



Sean Kelly

Sean Kelly: The club has always relied on the people who run it and the people, the membership, and I've not seen any great change in the membership over the years in the attitude that they take to the club. So I think coming into the anniversary year, we're not the sort of club that are going to jump up and down and make a big song and dance. We'll run a few events that will be for the club and for the club members.

It'll be very much driven by the volunteers and the people who work around the club. We're in good order and I think the anniversary year, it's been interrupted by the fact that we've had this pandemic and we've all had to sort of adjust how the club has operated, but everyone's been very adult about the approach they've taken to that.

150 years is a pretty good achievement, so I'm very happy for us to have a celebration that reflects that, but the main idea of everything we do at the club is to preserve it for the future and to preserve it very much the way it is now.

RP: And after 150 years, the club membership is stable, the finances are looking good, even after the COVID years?

SK: Finances are very good and one of the impacts of the COVID is that we did get a little bit of government assistance, but one of our loss leaders in the club is operating the bar, especially on the weekends. The Friday nights we tend to do okay because we've got all the Twilighters in there, but we run the bar after every race and there's expenses involved in that, so when we weren't running the bar, that actually saved us a little bit of money.

We've got close to a million dollars in the bank and that's all for use down the track when we have major infrastructure projects, but we're doing very good CAPEX studies as to what we will need and when.

RP: As you alluded by referring to the bar sales, apart from being one of the oldest sailing clubs in Sydney, the Amateurs has also been able to maintain its almost

unique character in remaining focused on sailing rather than the flash social amenities and facilities. Is this important to members that it remains that way?

SK: I think it's the only way we'll survive. It's crucial. I spoke to Noel Cornish over at the CYC and he's just finished as Commodore there.

After I talked to him a bit about the Amateurs, he said, "You know, the Amateurs has a very good understanding of what they are and what they're not". I think that's really important to us that we don't try and do things that we can't do. We don't try and open the bar more than we do and we don't try and offer more services than we do.

RP: Yes, I was going to ask you how you see the club fitting in with its perhaps richer and flashier neighbours – the Squadron, the CYC, as you mentioned. How do they see us as a club?

SK: We have their respect and we have a lot of shared membership. We've got good connections with the Squadron, but especially a good portion of our members and members over there as well. I'm not.

And with the CYC, well, we don't have the same offshore fleet that we did once, but we all complement each other. And one of the things that has been occurring over the last few years has been the Commodores have all been getting together initially to discuss what was happening with the (COVID) Pandemic and how everybody was dealing with that. But now we have a fairly good group of Commodores.

We're communicating every couple of months, usually on Zoom. We've also had a few face to face meetings, but we all get together and we talk about where we see issues with sailing. We share a bit of information about each other and it's allowing us to take a collective approach to some of the issues, especially the issues that we need to discuss with Australian Sailing.

RP: In terms of membership, are we seeing any changes towards perhaps more family memberships, more women taking part in the club?

SK: The issue that has confronted us over a number of years has been a declining membership. Once we get a member, we looked at the statistics a while ago, and they stay for about 19 years on average. So once a member joins, they stay for a long time.

What's the benefits of being a member, especially if you have a boat? Well, you've got the tender service, you've got easy access to your boat, you've got a key to

the club, but that's one owner, you know. We've got 65 moorings, so anyone who's got one of our moorings has to be a member.

But what does everybody else get for it? That's been an issue that we've had to address and I think one of the things that's worked well for us has been introducing the crew membership and we hope that through the crew membership, down the track, they become full members.

RP: Explain a little bit about how that works.

SK: Well, a crew member pays about a third of an ordinary fee. They can go on paying that and they don't pay the initial joining fee, whereas a full member pays a joining fee, which is basically a year's subscription plus they pay the year's subscription up front. So it varies, but the crew members, it's brought in about 100 members and we think that over time they will become full members of the club.

RP: And is there an increasing interest in women sailing and joining the club?

SK: I've always sailed with women and two of the best sailors I've ever, well there's a few of them...certainly I'm sailing with Mel Godfrey, sailing with Vanessa Dudley, sailing with Lani Tomaszewskii and Tiare Tomaszewski. Their gender never had anything to do with them sailing, they're just fantastic sailors. They look at it a bit like that.

