



## REFLECTIONS 150 YEARS

### Leone Lorrimer

**Leone Lorrimer:** My father bought a dinghy to sail in, and he was advised to do this when he realised he had four teenage daughters, but he thought he should distract them into something healthy and wholesome. It didn't work on three of them, it only worked on me, so I was the only one of the four daughters that actually sailed with Dad down at the Double Bay Sailing Club, and you'll all laugh now when I say that we sailed in a Heron.

Now, with the Heron, of course, it is a full dinghy, so if you capsize it, you have to bail it out. So it's really not a good idea to capsize the boat, and particularly not when your father doesn't particularly like swimming and bailing, you see. And we used to race every Sunday, we did that for a few years. I always say that we won more frequently when I was skippering, and he agreed with that, but he said it was to do with the weight distribution in the boat.

**Richard Palfreyman:** How old were you then?

**LL:** I would have been about 14, I suppose, yes.

**RP:** And your father was very involved in sailing, wasn't he, in part of the administration and other areas of sailing, not just actively sailing?

**LL:** Yes, well, he's the sort of person that can't do an activity without then getting engaged with the community and then taking a leadership position in that community.

**RP:** And his name was?

**LL:** His name was the Honourable Dr Judge Frank McGrath, AM OBE.

**RP:** Wow...

**LL:** (laughs) I think you can leave the judge bit out.

**RP:** Now, that sounds Commodore material.

**LL:** Yes, well, of course he got involved in the community. He became the Commodore of the Double Bay Sailing Club. From there, he went on to be the chairman of what was known as the Royal Anniversary Sailing Regatta.

**RP:** Which is now the Australia Day Regatta.

**LL:** Which is now the Australia Day Regatta. And he was the chairman of that from 1973 to 1988, about 15 years.

**RP:** So he would have been at that auspicious regatta for Australia Day in the Bicentenary.

**LL:** That was his final one, exactly. And after that, then he handed the baton over to another judge called Davidson. During that time, he claims that he saved the Regatta from going broke. He leveraged the 150-year anniversary. So that's what we're doing at the Amateurs this year, is leveraging the 150th.

**RP:** Did he have any association with the Amateurs?

**LL:** He was a great friend of Lou d'Alpuget, who was a sailing journalist. And his daughter was Blanche, who was married to the ex-Prime Minister Hawke. And he built this beautiful sailing boat, which he named after his daughter, Blanche, because she had blonde curly hair and looked like a cherub.

**RP:** Is that a Ranger?

**LL:** I think it might be, but I'd have to defer to Peter (Scott) and Mark (Pearse) on that one. But they used to sail *Cherub* from Sydney all the way up to Pittwater and spend the night on the boat. I don't think there was a lot of room, but they would do that. And I think also, through Lou, he got to sail on bigger boats like *Ragamuffin* and so on.

**RP:** Well, that's a very similar story to one that Bill Gale told me, that his father and his mother used to sail up to Broken Bay and spend up to a week on the boat up there. And they would put a sail over the boom, and that became a tent. And they would fish and swim.

And I guess your father probably enjoyed something very similar to that.

**LL:** I think they did. The only thing they probably did a little differently was, I believe that the Gales used to sling their newborn babies in a hammock as well. So I don't think they took any newborn babies with them.

**RP:** Now, your husband, Matthew Lorrimer, is also a sailor, of course.

**LL:** Yes.

**RP:** What's his background?

**LL:** Well, he started on the VJs and he was made to be the for'ard hand, of course, which meant that you spent most of the race underwater...

**RP:** On a plank.

**LL:** On a plank, getting yelled at by your skipper. Anyway, that was his induction to sailing, far more wet than our leisurely dinghy.

**RP:** So jumping forward quite a few years, you're married. You both had a big connection with the Sydney Olympic Games planning.

