



REFLECTIONS 150 YEARS

Jim Davern OAM

Jim Davern: It was many years ago now in the 70s, in the mid 70s. I'd been producing a long-running series called *Bellbird*, which was a pioneering show for the ABC. I was getting a bit weary of it all and I always had a romantic attachment to the sea. I always thought it'd be wonderful to go sailing on the sea and I used to read lots and lots of sailing books, as most of us do, and I had a chart of Cape Horn that I used to hang up on my wall and say, one day I'm going to sail around that. But I never did and I probably never will.

Anyway, what I did, I was living in Melbourne and I walked down to the Royal Brighton Yacht Club and went in and saw the secretary and said, "Look, I'd like to learn to sail...I'd like to become a member of the club. What can you do to help me on that?" And he said, "Well, look, the best thing you can do is get on a crew and see if you like sailing". And he said, "Go down below. There's a fellow called Billy Woodman down there and he's got a boat called *Mistral 3*. He's preparing that boat for the next race to Tasmania. Why don't you go down and see if you can help him?" So I went down and introduced myself and he seemed an affable sort of a fellow. He was one of God's gentlemen, he used to be a stoker on the *Warramunga* in the Second World War. "Anyway", he said, "Come on, you know anything about electronics?" I said, "Yeah, I do as a matter of fact". He said, "Fine, you can wire up the boat for us."

So I spent a few weeks wiring up things and getting things ready and not going anywhere near the sea. But then we had it all ready, and the boat was ready to go and the race to Devonport was imminent, so we all hopped on board and sailed down to Queenscliff (from) where the race started. It was quite a good sail. I didn't get sick or anything like that and I thought, well, you know, this is easy. I'm going to be an expert at this.

Then the race started, and we went out through the Heads and we hit the first swells. That added a correction to my thoughts about sailing because it took me about 10 minutes to become violently ill. So I retired down below...I was a supernumerary anyway, I didn't have anything to do. The wind was starting to come up and I thought I was praying by that stage that it would stop, and they'd come into a landing, and I'd be able to get off. But there weren't any landings. We're in the middle of Bass Strait and the wind blew harder and harder and harder....and we were in a half a gale heading for Devonport, and I'm lying down below spewing my heart out. The skipper had given me a bucket and said, spew into that, not on the floor. Very sympathetic sort of a guy. And then it was getting worse. There was water coming in on the boat. A few of them kept coming down below and I'm in the way, lying on the cabin sole. And Billy Woodman said, "Look, get up for'ard on the sails...go

and lie on the sails. Take the bucket with you". So I took the bucket and I lay down on the sails, which were wet, of course. They were wet mainly because the for'ard hatch was leaking. And every time a wave came over, I got wet through. Worse than that, one time a really bad wave came over. It knocked the fire extinguisher off the holder, and the fire extinguisher went off and blew white foam all over me. So here I am lying here, sick as a dog, covered in white foam, praying like mad that somehow it would all stop.

Ian Macintosh: Thus began a career in ocean racing! Surely that would have been enough to put most of us off.

JD: Interesting introduction, wasn't it?

IM: What was *Mistral 3*? What sort of yacht was it?

JD: She was a sloop, a long keel, built in Tasmania by Jock Muir. Built out of Huon Pine. And she was a lovely boat. Not much good off the wind.

IM: But not a bad boat to be in Bass Strait in.

JD: No, no, not bad at all.

IM: So at what point did you move from Melbourne to Sydney and continue your sailing career...how much experience did you have before you moved to Sydney?

JD: Because I was pretty useless on the foredeck, I decided the only use I could be on a boat was a navigator. So I studied navigation. I studied it hard and became good with a sextant. I could find my way around. So I joined Billy's crew as a navigator, and it was more luck than anything to navigate, you know. But anyway, I did a lot of races in Port Phillip Bay...a lot of round the bay races and stuff like that.

IM: That's a very honest waterway, isn't it? You can get some pretty nasty weather on Port Phillip.

