



REFLECTIONS 150 YEARS

Tony Clarkson

David Salter: Well thanks Tony. First of all we've got to establish the Tony story. Were you a Sydney boy?

Tony Clarkson: Born and bred in Sydney. Graduated from the product of Sydney Boys High. Commonwealth Scholarship to Uni of New South Wales. Did commerce. I wanted to do a major in economics because I was 15th in the state of New South Wales in economics in '56. And I was keen on it, but I decided that you'd earn more employment opportunities back in the '50s with accounting. And so I moved over into accounting. Majored in accounting. Qualified, while still studying at the Uni, as a fully fledged accountant.

DS: Right.

TC: And also did a second major in Economics, but it wasn't my first choice.

DS: So you set your heart on being an accountant?

TC: No (laughs). I just said that's how I'm going to make money. And as it turned out I only operated as an accounting type guy until '69. '69 I moved out of the accounting world into general management.

DS: Right.

TC: And then in the '70s onwards I was the managing director of Yarra Falls, that big textile warehouse in Melbourne. They had local mills here in Sydney in the Whitlam years, when we actually were shutting all of that stuff down. And it was hardest time of my life, just dealing with the retrenchment of thousands and thousands of people.

DS: Right.

TC: And none of it was anything ever...just in their pay packet a letter saying you're fired. It was addressing the various parts of the company that were closing down.

DS: Right.

TC: But that was that was a very very difficult part of life. Apart from when my first wife died, that was also fairly difficult.

But later on following that I ended up in mergers and acquisitions for a private family who became very wealthy and what we were all doing.

DS: So can we look back though and say sailing where did that start?

TC: Sailing started in Papua New Guinea where myself and two others bought a steel Thunderbird (laughter). Now that's a laughing point, that steel Thunderbird which we sailed. But the good thing about the steel Thunderbird we kept running onto reefs and things mainly because we're too drunk to know where we were going. When the wind was really strong we were able to win some races too.

DS: What took you to PNG?

TC: Oh, I joined W.R. Carpenter back in the mid '60s. Those days I was involved with the church and I thought of maybe becoming a missionary or something.

But then I worked out that with your children, etc, it was a bit silly. But I could go to Papua New Guinea as a lay missionary and I traveled up there on Carpenter business and got involved in some of the missions up there, although I ended up going up there as a chief of finance for Carpenters for the country.

Those days it was called the 'company secretary' of the holding company. But then I also was the treasurer for a group called Everyman Centres, and was involved with other missions, and we actually founded another operation which I was an initial director, and fundraiser for the capital, a company called Technical Christian Training (for) which we built a workshop.

We brought in local people, local indigenous people as trainees. We built the workshop, we built accommodation for the trainees and we built a house, a building for the guy who's leading the training programs. And we set up the business and it was successful, and in that particular one the most wonderful things was we had a blind panel beater, a local guy who was blind. And I reckon if that was the only thing I achieved out of my time in Papua New Guinea that was well worthwhile.

DS: It's an amazing story.

TC: Yes. That company went on...I eventually became deputy chair of the mission that was Everyman Centres, and it was basically bankrupt when I took over as Treasurer and then we sorted out its finances over time.

DS: So before your heart was stolen by a steel Thunderbird, did you have sailing experience other than that?

TC: No, no, no. But my father had always had, we'd had boats since we were little kids. We had a little 12-foot boat and we ended up with an outboard on the back which as a kid growing up I was allowed to take out when you're 12, 13, 14...we had pretty well free run. We

had a house down at a place called Currarong which is just on the Beecroft Peninsula, which forms the north arm of Jervis Bay. It was on the north side of the peninsula. Abrahams Bosom, you might have heard of that beach, is where Currarong is. Yeah, we were in boats and fishing and whatever. Then dad retired down there as a fisherman...had a bigger boat and I used to fish with him when we were on holidays or down there.

DS: So business obviously took you around Australia to different locations.

TC: Yeah, I've always been one who's always been happy to take the next opportunity. I've always made sure I had my replacement always in situ wherever I've gone, and that's always paid well because when an opportunity has come up - whether it's changing employment or whatever - you can leave on very good terms, sorting out that everything you're doing and it's a replacement for you...maybe there's contested replacements. Actually when I left Papua New Guinea I was actually the chief general manager of an automotive company there that had gone bankrupt, owned by the Carpenters, and we sorted that out to become a rather special jewel in their crown over the years after I left, and there we had three contenders to replace me (laughs).