**LL:** That's right.

**RP:** Your role was?

**LL:** Well, I'm an architect, like about 50% of the members of the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club. Our firm was doing all the, what's called the overlay planning work for the western venues, which effectively means designing what you need to do to operate during a Games event. Matthew was the Common Domain Manager at Sydney Olympic Park, which meant that he was in charge of everything that happened at Sydney Olympic Park during the Games time, from all of the bus interchanges right through to the pedestrian movements and goods movements in Sydney Olympic Park. He was on that for about four years ahead of time, doing all the planning for that, including things like crowd modelling.

**RP:** Well, it's a coincidence because I was working with Matthew at SOCOG. He, in fact, would have been in charge of one of my venues at the main press centre, which was within Sydney Olympic Park. And I think you and Matthew and I joined pretty much exactly the same time, around the early 1990s.

**LL:** Yes, yes.

**RP:** How did you come to do that?

**LL:** When we first got married, we were overseas and we came back to Australia and we had young children, so we were all too busy for sailing at that point. But we did have a friend who was a sign writer who decided to build himself a 72-foot boat. For a number of years, he couldn't go out unless he had us, because he couldn't sail the thing if we weren't there, you see. Then he sold that, and we thought, all right, finally, we'd better get ourselves a boat. Which we did. That was in about 1992, '93. So the obvious place for us to join up as members was the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club.

**RP:** And that boat, if I remember rightly, was called *A Fine Balance*.

**LL:** That's right because we thought life was a very fine balance. And every Friday night, that kicked in, because to make a twilight on a Friday night, it was a very fine balance whether you could drag a whole bunch of people out of the office, get them on a ferry across to Old Cremorne Wharf, then have them walk around down onto the pontoon, get them on a tender, which was packed, crowded...I mean, it was so difficult to get them on, get them out to the boat and make the start line.

**RP:** So most of your sailing at that stage, at least, was in twilight racing.

**LL:** It still is, actually.

We do the twilights. And I suppose, you know, the problem when you start sailing at your father's sort of knee, if you like, you don't really go through that professional training, shall I say. We're very much sailors that enjoy getting out there and sailing the boat and erring probably on the side of caution... rather than being the competitive, push-the-rules-to-the-absolute-limit to sneak around the mark before anybody else does.

**RP:** It's probably true to say that the twilight racing forms a major part of the club membership for many members.

**LL:** It's a wonderful way to connect the club to the rest of the world, because as we all know, we have our own little piece of paradise down there. And there is nothing more inspiring than being down there through sunset, into the evening with mateship, friendship, all standing around the barbecue, watching that sun go down. And it's just the most beautiful place in the world. Very, very regularly, and particularly through that Olympic period, we had so many internationals in town. And it was like a cue to come out to do that twilight, because it's the absolutely best way that foreigners can experience Sydney.

**RP:** And your children joined in as well?

**LL:** No, not really, not really. However, there was one famous incident where probably relatively early in our club membership, we thought, well, we better do more than the twilight. So we saw that there was this cruiser type race thing called the Idle Hour. And we thought, well, that suits us culturally down to a T, that we're pretty much idle hour sailors ourselves. And we did manage to con one of our daughters and her friend to come out on this race with us. And we went and did the race.

**RP:** It's the race...

**LL:** ...down to Store Beach. Much to our surprise, we won the race! So we thought, whoa, that's pretty good. Everyone swims into Store Beach and everyone's standing around. And we thought we were going to go up and have the prize ceremony and do whatever. And I got presented with a chamber pot full of beer (laughs). I had no idea that this was the thing that the winner of the Idle Hour had to do.

**RP:** So you were supposed to scull it?

**LL:** Supposed to scull it. We then realized at that moment, the reason we won is everybody else was doing 360s so they didn't cross the line first, you see, so that they wouldn't have to do it. Now, having been a barmaid when I was 18, I can't stand the smell of beer on my fingers and everything. I've never had a sip of beer in my life. And here was I confronted with a chamber pot full of beer. So my husband, being the best man that he is, he had a bit of a drink of it. And then we just passed it round to all and sundry (laughs).