JD: Yeah, they close the bay occasionally, you know. I can remember once running hard under a storm spinnaker. He actually had a storm spinnaker, which was, you know, half an inch thick...it was that solid. And a big gust came up behind us and drove the bow of the boat under the water. And I thought, we're going to pitch pole, let go of the bloody jib! Anyway, we let it go and we survived that and just did the rest of the race under a jib (laughs). I did one Sydney Hobart with Bill. That was way back in, oh, yeah, 1979, something like that. By that time, he had an S&S 34. Took the S&S 34 up to Sydney. The ABC had moved me up to Sydney because I had to produce *Rush*, which was a gold mining saga with Sergeant McKellar. It was very popular. It was an international co-production with the French and Scottish television. Anyway, I was in the middle of producing that and I came up to Sydney on Bill's boat. Then we started the Hobart, and after about three days we had to pull out. We ended up in Eden. It was so rough. You'd think that it would have cured me of racing, but it didn't. I was enthusiastic about racing. I wanted to do more of it, you know, even though I was prone to seasickness.

IM: Were you always prone to seasickness?

JD: I was prone to seasickness.

IM: Throughout your offshore career?

JD: Yeah, always...always the first couple of days I'd be crook.

I was living in Sydney for a while and not doing any offshore work, and in the late 70s I bought a little boat called *Anna Twee*, which was a 24-footer, and I learned to be the skipper of that. That was very good. And then *Morning Tide* came up for sale up in Queensland.

So I went up to Queensland and bought *Morning Tide* and sailed her back. Then I thought, well, we might as well do a Sydney Hobart now that I'm here. So I recruited a few guys, all of whom ended up at the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club. Michael Tomaszewski, Chris Oh, Dennis Williams. And I always tried to take a girl with me on my Hobarts. Vanessa Dudley came with me a few times, and she did a couple of Southport races too...a terrific helmsman. Absolutely amazing. The first Sydney Hobart was the '81, and we got there all right. '82 on *Morning Tide*, got there all right. Gave it a pass in '83. '84 went out again, and that was a bad one. That was a bad, bad, bad race. The water tanks broke loose on the boat. There was water slashing around on the bottom, and I thought I can't get across Bass Strait like this. So I pulled into just south of Wollongong.

IM: Kiama?

JD: We pulled in there and had two days' rest, and then brought the boat back. It was a bit of a disappointment. But then I gave it a rest for a while, and then I got restless again. I thought, no, we've got to beat this Sydney Hobart thing. What was it I bought?

IM: In all, you did?

JD: *Seahawk*...I did one on *Seahawk*. Vanessa came with me on that race. That was a good race. We did well. I beat Hughie in by a country mile, Hughie O'Neill. That was a fine, very satisfying race. But what I discovered is that there's ways of coming back from Hobart which are really, really good. So we used to come in through Banks Strait, then go up inside and call in at Preservation Island, you know, and anchor there for the night and do a bit of fishing, and sometimes go into Cape Barren Island, to Cape Barren. It was absolutely gorgeous, gorgeous. And then go to Deal Island and stay there for a little while, and to Erith Island is the other side of the channel from Deal. Erith Island's a great place to be.

IM: You did eight Sydney Hobarts. You did...

JD: I did eight, did I?

IM: Yes, according to the record. No, you did nine. You did eight on your own boats and one with Bill Woodman.

JD: That'd be right, nine.

IM: You did, I think, five Sydney Southport races.

JD: Yes.

IM: You did a number of Lord Howe races, and through all this, according to the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club Yacht Register, you had eight boats. Which of the eight boats would you regard as your favourite?

JD: My favourite really was my last boat, *Ratu*. It was a New Zealand-built boat. It was a lovely boat. It was a 34-footer. It was very fast, particularly off the wind. I won one Sydney Southport race on that, on the handicap, and had a hell of a good time on that boat. I got too old. You know, you get to the stage where your body won't take being beaten up. I bought a 34-footer because I knew the crew couldn't make me go to Hobart anymore, because those Hobart races are tough. Once you get into your 60s, they're tough.