DS: Now your association with the Amateurs is long and distinguished. How did that start?

TC: What happened is, in Victoria I decided I wanted to do a bit more serious sailing. There was a guy called John Manton down there who was the one of the senior guys in the Australian Wool Corp, and he introduced me through the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria into sailing for a guy who had a Brolga, that's a three-quarter tonner. So then I spent five years sailing with him in Bass Strait races, and getting right into the bit of it. Eventually I bought my first boat down there, a Top Hat.

After a couple of years I wanted something a bit bigger and better so I bought a S&S 30 which was a forerunner of the Defiance class, and this boat had been built by the Savage family in Victoria. So that was called *Maring* and I bought her and sailed her competitively in Victoria for some years.

We're now talking the late '80s...I was going to marry Sandy and I was commuting to Sydney, so I decided that it'd be easy to just swap it around and live in Sydney and commute to Melbourne when I need to be down there.

But in the meantime I'd become the chairman of the finance committee for the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria, where I organised the funding for the America's Cup when Alan Bond was training down there with all those syndicates. He went on to win the Cup, but we put in the big hard stand facilities for all the 12 meters and following all of that I said that we had a lot of grief from Alan over that whole issue (laughter). And also the Victorian Government welshed on their part of the deal...had a change of government. So we had a bit of pain but I said "Look those guys down there are going to kiss my arse somewhere along the line for having got the thing financially done". I didn't do the engineering and all that, so that was other committee, other people. But, anyway, (I) went on then to become the Rear Commodore then the Vice Commodore.

DS: Down there?

TC: Down there, at the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria, and then when I was coming up here to marry Sandy I immediately put my hand up to join the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron while I was still the flag officer down there. But no, they had a waiting list and you had to have the seven references and you had to have all these rules. So I didn't do much about that, but I bought another Top Hat. I had my half ton(ner) down there (in Melbourne) but Tom Selby - Dr. Tom, who was a revered member of the Amateurs - and because it had a mooring in those days, and he was a member of the Amateurs (with) a mooring just in front of my house I then owned up here, I bought his boat which came with the mooring and I joined the Amateurs.

DS: So the Squadrons loss was the Amateurs gain?

TC: So, I then put my hand up to join the Squadron seriously in '88 when I came up here, had Bill Mobbs then the Rear Commodore as my seconder, but they still had to go through the waiting of two or three years then when you put your application in you had to wait another year while they checked all the references. So it wasn't until '94 I actually became a member of the Squadron. By then I was heavily involved in the Amateurs. I think I became the Treasurer in about '95, '96 and then became a flag officer in '98.

DS: How were you encouraged to to take on Board responsibility at the Amateurs?

TC: All my life I've made tried to make a commitment to the community where I am, whether it was in Papua New Guinea, whether it's in Melbourne, even in the Scouts...in the organizations you've always said I should make a contribution to the community and hopefully leave the place a little better off for having been there. We had the issue that Fred (Bevis) had been the Treasurer at the Amateurs for a long period of time and so we got talking about a vacancy as a Vice Commodore (that) had come up, and we had a chat and I agreed to take over the treasury for Fred. And then of course two years later there's a vacancy came up again which I then took to become Vice and then I went on to become Commodore. Then after I'd finished as immediate past commodore there was a little issue between the then Commodore and the Treasurer that was a little bit tense. So I just suggested to the Commodore of the day, "If you like I'll put my hand up and stand against the current Treasurer". At which point he promptly resigned and (said) "Thank you very much, I'm out". So I came back for some years.

DS: The Amateurs way of conflict resolution. If I can take you back a little bit though I mean you had wide business experience you'd had experience with the club in Victoria and obviously knew the Squadron. The Amateurs is a completely different animal.

TC: Absolutely.

DS: How did it strike you?

TC: I just love the place. There may be two other clubs that might be somewhat similar in the RANSA and Balmain, and there may be now Greenwich, who've gone into keelboats. But back then they were very much skiff clubs.

