

Seems like only yesterday ...



by David Salter

Hard to believe, but it is 50 years ago this week that Ragamuffin won the Fastnet Race. No other Australian team yacht* has triumphed in the 600nm biennial race over the testing course that starts from Cowes, around the Fastnet Rock off the coast of Ireland, and back to the finish line at Plymouth.

The Fastnet was always the final race in the old Admiral's Cup offshore championship (sadly now discontinued). Australia's three-boat team for the 1971 series was Salacia II, Koomooloo and Syd Fischer's Ragamuffin.

Eleven international teams contested the four-race event that year. Australia placed third**, but the undoubted highlight was Ragamuffin's win in the Fastnet. Fischer and his crew contended with everything from dead calms to gale-force winds. The skipper remembers their motivation:

"We went there with determination to win and we pulled it off. The main thing was that '71 was the first year that the IOR measurement came in. Ragamuffin was built to the English RORC rule. When we got there they said 'what are you bringing that bloody old boat here for?' Anyhow, we kept sailing it and came out of it pretty well. We had a very good crew and they sailed the boat as hard as they could."



Remarkably, six of those nine sailors are still around to celebrate the anniversary of their Fastnet victory: Tony Ellis, Peter Tierney, Hugh Treharne, Peter Hemery, Doug Patterson and Fischer himself.

The skipper still cherishes the way his team showed the English the competitive style of Australian offshore racing:

"We listened to all the bull the Poms put on us when we got there. How good their boats were, what they were going to do with us. Then we would go out and beat the arse out of them the next day. Then they asked what we did and we said, 'we just got lucky'. That was the attitude of the Aussies."



* Great News, an Australian yacht, won the Fastnet in 1989 but was sailing under charter that year with the USA team.

** Australia would probably have won the 1971 Admiral's Cup but Koomooloo broke her rudder during the Fastnet race and failed to finish.

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