IM: You always had happy crew. They were very collegial crews, you had a lot of fun.

JD: Yes, yes, we did.

IM: And you had some great characters in the crews. You mentioned Tomo, Michael Tomaszewski, for example.

JD: (chuckles) I still see a lot of Tomo. He comes around...I've got a little house up in northern New South Wales, out of Byron Bay, and Tomo comes up and stays with us for a while...you know, it's always lovely to see him. I love Tomo. He's a great guy.

IM: You went to Lord Howe on a number of occasions. You sailed to Noumea, Southport, Hobart, cruised through the Bass Strait Islands.

JD: Yes.

IM: What are the memories that stir you the most from all those years? Specific things that stand out?

JD: Well...you know, the water's very cold down there. It's cold! We called in (at) Deal Island, it was, and we anchored there. And everyone said, do you want to go in for a swim? I said, no bloody way...it's absolutely freezing. But Tomaszewski, unbelievable...no brain, no pain. In he goes into the water. Splash. And he's swimming around - "Come on, it's beautiful. Beautiful." He's turning blue (laughs). My son and Chris Oh came back with me quite a few times on Morning Tide. You know, some people have got a talent for fishing. And Patrick, my son, always managed to pick up the biggest fish, you know. And I can remember him pulling up huge flathead in Bass Strait, parked in the islands there. It's a great part of the world to go cruising, Bass Strait, really wonderful.

IM: Your offshore sailing career at the Amateurs has coincided with, I guess, the peak of Amateurs offshore activity. In the 50th Sydney Hobart in '94, there was something like a dozen or more yachts from the Amateurs. Nowadays, maybe one or two. The Amateurs has always been regarded as, first and foremost, a harbour club. But in fact, that period of 20 or 30 years was very active offshore as well, wasn't it?

JD: There was Jim Lawler. He was a terrific sailor, Jim. And he used to love the Hobart. Hughie O'Neill used to go in all the Hobarts. And there were a lot of guys from the club used to pile into their boats and head down. But in those days, you could; it wasn't that expensive to do a Hobart. Nowadays, with all the safety regulations and all the competition that goes on, it's becoming too difficult to do a Hobart. They're better off making it a cruiser race. Maybe one day they will, to get the young fellas back. But, you know, the mighty dollar is the important thing in the Sydney-Hobart nowadays. So they attract the big hundred foot boats, with all the money that entails, and that's important for the sponsors, I suppose. But in the '80s and the early '90s, up to '93, a lot of amateur boats went to Hobart. John Rickard also went to Hobart in his own boat once or twice. Bob Lawler...Bob used to go down. We all used to gather at this pub in, I've forgotten the name of it, the Sailor's Arms or something.

IM: Shipwrights Arms.

JD: You've been there a few times (laughs).

IM: I'm not saying anything (laughter). Despite all that friendship and camaraderie, the actual racing was very competitive. I can remember, for example, brothers, Bob and Jim Lawler, you know, dear brothers. But boy, those two boats when they were at sea! Cut-throat. And you were always somebody we had to knock off. Is that how you saw it from your boat?

JD: Well, the best boat I had was *Seahawk*. She was very fast. She was a Farr. She was a Farr 38. She was a wooden boat. Triple planked kauri. She was beautiful. Still around. She's a beautiful boat. I don't know why I sold her. We did a good Hobart on her. Came up very high in the results. We beat a lot of bigger boats in, you know. Soon as she got off the wind and the spinnaker went up; she would just skate across the top of the waters...she was very good.

IM: I get the impression, Jim, that offshore sailing was the cure, if you like, for your hectic life in the media business. Did you see it that way...was it an escape?

JD: Oh, look, it was. It was a terrific escape. I left the ABC and then started my own company, and then started to produce *A Country Practice*, which ran for 12 years. There's a lot of pressure, a lot of tension in that sort of work. So it was a relief to get away to sea, to be quite honest. And in the latter years, I used to go north rather than south because it's a lot easier.

IM: But through all those years of winning Logies and getting other well-deserved recognition for your business, you kept sailing.

