

A PARALYMPIAN MAKES AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

# From gold medal to blue water classic



Liesl Tesch prepares for her first Sydney-Hobart in 2009

PETER KOGAY

LIESL Tesch won a gold medal in sailing at the London Paralympics and now the NSW central coast school teacher is having another crack at the Rolex Sydney-Hobart. Tesch, one of our greatest Paralympians, having competed at five Games as a wheelchair basketballer in addition to London this year in the two-person SKUD180, has again teamed up with skipper David Pescud aboard the Sailors' Winch. Winning gold in London broke a long run of ours for her after winning two silvers and bronzes as a

member of the Gliders. "After 24 years of trying, it was something pretty special," Tesch said. "Since I was selected as a member of the crew, we trained twice a week, every Tuesday and Saturday to prepare for Hobart." "This first race two years ago turned my life around in many ways." "It was where she met her partner, Mark Thompson, a local boat builder, who is also watch captain and second in command on board the 13-year-old TP52 class yacht. This will be his seventh trip to Hobart. "As a kid growing up around Lake Macquarie before my accident, I did a lot of water sports, particu-

larly windsurfing and when I wasn't on the water I played basketball," Tesch said. "Her life took a sharp U-turn when a crash on her mountain bike as a 19-year-old Newcastle University student left her with incomplete paraplegia with only partial use of her legs and dependent on a wheelchair for long distances." "I spent the next two months after the accident in a hospital bed, then I was moved to Mount Drain in Sydney's western suburbs to a specialist facility." "I'm classed as an incomplete paraplegic which means I can still walk, it's more of a waddle."

"It's only if I have to go long distances that I use a wheelchair." The 43-year-old teacher at Ilfracombe Secondary College, settled on the central coast six years ago after playing professional wheelchair basketball alongside men in Europe. She first spent a year in Madrid, then three years on the Italian island of Sardinia and a further year in Paris. "I enjoyed my time shooting hoops, but sailing is now my passion," she said. "The Hobart two years ago helped launch me into some incredible things. I'm expecting nothing different this time around."

HENDRIK Harkema finally gets to live out a childhood dream of sailing to Hobart. But for the 41-year-old Dutch businessman who manufactures and sells sailing gear online through his company Searam Oceanwear, it was a close run thing. Harkema had originally accepted a spot on the crew of Cruising Yacht Club's member Alfran Duntjy's charter yacht, Deda.

## Dutch sailor hitches a ride

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But with Duntjy unable to have the 52-footer race-ready in time for today's start, it appeared Harkema's hopes were dashed. "I had paid for my ticket flights over from Amsterdam when I received an email confirming the boat Deda wasn't starting," Harkema said. "While it was very disappointing news at first, I had already booked my plane ticket and I thought I'd give it a go anyway."

"I arrived here last Thursday and within three hours I had a ride to Hobart aboard Finistere, a Davidson 50-footer." The Finistere, owned and skippered by Robert Thomas from the Fremantle Sailing Club, endured as soon problems sailing to Sydney for today's start, including an unscheduled stop at Sandringham Yacht Club in Melbourne for repairs after encountering a hellish crossing.

"We were doing OK until we hit a gale that blew for 24 hours and reached 65 knots at times," Thomas said. "Hendrik made a very impressive approach, but I initially suggested he try one of the bigger boats. He looked big and strong and I had room, but then I had to put it to the rest of the crew and they agreed."

"He's been given the job of working the mast." Even though he had hitched a ride to Hobart, Harkema's introduction to the crew was the safety gear he brought with him from The Netherlands didn't comply with the stringent rules brought in following the tragedy of the 1998 race when six sailors were lost.

"I had bought the most expensive life jacket I could find for the Finistere race last year, but it served before I came here, but the (safety) certificate was rejected, which means I had to go out and buy another one here."

The son of a Dutch family steeped in yachting, Harkema says he wanted to sail to Sydney. He joined the Finistere crew on Christmas eve, spending the night bunking down aboard the boat before an afternoon start down cruise around the sharkwater.

## Size no handicap in overall pursuit

WINNING line honours may be the Sydney-Hobart's glamour trophy but securing overall victory remains the purists' holy grail. The famous 628-nautical mile race is now so utterly dominated by cash and technology that only the largest and most expensive boats stand a chance of reaching Tasmania first. And there's nothing wrong with that — line honours is an exciting, design-driven pursuit, not unlike modern Formula 1 racing.

