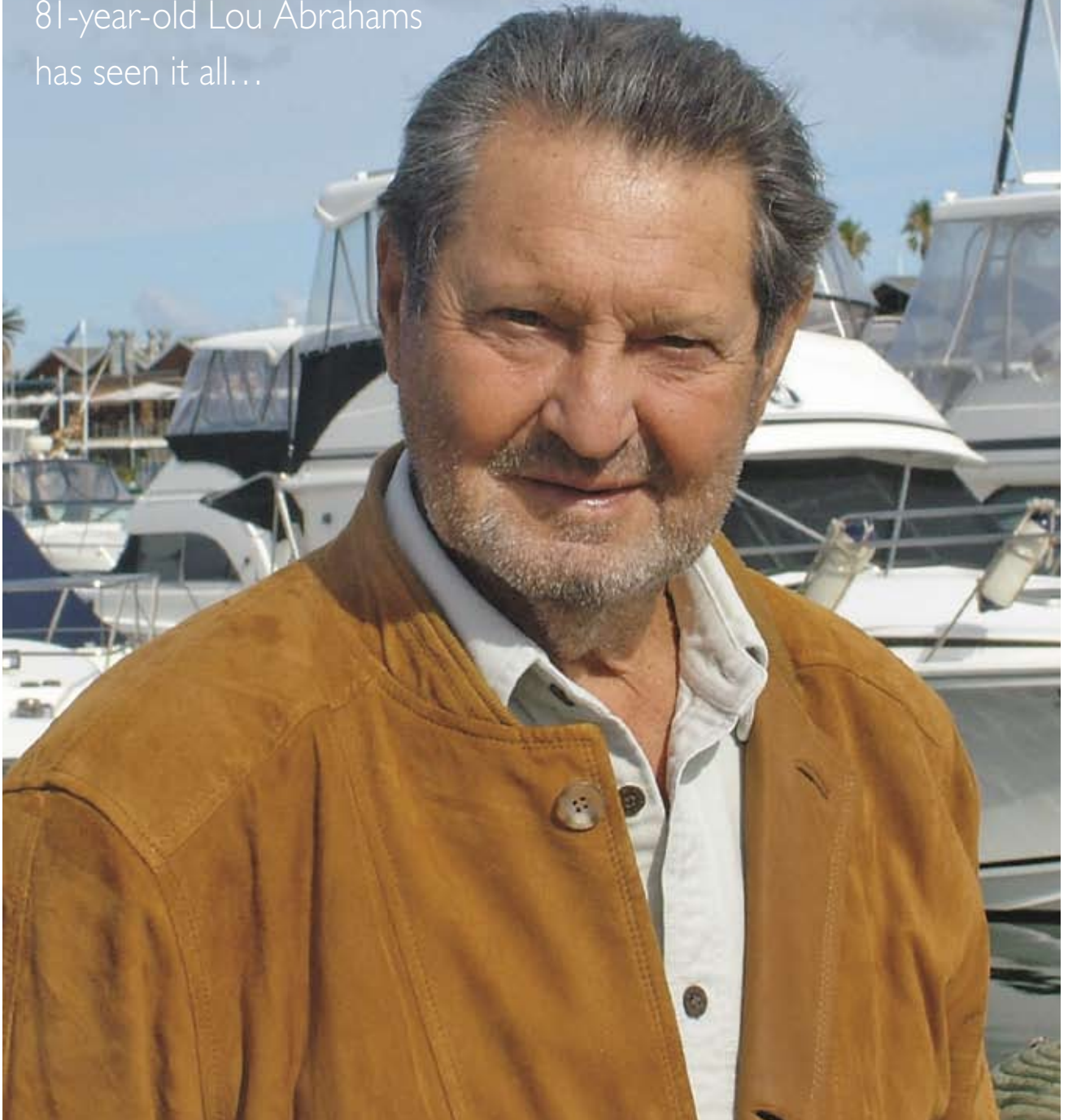




Profile

Salt in his veins

With 44 consecutive Sydney Hobart races to his credit, 81-year-old Lou Abrahams has seen it all...



If he'd followed through every time he'd said it – “No, not again, I am not racing to Hobart” – he would have missed out on some of the most extraordinary experiences of his life. This time around, however, he's changed tack. After tying the record for competing in 44 consecutive Sydney Hobart races, 81-year-old Lou Abrahams has confirmed he won't be bracing himself for Bass Strait in 2008.

DINGHY DAYS

Abraham's association with sailing began in Port Phillip Bay, where as a 12-year-old he started mucking around on foam surfboards and home-made dinghies. It was only after he joined Royal Brighton Yacht Club with a Jubilee-owning school friend that a determined Abrahams began participating in club races, later graduating to the Star Class.

“We competed in club races but it wasn't very serious,” said Abrahams. “I dropped out of it for a period of time when I got interested in power boats and water skiing up at Lake Eildon in Victoria,” he added.

In his early 20s he became further involved in speed boat racing and boat building. His fascination with engineering led him to design and build an engine originally slated for a speed boat, but actually finished up in a motor car.

“Developing that motor was my pet project, but it was way too powerful for the water. It used the first tachometer part to be released by Repco, and I think it went up to about 300hp. We were never able to clock accurate speeds on that boat so it's hard to know how fast it went, but it was pretty fast and it was completely unmanageable,” said Abrahams.

He later installed the motor in a racing car, but it still proved to be too powerful – even for a car originally fitted with a Ford V8. Abrahams said that after breaking everything, including the gearbox and shaft, he decided it was better to build a new car from the ground up.