JD: Yes, I did. It was only about three years ago that I ended up sailing *Ratu*. I was getting too old. Getting in and out of the dinghy became an effort, you know. And I thought, you've got to be able to rescue yourself if you go out there. If you can't rescue yourself, give it away. So I did.

IM: You were involved in the salvage of a boat called *Pacific Breeze* owned by your friend Bruce Hitchman.

JD: Yes.

IM: Can you tell me about that little escapade? It sounded like another example of Amateurs volunteering, on a grand scale.

JD: Bruce was a member of the Shorthanded Sailing Association and I'd sailed against him several times. I did the '93 Hobart in a Beneteau 40, *All That Jazz*. She was a good boat and strong, but a bit slow, you know. Vanessa (Dudley) came with us once on *All That Jazz* and she said it was the most comfortable Hobart she's ever done (chuckles). I'd done the Hobart on that...and that was the 50th Hobart and I thought, that's the end of it. But anyway, I hear on the news that the Shorthanded Sailing Association had run a race to New Zealand from Sydney. A boat had got into trouble' and it was *Pacific Breeze*. It was owned by (Bruce) Hitchman. I rang up the club and said, "Look, pass it on to Bruce - if there's anything I can do to help him, I will". By this time, Bruce has been picked up by the Navy and been transported back to Sydney, but his boat was still out there and Bruce had left the locator beacon on, yeah. And it was still beeping away. So Bruce said, "Do you think you can help me?" I said, "Well, I've got a 40-foot yacht, which is pretty well set up. You get two people and get five days rations. I'll get two people and get five days rations and we'll meet down (my) boat tonight and we'll head out and we'll try and find your boat".

IM: And you did.

JD: And we did. So I got Lani Tomaszewski and David Willis, and neither of them hesitated. They said, yeah, "We'll be in it. Okay". So they all got some food and some booze and we threw it all on board. And we'd organised the coast radio station, Penta Comstat. Penta Comstat had organised a link through to the main (HF radio) station around Alice Springs somewhere. And what we were going to do, they were getting signals from Bruce's boat. The signal was still coming through reasonably strongly and giving them a position. They gave those positions to Penta Comstat who radioed them through to us. And out we go. You only got one position about every four or five hours.

IM: It was the old satnav system?

JD: Yes, the old satnav system. (So) I'm pointing the boat down to the south east, which is where Bill abandoned his boat.

IM: How far offshore are we?

JD: At this stage of the game, I'm about 20 miles offshore, that's all. And we get another position and suddenly we find Bill's boat has moved and it's moving at about three knots, just been drifting north. Half full of water. Yeah, bad seas, big seas. We follow it along and the next position we got it moved further north still, being tossed around by the Tasman. So we followed it and this went on for two days and we end up getting close to the south of Lord Howe. And I'm getting fairly close, and at night time the batteries are getting weak in the locator beacon. And I thought, well, we've just got to keep going. We're not going to hit anything in this sea in this night...and we'll go past it, and we'll have the sun behind us in the morning and we might pick it up. And let's hope we can get another position. The next morning we turn around and we're waiting for a position, hoping that the batteries in the locator beacon are strong enough to give the beacon (a signal). And they finally gave a position and it was 25 miles to the northwest of us. So off we go on the wind, going like a cut cat with binoculars out. Hopeless. Binoculars in that sort of a sea are useless.

IM: This is like needle in a haystack stuff.

