 19, took on one of the toughest positions on the boat.

"I had Jono English backing me up and we worked as a team, plus it's good to know someone will be there when you need the help," Scrivenor said.

Growing up on the shores of the Gippsland Lakes in Victoria, she cut her teeth on dinghies and Etchells.

"I'm from a sailing family and since moving to Sydney in 2007, I've taken the opportunity to broaden my skills into keel boats. Here, everything is at my doorstep and I've been able to step up."



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Also with a dinghy background, Catherine Trew started sailing at the CYCA Youth Sailing Academy 18 months ago and was introduced to the *Wot's Next* programme by coach, Jenni Bonnitcha.

"Jenni involved us with the program. We have a lot of fun, but everyone knows what they're doing and their job on the boat," Trew said.

Stacey Jackson, a first-timer on the boat, but competing in her fifth Hobart, said it was awesome having five girls in the team.

"The other girls helped me settle in and the guys showed me the ropes. It's great to see the gender mix equaling out and it's more even in sailing now," she said.

Rebecca Dunn said she's a gopher and does a bit of everything on the boat.

"We had a great race and all the training we did prior enabled us to cope well during the race."

The *Wot's Next* sailing program not only supports youth sailing, but sailing in general. The girls agree that there is a broad cross-section of people in sailing and it's great to get people involved who never might have had that opportunity before.

"It was pretty exciting racing to Hobart for the first time and we all shared an amazing experience," said Tiffany Fulde, who trimmed and was one of the medical officers on board.

HALF A DOCTOR

"Graeme arranged for all of us to complete the Safety at Sea course and even though the regulation is for only half the crew to have to do it, Graeme is very safety conscious and felt it was worthwhile. I am in my third year of medicine, so that's why the crew nominated me as I am half a doctor," Fulde laughed.

"I had full confidence in the crew and the boat and we trained with Bill Sykes, Scottie, Daryl and the experienced guys on the boat. We talked with the other youth guys who went down last year and had an idea what to expect. Being coached by them makes you realise how far you've come. It helps with your sailing by keeping things simple again.

"It also helps me when I have to explain things to the other kids and pass on my knowledge. Bill's kids get so excited just being on the boat and they are so grateful. Looking around them makes me appreciate being on the boat even more."

Jenni Bonnitcha said the girls were chosen to be a part of the Sydney Hobart because they

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Graeme is feeding the whole ocean racing fraternity through his endeavours

wanted to do it and were prepared to put the time and effort in.

"Bill and his team have put the support in place to give them the skills and it thrilled me no end to watch them go outside the Heads. I followed them for a mile or so and saw that first code zero go up with perfect team work.

"I have so much confidence in them. The reason I am here is because I love supporting these kids and seeing them find their pathways. Without Graeme, that opportunity may never have arisen. They wouldn't have had the courage

Left: John 'Jono' English and Tiffany Fulde.



Many of these kids are from a lower socio-economic background

Above and right: Blacktown Tutorial Centre students learn the ropes.



to stand up individually and say: 'I'll go on a boat to Hobart,'" she said.

"Graeme is feeding the whole ocean racing fraternity through his endeavours. I don't know if the ocean racers out there know how much he is contributing. To be able to support people broadly by putting them on a Rolex Sydney Hobart yacht, with their mates; that's another step up."

Sykes says that the *Wot's Next* sailing program is making his kids better people.

"By helping them be better citizens, they will then get along better with others. After six months of being involved in this program, I can notice changes from when they first walked through the door," he said.

The impact of the program has already reduced truancy and now, regardless of inclement weather conditions, many kids arrive at school by 7:30am ready to go sailing.

"If I cancel sailing on a day that is cold and wet, they become miserable. I received a phone call last year from a paediatrician, who had been working with one boy for a long period of time, and said all he can talk about now is sailing," Sykes beamed.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT

"He's now my navigator and can take the boat from The Spit to anywhere around the Harbour. At 14 years old, he understands the keyboard on the computer, how to zoom in and out and when we are approaching land. Using the daily newspapers and tide charts, he works out if we can fit across the sandbars. For a young person to get to that level who hasn't sailed before, I think it's a major achievement."

The boy didn't like being on deck when he first stepped onboard, preferring to be down below, so Sykes suggested he be the navigator. Before he went sailing, he did all the research by studying the newspapers. He investigated the possible wind directions and studied the charts to determine the different weather conditions.

"He researched what the tides were doing, so when he came down to the boat I could ask him a question and he could answer it," said Sykes.

While his current kids aren't old enough to go to Hobart just yet, Sykes says it is always a possibility for them to join the Hobart crew if they prove themselves.

"I've got two that did the Hobart in 2006. It is part of the disadvantaged program that they can set a goal to do the Hobart and compete, once they turn 18."

Ultimately, Wood says it's all about having a good time and good experiences on the water.

"One thing about my crew is that we like to have a fun time. In my mind, a happy crew is a successful crew and we all really enjoy sailing together." 