“I worked on it in my spare time either late at night or in the wee hours of the morning. The neighbours would complain about the noise and after a few visits from the council inspector I thought I'd have to shelve the idea. But the inspector got really interested in what I was doing and the complaints stopped,” he said.

He named the car ‘Tornado’ and it went on to break the Australian land speed record. “I was in my early 30s then, and with a growing family, my wife preferred me sailing rather than racing fast motor cars,” he said.

CALL OF THE SEA

Abrahams returned to sailing in the early '60s, crewing with the Warner family aboard *Winston Churchill* for his first Sydney Hobart race. After doing a few ocean races he was hooked.

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Melbourne sailmaker, Col Anderson, first met Abrahams in the early '70s when he owned *Vittoria* – about the time he was starting up his own sail making business. “I made some sails for him because he was using Hood sails that were manufactured in Sydney, and it made better sense to use someone locally,” Anderson said.

The pair first sailed together in 1979 aboard *Challenge II*, with Anderson supplying Abrahams with a few peripheral sails, like spinnakers. “We did some offshore races together including the Port Fairy, Phillip Island and Apollo Bay races, and that's when I got into offshore sailing with him. My first Sydney Hobart was onboard *Banjo Paterson*, which is now a charter boat up at Hamilton Island,” Anderson added.

The pair also raced together when Abrahams owned *Police Car* and managed the winning

By Lulu Roseman

Australian Admirals Cup team. "Lou has this great ability to attract good people to the crew who are fun, happy types. There is a harmonious atmosphere on the boat. He attracts compatible crew and everyone enjoys sailing with him. He's not aggressive and while he demands a certain level of performance, he's very good at getting the best out of people," he said.

Anderson said that winning the Sydney Hobart on *Challenge II* was lucky, as they ran out of puff at Tasman Island and crawled all the way home to the finish line. "Winning the Sydney Hobart in 1981 was a significant milestone for him, because over the previous four years he hadn't done so well," he said.

STRAIGHT SHOOTER

Another crew member who celebrated that major milestone in Abraham's stellar yachting career was a young Matt Allen, now a seasoned champion and current Commodore of the Cruising Yacht Club

of Australia. At just 18, Allen not only realised his dream of competing in his first Sydney Hobart in 1983, but being a crew member onboard the winning yacht made the experience even sweeter.

"With Lou, what you see is what you get, and I enjoy the mateship and the camaraderie. Winning the 1983 Sydney Hobart stands out for me, as it always was an ambition and Lou helped me realise that dream. *Challenge II* was a Sparkman & Stephens 46, and an excellent all round boat. In fact it was the first Victorian boat to win that race," Allen said.

They charged into Bass Strait and finished the race somewhere between 3:00am and 4:00am, and, according to Allen, the partying began straight away. "Once we realised we had won, Lou booked a band and had them back their semi trailer up near the dock. We had about 100 people onboard the boat and on the dock celebrating with us. Lou filled the cockpit with ice and drinks that weighed the boat down significantly.

"Winning the Sydney Hobart in 1983 with Lou was fantastic. He is a great mate and someone who really loves his sailing. He was a bit of a father figure to me and we would often have a few drinks down at Sandringham Yacht Club together.

Lou has this great ability to attract good people to the crew who are fun, happy types.





While others are relaxing, he's out there going head to head with everyone...

He has done so much for sailing and has great organisational skills, and he really knows how to run a boat properly.

"I also competed with him in the 1981 Admirals Cup trials, but we failed to make the team because the committee decided to back Syd Fischer on *Ragamuffin*. We did well in the point score but the selectors decided against us, because we weren't a very good light air boat. We were very disappointed to miss out," he said.

Allen added that Lou is a very calm guy on the boat and terrific to go sailing with because he is so passionate about the sport.

Abrahams has been competing in the Sydney 38 Class since 2001 and is consistently one of the top performers, having won just about every event.

Scott Walton, who replaced Carl Schmidt (Abrahams' previous helmsman of 18 years), proved his salt helping his first Sydney 38 regatta aboard *Challenge* and defending their Victorian Sydney 38 OD title in April 2008.

"I thought it was time to give a younger person the opportunity and when Carl decided to pull back, it was the obvious thing to do," Abrahams said.

Walton first sailed with Abraham when he was about 15 and said the veteran campaigner has always been very generous in including Sandringham Yacht Club's younger sailors onboard.

"There are quite a few who have gone on to carve out Olympic, ocean racing or America's Cup yachting careers," Walton said.

POSITIVE SUPPORT

"Lou always puts together a top crew and has no hesitation in delegating responsibility and giving people the opportunity to show what they can do. He is always very positive and supportive, and this gives people the confidence to perform at their best. Lou is very generous with his time," Walton added.

"There is no-one better to sail with than Lou. He has a great attitude to the sport and is always a tough but fair competitor. You can't help but learn and be impressed by his knowledge and experience on all subjects, not just sailing. We always have a great time and he particularly enjoys letting his hair down on some of the deliveries," Walton added.

But on December 26, 2008, this elder statesman of the event will enjoy a considerable change of pace. Fittingly, the veteran Sydney Hobart campaigner will still be playing a high profile role in the 2008 event, by firing the starter's cannon on Sydney Harbour. Then, for the first Boxing Day since 1964, while the boats are already rocketing their way down the coast, he'll be returning to his home – and an altogether drier night. 