JD: That's right, but we had the position and we knew the line of drift. So we extrapolated that and figured out where we would go. So everyone's up on deck...looking as hard as they can. And old Bill's (sic) up there looking for his boat and can't see anything. And the hours pass and I'm thinking, oh Jesus, we must have missed it. And suddenly a fella called Liam gives a yell - I can see it! He must have had fantastic eyes. And we looked and right in the distance you could just see the mast illuminated by the sun. So we headed off with engine flat out and going on the wind, going for it. But I thought, I don't know what we're going to do when we get there because it's too rough. The thought of two masts colliding out there ain't much fun. So I talked to Bill (sic), and I said, "Now listen, we've got a problem. How are we going to get to it? I can go to your boat, I can go past it very fast because I've got a good engine. But I think you're going to have to jump and swim for it". He said, "I can't see any other way out of it because we don't want to collide here. We'll both end up wrecked". So that's what we did. Young Liam was the youngest of us. I wound her up to about eight knots, got in very close and got past. And Liam jumped in and climbed up on the boat, climbed up on *Pacific Breeze*. And then Bill (sic) followed and another mate of Bill's (sic). The three of them got on board. We got a line across, and we hauled their gear across, you know, a spare rudder. Their rudder was busted. The binnacle was gone. They spent the next three or four hours, while we just hung around, trying to repair the boat, trying to make it sailable. The mast was bent. He managed to get a headsail up. Once he'd done that, he had some motion and he started off. I reported in, thanked Penta Comstat and thanked the, ah...

IM: AMSA. Yes. In Canberra.

JD: As soon as I said we're back on the boat, we found *Pacific Breeze*, everybody rang up. They all said, good on you mate...well, from all over the world, people were saying good.

IM: Meanwhile, you're out in the Tasman in still pretty ordinary conditions?

JD: Yeah, it was pretty ordinary.

IM: Did you eventually, you eventually towed *Pacific Breeze* back, did you?

JD: No, no. She was capable of independent movement. So I just took a slab out of the mainsail, only because we went best with that configuration. I navigated back overnight to Lord Howe, making sure that I missed that bloody pillar on the right.

IM: Ball's Pyramid?

JD: Ball's Pyramid. That's right. You don't want to hit that in the middle of the night. No! Anyway, we headed straight for Lord Howe Island. I went back and had a sleep. When I woke up in the morning, Mount Gower was right in front of us. That was nice. And so we got towed in. I had to fly back because of work. I left my boat there. Bruce Hitchman did as much repair work as he could because he wanted to sail his boat home. And then after about four days...I flew back with Tomo. Anyway, we got on our boats and we headed out. And we were blessed with very good weather. We went straight through to Sydney Heads.

IM: And Bruce got *Pacific Breeze* back, salvaged it himself?

JD: Yes.

IM: What happened to *Pacific Breeze* after that, do you know?

JD: Well, he repaired it as best he could. Then he put it on a mooring in Sydney Harbour, and about two years later he lost the mooring, and she was wrecked...tragically. He's not the first bloke we've helped back from Lord Howe Island. You know, there was a boat called *Southern Cross*, lost his rudder.

IM: Was that a towing job?

JD: Oh yeah, it was a towing job. We picked him up in the middle of Tasman because I knew where he was. Another boat had towed him some way but ran out of fuel. And I had plenty of fuel, so we hooked up a bit of a sling and started to tow him. We were doing about four or five knots. And very slowly, we towed him back till we got within cooee of the Police launch. We called him up and said, we need a bit of a hand here. I'm about to run out of fuel. So the Police launch came out and threw me a five-gallon drum of fuel, and then took over the tow.

IM: I associate Mosman Bay, among other things, with the sight of your house on the other side of the bay from the club. Very few club members, apart perhaps from the Tomaszewskis, were fortunate enough to live so close to the club. You also were a member of the Board. Can you describe what the Amateurs was to you as a refuge, as a place, not just for sailing but for companionship?

JD: I don't think it was much different from what it is now. There's a lot more young people in nowadays. But in those days, it was a bit of a haven. We always used to go back after the races and, you know, have the barbecue and do all that sort of thing...drink too much beer. There was a lot of camaraderie. It was, you know, a good little club full of nice

people...it was always a pleasure to be there. (Wife) Philippa used to come across and she'd have dinner with us. It was fun...it was nice to be there.

IM: There's a very strong ethos at the Amateurs of self-help and volunteering.

JD: Yes.

IM: Was that the case in your day?