But I just say to have the fantastic approach of volunteers, having a minimum of paid staff, being able to run your program for racing with a race sec(retary) – one person who's only part-time – you know it suggests that we've got a lot of things, and we don't have a membership department. We've got four or five hundred members, so we're not that small. We're not as big as the Squadron, but we're about the same size as the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria membership at the time when I joined. They had about four or five hundred members but they had an office staff of two or three, and a full-time secretary, and they had whatever, this and that, and they had almost a full-time race officer.

The Amateurs just seems to have the right clique and the freedom to use everything for members which is something unique. Every member has 24/7 use of the club, but they're not to abuse it, of course (laughs). There are some rules, but it really is good.

DS: You had such extensive management experience. Where do you think that spirit comes from for the Amateurs?

TC: I think you'll find it comes from that long tradition that they didn't have a clubhouse for about 80 years, and when they did get the opportunity to get a clubhouse it almost split the club, if you read the history. It was a wonderful opportunity which they took, and I don't think they had the money to just go and get professionals to fix it all up, and so they got to and did it themselves. I understand they had a guy called (Bob) Skinner that was one of the engineers they had at the time, who did a huge amount of work on that first beam they had to get there, and there's a huge story on that alone. And then putting in the first of those pontoons was another huge achievement done by the Amateurs. I think people when they do get to join the club, and that's even the newer members, get captivated by this self-help. The fact that you do have the working bees and they do come down and it's a great opportunity for people to get to know other people and to complement one another in their skills and even the lack of skills. They can usually find something for you to do even if it is only to cook a burnt sausage or something.

DS: From your experience as Commodore what were your priorities then?

TC: When we first came in there's a couple of issues you want to do, and one is not to change the club too much. The club has a unique culture. The one thing I confronted when I first came on as Treasurer was the fact the Board had about five or six past Commodores on the Board, and there were about two on the general Board who weren't past Commodores.

My reaction was that was another reason why it was so easy for me to parachute in as Vice Commodore because there's not many contenders. All you had to do is find someone to be the new Treasurer. You just do the double role for a bit, whatever you had to do.

I had a chat to Vic Dibben (who) was still on (the Board), and I had a chat to...the first one was to get (Peter) Garrow to stand down, which we got him (to do). That wasn't too hard, and then Vic was a bit more difficult because his heart and soul had been on the Board and in the club for so long, but they quietly chatted to him about the need to get new blood and that worked. He stood down. We then got John Morris to stand down. Never approached John Jeremy because he was also part of the long time there.

Bob Lawler we had some discussions with Bob but now he was the leader of the (offshore) group with his brother Jim, so he didn't want to. And the tragedy of poor old Bob was of course he eventually got voted off, and that broke his heart. It really did break his heart, and that was sad.

That's why I've, in later years, cheated a little bit and tried to get others who've had a long association with the Board to, at the right time, just stand down. You don't have to stop working for the club. But just create the opportunity for more new blood to come onto the Board from which you can then find a reasonable pool of future flag officers.

One of the other great thing about the club is it's never had factions and nor does the Squadron nor did the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria. When you don't have the factions you have a chance for the whole thing to keep a steady growth. You don't want it, and the Amateurs have been very good in a stable flag I think over pretty well most of its history.

DS: Where do you think that stability comes from?

TC: It comes from having people who come in here who are not here to try and change everything.

DS: I do remember a period when there was a push on to get rid of the slipway and put in a hard stand and that had the potential of being divisive in the club.

TC: Yes, absolutely.

DS: Can you remember that?

TC: Absolutely, because I was a Treasurer while a lot of that was going on and I did a lot of the normal modelling that proved pretty well that it was most probably not going to be viable. We originally put a figure on that, (it) was most probably going to be one and a half million. We can do it for this, we can do it for that, or we can do it for this, we can do it for that. And then when you've got the first lot of quotes or indications what the cost was excluding this and excluding that, and then they were going to have it that you're going to put them up but move all the boats around by hand, and you've got a seven tonne boat up there on a trolley weighing another couple of tonnes. I mean, moving it around by hand you've got to be kidding me. It's just not going to work; it's just not to be done.

But what we did is just let the thing go along over the years. It went on for quite some years. What we did get is the plant to meet the environmental issues for putting our waste water back in the sewerage system.

