

Sport

Kirk on course for another sailing challenge

AAP

360 words

4 December 2013

Hobart Mercury

MERCURY

1 -

52

English

© 2013 News Limited. All rights reserved

A BLIND skipper in this year's Sydney to Hobart yacht race doesn't consider his condition a problem, with plenty of eyes to help him.

Kirk Watson, who suffers from the degenerative disease retinitis pigmentosa, will lead **Sailors** with disABILITIES in this month's race.

Watson started offshore racing in his early 20s when his vision was already being affected by the disease.

He can see when the sun is bright but has no effective vision and is legally blind.

Soon to embark on his ninth Sydney to Hobart, 40-year-old Watson stressed his impaired vision was no obstacle to him sailing and didn't create a hazard to him or his crew.

"There's always a few other people on the boat, so if there's something I need to see they let me know," Watson said.

He will stick primarily to his established role as a mainsail trimmer in addition to the extra decision-making involved in being the skipper.

"I'll still be trimming the sail. Just because you're the skipper doesn't mean you steer the boat," Watson said.

"I can steer a boat, I have steered a boat. It comes down more to the fact there are far better steerers than me [on the boat], so I'm happy for them to steer the boat."

He emphasised sailing was a sport that didn't just rely on vision and that feel was also an important aspect.

"Sailing isn't all about being able to see a sail, there's so much more to it than that," Watson said.

"There's also the technical side of trimming, and you've got your overall strategy.

Watson has sailed in the Sydney to Hobart eight times, finishing five times.

Showcasing the abilities of **sailors** suffering from a range of disabilities, the SWD program has a proud history in the race, contesting most years since its 1994 debut.

"Kirk's leadership is inspirational. This will be an empowering journey for him and the whole crew," said Malcolm Turnbull, the Federal Communications Minister and patron of the group.

Document MERCURY0020131203e9c400026