To level the playing field, the handicap system exists to ensure even the smallest vessels have a chance of overall victory — provided they sail brilliantly and have top luck onboard. The Tattersalls Cup is awarded to the yacht that finishes the race fastest, once boat size and other handicap factors are taken into consideration. And that means dozens of ordinary skippers can dream of reaching the top of the sport.

"The Tattersalls Cup is the pinnacle of sporting achievement," Wild Rose skipper Roger Hickman, the 1993 handicap winner, said. "To win an Australian championship is magnificent, to win an Olympic medal would be just amazing, but there's some things people can do and some things they can't."

"For me, winning the Tattersalls trophy is a possibility, albeit a very, very, very slim one." Hickman's 43-foot yacht is less than half the length of line honours favourite Wild Oats XI and has little in the way of hi-tech gadgets or cutting-edge design. It's sailing partly to raise money for a children's cancer charity, yet the handicap system means it's in the running for overall victory.

And the same goes for at least another 25 boats in this year's 77-boat fleet, including Matt Allen's Ichi Ban and Jim Cooney's Brindabella. Pugh class yacht, the 66-foot Redneck and her skipper, Mark Bradford, says good fortune plays as much of a role as good sailing. "The wind can stop or change direction, which is the lottery part of ocean racing," he said.

"I hate to say it but it's pretty much luck." That will be particularly true this year, with a series of weather fronts expected to cause unpredictable winds once the Sydney-Hobart fleet reaches Bass Strait. There's also a strong possibility that one of the super maxis such as Wild Oats XI or Ragamuffin Loyal could take line honours and overall victory.

Wild Oats XI was the last boat to win both in 2005, the year it set the race record. But as always with the Sydney-Hobart, lady luck and moor nature will have the final say. AAP

### FIVE TO FOLLOW FOR LINE HONOURS

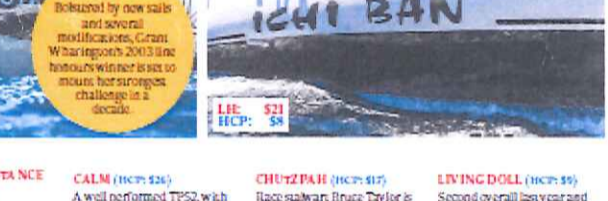
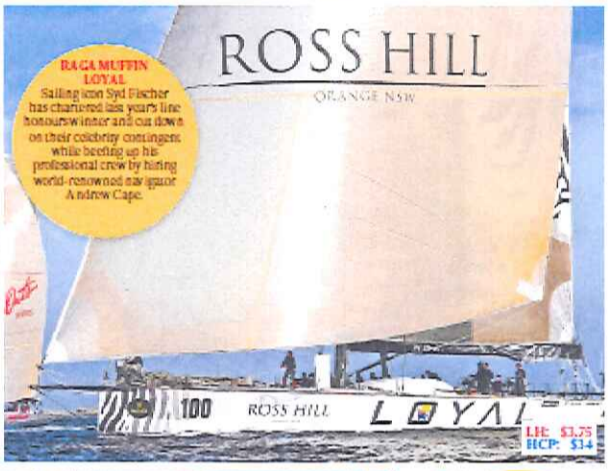
**WILD OATS XI**  
Five times, two seconds and a race record in seven appearances makes Rob Cooney's boat the modern-day Galah of the fleet and some modifications will make it even tougher to beat.

**LAGUNA**  
Third across the line for the past two years, it's hard to see this solid and reliable performer climbing any higher unless she gets her perfect weather conditions or the other more fanciful super maxis suffer a lack of top speed.

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### FOR THE RECORD

#### American Football

NFL	W	L	T	PCT	PTS
American Football Conference	10	6	0	.625	176
National Football Conference	10	6	0	.625	176

#### Basketball

NBA	W	L	T	PCT	PTS
Eastern Conference	10	6	0	.625	176
Western Conference	10	6	0	.625	176

#### Soccer

AFL	W	L	T	PCT	PTS
Geelong Cats	10	6	0	.625	176
Richmond	10	6	0	.625	176

#### Other Sports

Cricket	W	L	T	PCT	PTS
Western Australia	10	6	0	.625	176
Queensland	10	6	0	.625	176

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