We got that plant in, we got a method of operating legally the plant in the environment. So out of that whole thing we did get a benefit, and the biggest issue of all we didn't waste a lot of money. We didn't waste the money on the various reports. I think we spent maybe fifty, a hundred thousand, but that was small change to end up with a situation where (a) we do have a compliant slipway, and (b) looking at how often (it isn't) busy now in winter, it's just pretty sad. It's not that many members now are wanting to do all their own work, and wanting to do this. So we got a good outcome in the end, the right outcome.

DS: Because you've been responsible for such a long period for the part management of the club, and while you were Commodore directly responsible for the management of the club, what are the changes that you think have happened over that period?

TC: Well the things that I'm quite proud of...the first thing we did we sorted out how to run that slipway and get a positive cash flow. When I was Treasurer, first as Treasurer, we were lucky in a really good year to have a positive cash flow of say ten or fifteen thousand. I'm talking that's a cash flow, not looking at allocated costs. So just what the cash flow was doing. And in a bad year you maybe have three to five thousand. We had a full-time manager and two employees.

(What) we've been through this with other companies in the management field, (is) to incentivize the people running businesses or running this as a business, the slipway, incentivize it by giving them an incentive based on the things they control.

So what we did for Rod (Phillips), he controls what the basic revenues are and he controls these items of cost. The things he controls. So then I put them all together and then I said the best he's ever done, or has ever been done, when you look at that was about seventeen grand. What we did is change Rod to being a working foreman with no more full-time managers there, and then no full-time staff...get the grunts you want when you want them, and then we said "When you get to 35 grand we'll start paying you a bonus".

And in the first year the bonus was 25% of the excess over that, and in the first year Rod got \$25,000 in bonus but the club got an extra \$75,000 plus the \$35,000. So we changed a cash flow of somewhere between \$3,000 and \$15,000 into \$100,000 a year, and that revolutionized how quickly we're able to get the money together when we did replace that pontoon. When we went through all of the renovations we did to the club boats while I was Commodore, we spent maybe 60-80 grand over the two-year period and all of that didn't make any dent in the cash flow.

So that by the time we started planning for the new pontoon...it went in in Charles, who followed me, Charles Maclurcan's time, the new pontoon...we were able to pay for it in cash. We didn't borrow even though we put a line of credit in to make sure we could do it, and now we've still got those cash resources when we do know we've got a new pontoon coming sometime in the not that distant future and I think the way the club has run and by keeping it running that way, I know they've played around and annoyed Rod by changing his bonus arrangements a bit, but by incentivizing someone and giving them

the challenge and giving them a return out of what they control, even it might be substantial in some people's eyes...if it's good for you it's good for everyone.

DS: You did mention earlier that when people stand down from the Board they don't have to stop contributing to the club, and you're an example of that yourself. How did you transition into the starting boat duties, the race management?

TC: Because I'd basically stopped racing. I had a fairly strong relationship with Vic Dibben over many years, and I also did the first race management course we had at the Squadron. I did that course along with a lot of our people. Tony Barry was there, and Russ Chapman was there. We all went to the course. Vic Dibben I think went to it. Anyway, that was good. And then I slotted into starter doing the odd race, like the starting the Bob Brown or when I joined Vic on a couple of times when we had the Great Bar Boat Race on...that's for the barristers and judges.

So you did a few of those, and then I resolved that when the time come, yeah, I'd put my hand up to go onto the start boat. But I held back until Russ retired, and then when Russ retired I thought "Now it's the time to do that". But in the meantime, after I finished this course, I came back as Treasurer for about three years to solve that problem I mentioned earlier.

One time there, I think you might have been on the Board, we were having trouble on Friday nights with the fast tender and no one was driving it. So for two years (I) said "Well I'll drive it", and everyone was so happy, except that when I wasn't there, you suddenly found that the times for pick ups blew-out by an hour (laughter). All of a sudden actually that's when they stirred me up and said "Listen, come on Clarkson, surely you can get a roster". So we asked for volunteers, we set up a roster of independent fast tender drivers and got that going and I think it's continuing to this day, so that's good.

DS: When you first joined the club, were you racing with the club?