Mel would say, "I sail because I sail, nothing else matters". It's the same with dance. But around the club, yes, more women are becoming involved with the club.

I have two really good women on the Board and I'd certainly like to encourage more women to join the Board and to be more involved with decision making at the club, and I think that that is happening. The same thing all the clubs are looking at, they're all looking at their demographic and they're seeing the same thing. Why don't we get more females?

What are the barriers to that? Sailing with the wrong people, not being involved in the thoughts around the club and not being as involved on the boats. It's just being put on the boats to say we've got a female, whereas I sail with a mixed crew and I sail with a mixed crew because they're good sailors.

RP: But boat ownership still remains predominantly male, obviously.

SK: It does, but it's changing.

RP: The amateur's existence also depends on the leases of its premises and the meeting of environmental regulations to operate the slipway. Is tightening government bureaucracy and restrictions making it more difficult to run a club like the Amateurs?

SK: What else would they do with that venue? Sell it to a billionaire? I suppose that they could.

We have at least I think three leases at the moment down at the main clubhouse, two at the green shed. So we have to deal with local councils and with state governments, and sometimes with maritime services, and there's a bit of crown lease land at the main clubhouse.

So it's quite a juggle, but I don't see that situation changing. In terms of the environmental regulations, yes, it's very serious and we have to watch it all the time.

So far so good. There's some things we don't do down there. We don't spray down there, we don't let the members wash down their boats when their boats are up on the slipway because they may let antifoul spill into the water.

But there's a few things with the environmental regulations that are a bit silly because they talk a lot about not letting any, you know, runoff from the antifoul going into the water. But anyone can send a diver down to dive on their boat, and that's exactly what they're doing.

RP: How important is the slipway to the life and the success of the club?

SK: The slipway doesn't make us any money. I'd like to see it do a little bit better than it does, but on the other hand, I regard it as a really important part of the club. I regard the idea that we can work on our boats on the weekends as one of the great attractions of the club.

RP: And what about the Green Shed too? That's been a great benefit over the past decade or so.

SK: Yeah, well the Green Shed was the Mosman Amateurs and they were sailing OK Dinghies and other boats like that down there. They're hard boats to sail in our case, and they had a really stalwart group of people sailing down there, but they were losing members and they couldn't afford to keep up the infrastructure.

We took it over I think about 15 or 20 years ago. We've done quite a lot of work down there. In terms of a facility for working on boats, yes, it's absolutely fantastic. We've redecked it.

At some stage we'll have to replace the pontoons, but they look worse than they are. It's a bit of an amphitheatre down there, so we have to be cautious about the use of power tools down there because we do get complaints from neighbours, probably not unreasonably.

RP: And leading up to the (150th) anniversary celebrations in a couple of weeks, I've noticed that the volunteers are out, working parties, working bees are around both the Green Shed and the club. How important has volunteering been to the success of the club?

SK: If you just take Trevor Cosh for example, he's probably saved us three, four hundred thousand dollars in terms of his ability to put teams together and his engineering skills. That's just typical of the club and before Trevor there were other people before Trevor and on it's gone, the Lawler family and Bobby Lawler and all of those guys.

And there's still that real understanding down at the club that we can only do the things that we do if everybody mucks in. And it's quite fun. The Amateurs is everybody's second home. So I think a day volunteering, yeah, we've just had the last two weekends.

A lot of us were down there this weekend painting and scraping and just the emails that come through with ideas for doing this and that and the other. It's fundamental to the ethos of the club and everybody from, you know, I might be the bloody Commodore but I can tell you, you know, I have to muck in just like everybody else and I love it.

RP: One of the things I think about the club is that you get such a huge range of people. You've got people who might be high court judges or powerful in industry or and others who might be tradesmen and they all work together down there and you wouldn't know who was what, or who did what, because everybody down that club is equal.

SK: You wouldn't know and you wouldn't care, and that's not a question that even comes up. I mean, you don't, we don't measure each other on in terms of income capacity or anything like that. Somehow, and I don't know how it is, people who want to join the Amateurs see that it's a casual club. It's not about posing, it's about people who like sailing, who like their boats, who like just mucking around on the water.

RP: Turning to your own sailing career, I think you started at a very young age and together with your brother Chris, how did you get into sailing?