**RP:** And you haven't done another Idle Hour?

**LL:** I haven't done the Idle Hour again.

**RP:** Tell me how you came to be involved in the Amateurs Board.

**LL:** Probably Bruce spoke to me first.

**RP:** Bruce Dover?

**LL:** Bruce Dover. He was the Commodore. And Bruce commissioned some research that said that the membership of sailing clubs globally was in decline and that the whole original notion where you would sail as a family and then members of the family would go on to race and sail, that that had all but disappeared. And the other thing was the upshot of the individual wellness exercise type thing. Now, you go to do yoga or aerobics or jogging, running, these sorts of things. Go to the gym. And not so much these things that you did together as a team. So that was on the decline. Bruce really set out to address refreshing the membership. He felt that he also needed to refresh the Board, because the Board had people who had given decades of their life in service on the Board. But to renew ideas and renew culture, then you do need to have some outsiders, if you like, coming in onto the Board.

So my first attempt, with Bruce's encouragement...I thought, well, what's the way to get to the hearts of these men, you see, that I want to persuade to vote for me? So I turned up at the club one Saturday with large boxes of cupcakes. And I thought that what they do for federal and state elections and council elections, they put their face on the poster. I actually had a picture of myself sailing, stamped into the top of every single one of these cupcakes on the trays, you see. And whoever was down there, they all ate the cupcakes with delight and made the usual jokes about the fact that my face is on the top. And it didn't work.

**RP:** Didn't vote for you?

**LL:** No, didn't vote for me, didn't vote for anyone. The same people that have been on the board all that time voted themselves back in. Nothing changed. But the constitution did change. And then, of course, by the next year, the number of applicants for the number of board positions and a number of retirements. I think they didn't get voted out, they retired gracefully. We got a fresh set of people on the board. And to be fair, the previous board did remarkable things in terms of bringing things like the crew membership in. You know, what it did was an awful lot of people had been going down and using the club facilities for decades and not paying a cent. You'd have one member, maybe six crew, so all of the crew were using the club free and not contributing to working fees or anything like that.

**RP:** Apart from drinking at the bar?

**LL:** Yeah, but, you know, whatever five or six bucks a throw, that's not really generating much profit into the club, is it?

**RP:** No.

**LL:** What we got with the crew membership then was a whole lot of people who really started to get very engaged with the club. And they have been tremendous in participating in working bees, and also quite a number of them have gone on to become full members.

**RP:** The club has always had predominantly a male membership. Did you find it difficult as a woman to stand for the Board?

**LL:** No, because Bruce had already laid all the ground. And there was myself and Alice as well. Alice was already running the races. She was doing the core job, if you like. Racing is the core thing of the club. Alice was already doing that. I don't know the stats, but I would probably suspect there's at least fifty/fifty men and women members coming through the crews. We've got a tremendous number of women that crew on the boats, and skipper as well.

**RP:** You've also been very much in the thick of it in planning for the club's 150th anniversary celebrations. Tell me a bit more about that.

**LL:** Yes. When I came in as a board member, I said that I would very much like to get involved with the anniversary celebrations. So, I suggested that Matthew be the chairman of the committee because (a) he wasn't in the room, but (b) having run an Olympic Games with 14 venues and nobody dying out there with half a million people swirling around, I thought he could manage an anniversary celebration.

We had also the Gaffers' Day as part of the anniversary. So if you say that the Gaffers' Day celebrations are in the year of the anniversary, that's probably already about 50 or 60 percent of the hard work done by the people who've been doing that for a number of years. The rest of it really was about what did we want to do to celebrate the past, but also change things for the future...reverse the tide of sailing losing its currency globally and find ways to refresh it and renew it and attract people. So we decided to have a big opening party and followed by a special anniversary regatta. That then got delayed because of COVID. We needed to move it to the beginning of the new sailing season. Otherwise, we wouldn't have any wind. It's fairly logical.