JD: Yes, it was. We didn't have Trevor (Cosh) then, but there was always somebody who would lead on and get the work done, you know. Only in recent years has it become a sort of a collective enterprise. It's become very good now and they're very smart, the way they operate. They didn't operate that well in the old days.

IM: Times change, though, and people change, and demands on lifestyle certainly change. What do you see as the future of a little club like the Amateurs? 150 years old, in the black financially, where does it go from here?

JD: I don't think it has to go anywhere, to be quite honest. I think it should just....(pauses). Develop, develop, develop...I mean, it's all nonsense. The club is very, very good, very satisfying to be a member, very happy club, runs good races. We should attract more people with more boats and run more races and get back to the sort of endeavours it used to have.

It used to have all sorts of weird and wonderful races like Le Mans Starts, you know. You had to row across to your boat and get on it and pull the anchor up and start racing. Well, it was all fun. We also used to take out kids from various homes and take them out sailing for the day.

IM: Northcott Day, I remember, was one of those.

JD: We should be doing that still, I think.

IM: Did you participate in the Bob Browns or the Idle Hours?

JD: Oh, yes, I did. I did a lot of Bob Browns. (But) I only made the mistake once of anchoring near Bob Lawler. I never did that again. I never got any sleep that night. But no, the Bob Browns were great races.

IM: I guess the big challenge for the club going forward is how do you attract young people? The issue at the Amateurs in its 150th year is it's an ageing membership. You suggested some different formats of sailing. How would you go about getting younger members?

JD: The Mosman Sailing Club used to run a fleet of Moths before we bought into it. I remember on the board saying at the time, look, if you want young members to grow up, join the Moths into our club. You know, we can run the Moths, that's easy. But you've got young people in the Moths who want to graduate to offshore fleets, you know, so why don't

we do it that way? But they didn't. They wouldn't. It was a bit too adventurous; I think. But now I think they should start either Moths or some other junior sailing people, and have a junior group, so that they can learn to sail and have their sailing. And then they'll want to move on and join the club and be up with the others.

IM: Jim, you talked earlier about Sydney Hobarts and other offshore races and the crews, the fully crewed yachts you sailed. But you also were quite active in the Singlehanded Sailing Association. Tell me about that.

JD: The two-handed one?

IM: Sorry, the double-handed one.

JD: Yes, yes. Well, that's a bit of a story, actually. I joined the two-handed club with Chris Kelly. Chris Kelly was my opposite number in the two-handed races. And he's good. He was very strong and very active. And we did a hell of a lot of two-handed races. I owned a vineyard in the Hunter Valley for quite a long time, which was called *Wandin Valley Estate* after that program that I did. And I'd put in a cricket ground and accommodation. And so I said to the club, why don't we do a two-handed race up to Port Stephens, grab a bus the next day, come up to *Wandin Valley*, have a big presentation lunch, and then we'll play cricket. The crews versus the skippers. And they said, let's do it. So we did it for about five years. We had such a fabulous time!

IM: If you had your time all over again, Jim Davern, what sort of sailing would you do? Would you do anything different to what you'd done in the last 50 years?

JD: No, I don't think so, Ian...I had a lot of fun doing it. Ocean sailing is a mix of joy and terror. And you can always tell an old ocean racer when you go down below, because the scent of fear is still there.

IM: And they mostly live inland...

JD: Yeah, that's right, they do...under a tree. It can be, unless you've done a few, it can be terrifying.

IM: It's been a very important part of the life of the Amateurs, particularly in the last quarter century or so.

JD: Yes. I just hope they can revive the offshore group. But I think they might have to change the nature of the race and make it a cruise to Hobart, or perhaps a cruise-race to Hobart. Something like that would be very good...as long as you can have the option of when the southwesterlies come in at 60 knots, you can turn around and go back home.

IM: With the realities of insurance and risk assessment and so on, are today's offshore sailors softer than the ones that you raced with and against?

JD: No, I don't think so. They're less foolhardy (chuckles).

IM: Jim, thank you for your time. It's been a fascinating voyage through some pretty amazing experiences.

JD: Okay Ian, it's a pleasure to talk to you.