TC: Not when I joined, no. I joined the club, I had my Half Ton (*Maring*). They had a Half Ton championship on the Harbour and I was encouraged to go into that with a scratch crew. That was a bit of a disaster, for me personally, because you've got boats everywhere, all in different fleets, everyone's contesting waters and just in my racing experience in Victoria, we always had our own clean waters with our own fleet and our own marks. This was everybody's fighting, and you got your spinnaker up and you're fouling this one or he's fouling you, and everyone's yelling at you and you just (inaudible). So then I dropped out of that and then I started sailing with Bob Lawler doing the SOPS (Short Offshore Point Score), and I did the SOPS for about three or four years with Bob until he stopped racing in the SOPS.

DS: And what about *Mausi*, how did that come along?

TC: I had the Half Ton, and then I decided I wasn't going to be racing, and I wanted possibly a more oceangoing boat, a little bit more comfortable, something that Sandy could be happy about. So I looked around, and I was looking at about a 36 footer as

against a 30 foot boat. And I just came across *Mausi* (a South Coast 36) and looked at that and said "Gee whiz, it's like a little ship. It's got a real big deep freezer, you know, a really big freezer" (laughs). I couldn't reach the bottom of it with my feet on the on the cabin sole. I had to really dive in to get to the bottom. That was for cleaning purposes. It had racks in it. It was really good. (It) had another fridge. It had hot and cold water, had a shower. It was really nicely set up, and it had a 'passion pit' down aft (laughs), and a proper chart table in the driest part of the boat, so it's not near the companion way. It had that nice doghouse to keep you out of the bad weather, and it was the sort of boat I could take(out) by myself, which I did on one occasion (when) we had 30 to 40 knots for a Bob Brown race.

DS: I was going to say, I can remember...

TC: I took it up by myself in 30-35 knots to get up there and said "I don't think the Cavalier 28s are going to be very happy in this weather", so I called it off. In those days we didn't have any rules about calling things off, you know, so you give them a start and let the people decide.

DS: I remember *Mausi* as the mothership for the great raft ups at Smith's Creek.

TC: Yeah, that's along with *Charisma* (Jim Lawler).

DS: Yeah.

TC: You put one down this end and one up the other end, that was fun.

DS: They were great, great times. Unfortunately, as you say, now things are a lot more difficult with safety regulations and insurance and all those things. Can you sum up for us what the Amateurs means to you?

TC: Well, to me, the Amateurs now, because I'm really on the back end of whatever I'm doing, so it's not an important part of my current (activities)...and one of the things I want to make clear is that I voluntarily stood down on the basis that (when) I get to an age, it's time to pass the mantle to others. So what I've got from the Amateurs is an absolute brain full of wonderful memories, of good times. We've had some nasty little fights and spats. We've had some difficult decisions to make.

But I see pretty well out of all decisions that have been made...not only by me, but by my predecessors on the Board, and successors as Commodores on all the Boards...we've actually got pretty well in every case, eventually, the right decisions being made.

And that gives me a lot of pleasure to think of, here's this little club, it's coming up for 150 years old, could see as long as we keep it on that same trajectory, it should be here in another 150. For that to happen, it speaks of following your traditions, not being too brave, being solid on decisions you want to make.

(Peter) Garrow always wanted to put the upper deck above there, like the clubhouse had back in the 1900s, but that didn't ever happen. But we can put solar power on the roof, which is the practical thing to do today.

One of the great things I think we did was take over the Mosman Amateur Sailing Club. At the time, it was a little bit difficult, there were some contests on the Board about what we're doing and why, and how we should use it, shouldn't use it. And again, we said when we did the deal, it was waterfront land in Mosman Bay, if it comes up, we should grab it. Now there was a suggestion that when Mosman Rowers were going broke, we should maybe make a bid for that.

I think I was still on the Board, maybe as Treasurer, and there was even a suggestion that we take over Middle Harbour Yacht Club (laughs). But there we decided that was not on. We had the cash, but that wasn't going to be on because it's a totally different culture. It's not us.

I like the idea of our classic boats, we're a centre of classic sailing, really, on Sydney Harbour.

I love that, and that's the reason why the Classic Boat Association formed in Victoria didn't really catch on up here that strongly, because we already had it. We had the Gaffers' Day, we have the events for old boats, and I just hope that those traditions keep going on.