SK: Career, I wonder if it's a career? I've never been paid much for it. My father Jim had some friends who were building down at Berrys Bay two ferro-cement yawls to a Len Hedges design. They were 48 foot. So, from the earliest age, I can remember we'd be driving down to Berrys Bay with dad while they were putting in the chicken wire and then everything that went with that. The first time I saw a boat, I saw a boat shed, that was it for me and I remember all those adventures down there and I remember those boats being built. They were both going to be sailed around the world but neither of which went much further than Pittwater.

RP: Would it be unusual perhaps to have been watching ferro-cement boats being built?

SK: Yeah, fascinating. They've got to do the whole pour in one day. You've got to start, and not stop, until you've got the whole boat poured. That's the only way to get a strong structure. So, yeah, that was interesting.

Dad was good, he encouraged me to get involved with dinghies. So, I sailed, I think I did my first season when I was about eight years old down at Northbridge Sailing Club. I sailed on Northbridge Juniors.

Then, I sailed with a guy called Geoff Masters at Middle Harbour, I think the 16 foot Skiff Club, on Flying Ants. Then, I sailed VJs up at Bayview. Then I sailed 16 foot Skiffs and whatever else I can get my hands on down at Middle Harbour 16 foot Skiff Club. Spent a lot of time upside down on the 16 foot Skiffs, very hard boats to sail.

RP: And were you skippering or crewing?

SK: By the time (of) the 16s, mainly skippering, badly. I'll tell you who could sail in those days were people like Trevor Barnabas. I can remember following him on a motorboat one day and watching the way he handled the 16 foot Skiff, and (he was) just unbelievably skilled.

RP: And these were open boats, the 16 Foot Skiffs?

SK: Yeah, yeah. There were some that were starting to close off the bows on some of them, but certainly the first boats we were sailing on, you think capsize it was a problem. Yeah.

RP: You floated ashore.

SK: You did, you swam, you dragged the boat ashore and got the water out of it.

RP: Now, at the moment at the club, you sail *Lonely* (420). Before becoming actually a member here, you sailed on a number of boats from the club.

SK: Yeah. Michal Tomaszewski, who I grew up with...our families were very close. And Michal had a little Swanson Dart called the *Salty* (A161). He used to race it out of the CYCA in the Winter Series. So, we used to hitchhike from Killarney Heights, where I live(d), to get down here in the morning. Tomo would make us dive on the boat and we'd give her a scrub. And then we'd go and bash it around the Harbour. Really enjoyed that.

Through Tomo, I then met Jim Davern, who was a television producer. And he was just starting 'A Country Practice'. And I did my first Hobart on his S&S 34, *Morning Tide* (A94), in 1982. I was 19. It was a fantastic experience. And so, I kept sailing with Jim through many boats over many years.

RP: So, how many Sydney to Hobarts have you done all together?

SK: Oh, not enough. I've done about half a dozen. I've done a lot of Lord Howes. I've done a lot of trips up and down to Southport and places. I stopped doing serious offshore when the babies came along, because it was causing too much angst with my then partner, who was convinced I was going to drown. In the end, she probably would have been delighted if I had. But, at the time, it just was an issue.

RP: What is it about the Sydney to Hobart that makes it so attractive to sailors? It's a challenge, isn't it? It's something that to have under your belt is a big thing to be able to say.

SK: Yeah, the second race we did in 1984 is still the worst conditions I've ever been through. Again, we're on the S&S 34. And we started in a pretty strong southerly that kept on building. I think it took us two days to get down to Jervis Bay. The seas were monstrous. We had 65, 70 knots, really short seas.

We had the two stainless water tanks in the boat both come loose. So, there was cans and things like down there that were all squashed flat. We pulled into Jervis Bay, and one of us went up the mast, and we saw that the forestay was working its way down the mast.

Everyone on the bloody crew was seasick except for me. So, I'd be down below trying to cook for all these mongrels, because I wanted to eat. Everyone was

looking at me not understanding how I could possibly do it, but I just don't get seasick...so, it was a great experience.

RP: And what about some of your previous cruising? You mentioned Lord Howe.

SK: Yeah, but mainly racing. Because Gosford Sailing Club hasn't kept good records, so it's very hard to work out historically how many races we did over there, on quite a few different boats. But I can't actually remember how many.

