

How Cathy Hawkins bullied the Tasman into submission

BERWYN LEWIS meets the solo sailor who thrives on challenge:



Cathy Hawkins: a question of survival. Picture by COLIN MURTY.

CATHY Hawkins had an ambition — to make a solo crossing of the Tasman in her trimaran before she turned 30. On November 17 this year Cathy's wish was fulfilled when she sailed into Coffs Harbour after a gruelling voyage from Norfolk Island.

Her voyage took five days and 23 hours, much of it without sleep as she fought a gale that lasted 50 hours and whipped up towering waves.

Cathy's yacht, a 12m "short-handed" ocean racing trimaran named Bullfrog, which she helped build and co-owns with her friend Ian Johnston, 34, is "very fast, very high tech and a very complex boat to sail," she said.

"The trip was a bit of a survival situation for me and Bullfrog. It told me a lot about my capabilities. It was a very sobering experience. I don't think I've ever seen seas like it before," said Cathy, a former journalist.

Bullfrog, sponsored by Johnson Wax, was built in 1984-5 in northern NSW. To help finance the construction, Cathy turned her hand to managing a Tweed Valley farm which produced avocados, paw-paws, lychees and macadamia nuts, while Ian, a boat builder, worked on the trimaran.

"It was great seeing the boat evolve. On my days off I helped work on it. They were very pleasant and easy days," said Cathy. "By the time the boat was built I was ready, psychologically and physically.

"The solo voyage went really well considering the weather.

"There was so much to do I couldn't be at the helm all the time. I had to rely on auto pilot for steering. I didn't sleep for more than 15 minutes at a time. I had a little kitchen alarm clock which I set for my catnaps once I'd checked that everything was safe and secure.

Thrown from her bunk

"It wasn't really sleep. It was just lying on the bunk listening to all the noises. I didn't have any radar and at the time of the gale the visibility was extremely poor."

Cathy, who was prompted to study navigation after her mother bought her a sextant for her 21st birthday, said she believed celestial navigation to be easier than coastal navigation, "which has so many variables".

The last day of the voyage also had its risks.

"Making my way into Coffs Harbour, the wind turned. It meant I had to tack the last 30 miles. It's more threatening close to the coast because of shipping and other boats. If I'd fallen asleep in those last 15 hours I'd have been in trouble," said Cathy.

"It was really important to do a safe, seaworthy passage in the boat without any dramas."

Cathy cooked on her two-burner gas stove mounted in the trimaran.

"When I felt hungry I'd open a can and I fished. I put out a lure and caught a couple of tuna.

"I didn't feel lonely or afraid. I felt very close to our boat. I'd talk to it. I developed a great respect for its personality.

"Towards the end of the storm I was thrown out of my bunk. I went out on the deck and yelled at the weather, 'Why don't you leave us alone!' It worked. Within ten hours I was becalmed. The water was like glass. It gave me a chance to dry out," said Cathy with a laugh.

Would she ever go cruising?

"We're cruised out. We've been there and done that. We enjoy the challenges of racing, cruising is

too laid back. We're competitive people.

"When you're out there on a boat nature is so indifferent. That is the real challenge."

Next September Cathy's book, *Nice Tri*, published by John Ferguson, will be released. It ends with Cathy's solo journey.

Now, Cathy, Ian and Bullfrog are gearing for their next challenge.

"Our ultimate goal is the double-handed bicentenary yacht race around Australia which starts on August 8, 1988," said Cathy. "Together, Ian and I have clocked up about 120,000 nautical miles."

Cathy is no newcomer to the hazards of lone sailing. On another trip earlier this year she smashed into a huge whale 150 nautical miles off the NSW coast. Bullfrog's centreboard was broken but she returned to port safely.

In another whale encounter when she was sailing with a friend, Kay Cottee, their craft was almost rammed by a whale about 200 nautical miles offshore.

"I looked up and saw it less than 30m away and coming straight for me. I started the engine and hoped the noise would frighten it away. Suddenly the whale crash dived and went right under us," said Kay.