The other part of that, I mean the party is really to celebrate...it's 'knees up Mother Brown' sort of, let's just have a fun party. The regatta the next day, really, it's a focus on the wide diversity of boats that we have in the club. This is really saying, well, we're a sailing club at its core. We race. This is our club regatta.

The other thing about it is then we needed to do something for the families and for the broader public to raise the visibility of the club in the community. So we've got two things happening there. Mark Pearse has put together an excellent exhibition of 50 images of the bay over time and its transformation from the original indigenous carvings right through to the present day. That's been in the club for five Sundays in a row. Now, today's the last

day. So far, we've had, I think, over 800 people through. With good weather like today, we may hit the thousand visitors through that.

The second thing then is really a family fair day. We've got the party on the Friday night. On the Saturday, we'll have a big fair down on the grass there, and people can participate in the fair and then go out on the regatta. So we've got a number of games, all *à la* 1872. We've got hand painted floor cloths with model boat races on them. We've got a 'head in hole' board. We've got a couple of club characters and four holes, two for kids and one for a lady and one for a man, where you stick your head through and have your photo taken in the board. We've got 'splat the rat' with the side of a ship and a drain pipe. You drop it, you drop the rat down (and) you've got to whack it before it hits the ground. I've personally handmade all the rats. I've sewed them like you would have in 1872, from felt and blanket stitching, and made the little whiskers and everything. So please come down and try and destroy my rats.

**RP:** It sounds like it's going to be a lot of fun.

**LL:** Yeah...and then we've got old fashioned quoits and things like that. So hopefully we'll bring the broader community down and showcase our club.

**RP:** And of course, the club over the last two years from 2020, 2021, has gone through a remarkable period where we've all been observing the precautions for COVID. There's no great groups of people gathering. Sailing at one stage was banned. How did it affect the club over those two years?

**LL:** Well, as usual, the volunteers all stepped up and the clubhouse had a COVID subcommittee, a half hour meeting every Tuesday night, having looked at the New South Wales Government advisory notices and, week by week by week, refreshed the guidances. We would have weeks where we'd go from three on the tender max(imum) to five on the tender max to eight on the tender max. And all of that was managed absolutely seamlessly out, with clear communications to all the members. So I really think everybody was allowed to continue sailing in the most normal way possible.

**RP:** But racing was fairly affected though, wasn't it?

**LL:** Racing was affected for a period of time, only during lockdowns when you literally weren't allowed to leave your five-kilometre radius because a lot of our sailors, our racing sailors will come from quite far distances in to race at the club.

**RP:** You spoke of volunteering. The club, I guess, almost exists on volunteering. How involved have you been in that, apart from your role on the Board?

**LL:** Well, again, we've got fabulous people in the club who are excellent at organising things. We have had a number of working bees and some of them come to mind as being, I would say, major infrastructure projects. When I think about the replacement of all the wharf decking adjacent to the main clubhouse, the entire structure was renewed by volunteers under the unbelievable technical supervision of Trevor Cosh, known as Coshy.

And I'm not sure what we're going to do ultimately if we don't have Coshy anymore because the foresight, the logistics planning, because...everything has...all the materials have to be barged in, often left to cure for some period or left under the water and retrieved, all sorts of things like this. So the club has done these major infrastructure projects on volunteering and then every year has a series of working bees, which are usually less dangerous, less technically difficult, such as painting or minor bits of renewing barge boards or things like this. But it all gets done. We had to basically strip the whole boat shed out to remove all the asbestos that had been in the clubhouse and then put it all back together again, which meant moving all the dinghies, accumulated years of old sails and junk and get it all out onto the lawn. And these amazing things are done by volunteers.

**RP:** It is indeed an amazing club. Leonie Lorrimer, thanks very much for your time.

**LL:** It's a pleasure.