RP: All racing rather than the traditional Amateurs cruising groups?

SK: Yeah, I've done the barbecue (cruise) on *EZ Street* (6814) with Bruce Dover, but mainly racing. My favourite trips were with Jim Lawler and the boys on *Azzurro* (A42).

RP: On *Azzurro*?

SK: Yeah, beautiful boat.

RP: Tell me more about *Lonely*. She was previously, I think, *Supertramp II*.

SK: She's a Laurie Davidson design, 35 foot. She was built by a guy called Brian Keelty who was a pattern maker, and he built it in a shed up in Queensland because he'd gone up to Queensland and started growing bananas. Brian built the boat and I've got all the photos of the boat being built. She's a western red cedar (hull), triple skin. And I saw the boat for sale.

I watched it for a few months on 'Trade A Boat', and eventually I went down there and it was in the middle of a recession at the time. And I went down there and I made a stupid offer, and the guy accepted the offer. And the guy who owned the boat then was a guy called Alan Webb who'd circumnavigated the world in it by himself.

RP: Wow, it's got some record then.

SK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. She's a strong, beautiful boat. Anyway, I bought her, I think that was in about 2009.

RP: You've certainly had some success around the cans as well. I think you've won five season Gold Medals with the Amateurs.

SK: Yeah, probably. I've got a very good crew. A really nice bunch of guys to sail with, including my brother Chris and a really nice group of good sailors.

I've never did much around the cans with the Amateurs in the past, so it's been fun, but I still prefer the offshore stuff.

RP: So what is it about offshore that makes it much more exhilarating, more exciting presumably than sailing in the Harbour?

SK: It's the beauty of the dawn watches. I think just waking up at sea is something I'll never ever get sick of doing.

RP: Just going back to the Hobart, is the cost now of insurance, of all the safety requirements and whatever, making it really difficult for the average sailor to be able to fit out a boat for the Hobart race?

SK: Yes, but it's always been a money game, hasn't it really? It's just the boats have got bigger. I mean, when I was first doing Hobarts, you know, like the 40 footers were big boats and they were pretty modern and flash at the time, and now, you know, they're all sort of landfill.

A TP52 is, you know, sort of a standard boat, so you need a budget of a hell of a lot of money.

I like the two-handed stuff. I think that's a good idea.

RP: You've managed to combine a lot of sailing with a varied career in, what, publishing, marketing, writing and the law. How do you manage that?

SK: I'm still trying to work out what I'm going to do when I grow up. I find the time and I work for myself these days, so I don't know if I'm ever going to be particularly wealthy, but I think I'll always be okay. And I just get so much enjoyment out of sailing and just mucking around on the boat, and just being able to sit on the boat and fiddle with something and do it wrong. Like us all, we all love our boats and we all love just that time on the water.

RP: I've noticed that it's, as Commodore, you've brought a certain literary humour to your columns in the club newsletter. Are they always appreciated?

SK: As far as I know, I don't get much feedback. I do my best. So the hardest ones to write are the ones when you want to castigate people without getting into trouble.

One of the things I like about the Amateurs is we don't have a lot of rules and regulations. We don't have to have a big list of this and that and the other, that

you can do and you can't do, because everybody understands that this is a community and that you'll only stand out if you try and push your luck by doing things that we can't do. So sometimes I have to write about those things and I try to do it in a way that sort of gets the message across without being...

RP: So what are some of your pet subjects?

SK: Certainly use of the facilities, not trying to dominate facilities, understanding that this is a shared environment. If you want to complain about something, it's probably a waste of time. You should probably do something about it.

RP: So we all need the occasional reminder of how we should be behaving at the club, presumably.

SK: I try not to be too competitive, but I'm not opposed to protests in certain circumstances. Sometimes, yes, a nod and a wink's fine, but I have been known to turn up for a protest.

RP: So you can protest and still be a gentleman?

SK: I believe you can, yeah. I believe there are rules of the rules and sometimes you need to remind people of that, yeah.

RP: We talked earlier about your interest in writing. Does that interest in writing extend to writing about the sea and boats?

SK: It's the one thing I love, is a blank piece of paper and just the luxury of having time to write something creative. So yeah, I've always enjoyed that and I've had a lot of letters published in the ('Sydney Morning) Herald' over the years, and I wrote a few stories for them for the 'Heckler', for the back page of the 'Herald'. And it was good, you know, about 700 words on whatever you wanted to sort of rant on about.

And I wrote a story about something to do with the children, I can't remember what it was, but the 'Herald' contacted me and said they've been approached by a producer at Radio National, "Can we give you their contact details?"

So, Claudia Taranto was the woman. She contacted me and she said, "We like what you've written, have you got any more?" No. (But) I said, "Of course". And she said, "Send them to me".

So quick as a flash, I wrote what I could think. I sent them across to them. They liked them, they bought them and I was recording stories just on life and on

bringing up children and things and that for 'Life Matters' when it was run by Geraldine Doogue. I used to go into the studio with the stories and record them, and then they'd play them on 'Life Matters' in the morning and the interesting thing was that Radio National goes across the country, so it could be somebody driving a truck in Perth or somebody driving to work in Sydney, so you couldn't be Sydney-centric and they gave me fairly wide scope to cover various things.

RP: Well, as well as writing and boats, you also have a love of motorbikes?

SK: Yes.

RP: Tell me about that.

SK: I had motorbikes before I had cars. I've had quite a few over the years. Again, I stopped when we had young kids because you can't run up and down a soccer field, you know, if you're badly injured and things, and it wasn't fair to do anything like that. I always told my kids, "If you buy a motorbike, I'm going to smash it to pieces and I'll give it back to you in a nice little box. But I'll keep the decal so you can have it on the side."

So I started riding again when kids were old enough and I didn't have anyone to tell me not to.

So, I've had a few...I've got a very nice Kawasaki Ninja 1000, which I've just done 2000 kilometres in the last week or so. But only unfortunately driving up and down to Lismore and back to do some things with my mother, and that was all highway riding.

I'm 59 now, so I think I need to grow up. I had all my worst accidents when I was young and drunk, so hopefully I've got a bit more sensible now.

RP: So is there an affinity between sailing and motorbikes?

SK: Offshore sailing, I take it very seriously and I've been really, really fortunate in the people who've taken me sailing. People like Jim Davern and the Lawlers, Jimmy Lawler, they're two of my favourite human beings in the whole world and I'd sail anywhere with either of them.

We've all recognised that what we're doing is a dangerous pastime and things can go wrong. I think I was so young and stupid when I did that second Hobart, that I didn't quite realise just how dangerous it was and I didn't realise how unusual it was to be up on the foredeck with Chris Oh in 65 knots, changing down to a storm jib. I've never seen conditions as bad as that. But we had one trip back

from Lord Howe and there were four of us on the boat with, again, a really fantastic sailor, John Rickard, and myself, my brother Chris and I think Rab.

We saw a very big swell come up very quickly, big rolling waves, and I've seen that one other time on the Lord Howe where we didn't really get the wind. But in terms of the rollers, you could see what they could turn into, and I think that the trip across the Lord Howe is probably more dangerous than the Hobart because you're outside of helicopter range. So, I think you have to really respect that one.

RP: Looking back at your time as Commodore in this anniversary year, what's given you the most satisfaction about leading the Amateurs?

SK: We have a really fantastic Board. We keep on doing it at the Amateurs. My approach to the Board has been to make it really, really inclusive.

I ask all the Flag Officers to produce a monthly report which goes out well ahead of the Board meeting so that everybody's got an idea of what are the issues, so that when we actually go to the Board meeting, we're actually talking about the issues that we need to talk about.

It's been important to bring some new faces onto the Board, some new energy onto the board, and I'm really satisfied with who we've got on the Board.

Why join the Board of the Amateurs? I think you join the Amateurs either because you see a great problem there, or in the alternative that you see it as a great club and you want it to continue.

I want the Amateurs to be just what it is now, which is pretty close to what it's always been, which is a very welcoming place where everyone walks in there, you've got a key to the club, you wash up after yourself. If someone's in trouble, you help.

Through the Board that we've got now I have no doubt that nothing major is going to change. We've got no big personality conflicts. We understand what we're trying to achieve with the Amateurs, which is to look like we're standing still or paddling very hard below the water.

I'm very satisfied that that's going to continue.

RP: Sean Kelly, thanks very much.

SK: Thanks, mate. Cheers.