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ROLEX SYDNEY HOBART YACHT RACE

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Ed's new, brutal stealth machine



Ed Psaltis and Michael Bencsik, owners of the Kar 40 AFR Midnight Rambler. Bob Thomas (not pictured, is the third owner of the boat) ROLEX/Kurt Arrigo

Veteran Rolex Sydney Hobart addicts Ed Psaltis and Bob Thomas have always believed the exhausting marathon down the NSW coast and across eastern Bass Strait can be won and lost in the dark.

At night, when it is cold and wet and tired crews can back off the accelerator just a little bit. That is the time to step up a gear and put in those few extra miles on your rivals. It is why they call their boats *AFR Midnight Rambler*, after the Rolling Stones classic. Now they have a new one, and this latest Rambler is a rocket that will test their late night stamina with a vengeance.

In 1998 they won the race on the little Hick 35 *AFR Midnight Rambler*, and in recent years their beefed up Farr 40 has been a fixture on the Boxing Day start line. This year sees them with a new partner, long time crew member Michael "Mix" Bencsik, and a brand spanking new Ker 40 wearing the *AFR Midnight Rambler* moniker.

Ed Psaltis says the new boat will change the whole architecture and strategy of their upcoming Rolex Sydney Hobart.

"This is a big step up for us," he says. "She is so much faster than the old Farr 40. The old boat was quick down wind, but nothing like this."

But the Ker 40 isn't just a downwind skater. "You hear all the hype, but this time it is true," says Psaltis. "We didn't believe Ker when he said that it would be fast upwind, but it is. This boat has a very full bow. It gives it more punch upwind.

"In the Farr 40, we would basically hope to hang onto our rivals upwind while we waited for the wind to swing around and really get us going. Now we can compete upwind as well.

"It is that much faster. With the old boat we had to do everything perfectly, now we can even afford to make a mistake and still get back on pure boat speed."

The new *AFR Midnight Rambler* doesn't rate as well on handicap as the Farr, but Psaltis says the exponential increase in speed more than makes up for that.

"We have more sail and less weight. We've got a square top main for more sail area downwind, and that costs us in the rating, but we are just going for speed with the maximum sail area we can get.

"We have done seven Hobarts on the Farr now, and we know how to get 110% out of her. We just can't sail her any faster. But at this stage we aren't near reaching the new boat's maximum speed, so it has completely reversed the game."

This extra speed implies a new strategy for Psaltis and his crew. He now expects to be much closer to the TP52s, effectively sailing in their weather pattern.

So often in the past the bigger boats have scooted across Bass Strait ahead of a big wind shift that has left the smaller boats further behind, either grinding across the Strait in a howling southerly or bobbing about wondering where all the breeze went.

"Twice in recent years we were in great positions about half way across Bass Strait and found ourselves on the wrong side of the (weather) gate when it shut down.

This year we will get there faster. We hope to get to Tasman Island around 10am, which means finishing in Hobart around 4 or 5 in the evening," well before the breeze on the Derwent River famously shuts down for the night.

The saying goes that to win the Rolex Sydney Hobart, first you have to win your division and then hope that the ups and downs of the weather will have favoured your sized boat.



The new Ker 40 AFR Midnight Rambler owned by Ed Psaltis, Bob Thomas and Michael Bencsik ROLEX/Kurt Arrigo

Psaltis nominates Darryl Hodgkinson's Beneteau First 45 *Victoire* and Bruce Taylor's Reichel/Pugh 40 *Chutzpah* as the boats he will first have to beat to be in contention.

"In the old boat we could hang onto *Chutzpah* upwind, but she would just blow us away downwind. She is probably still a bit faster than us downwind, but we think we will have an edge upwind."

All this extra speed has its price. Managing crew fatigue will be a real challenge. On deck the new *AFR Midnight Rambler* is a much wetter boat than her namesake, and incredibly noisy below, so sleep is hard to get.

"Downwind you have to get all the crew down the back of the boat. We can do that for four or five hours, but can you do it for 15?"

In the boats Psaltis cut his teeth on, the headsails were huge, so constant sail changes were exhausting. These new boats have smaller headsails, a plus. And below, the Ker 40 is at least drier than the Farr. But the handicap rule changes, in the long span from IOR warhorses through the kindlier IMS racers to the IRC excitement machines has completely changed the ocean racing experience and its demands.

Brute strength isn't perhaps such a factor on the foredeck as agility and daring. The hard grind of IOR racing favoured a stoicism maybe less called for in the thrills and spills world of IRC ocean racers that can pane like a dinghy.

Psaltis has peppered his experienced crew with some agile, fearless youngsters, and the crew has never worked on its fitness as hard as this time round.

"I suppose with these new boats it is becoming more a young man's sport. These boats are brutal," he reflects. "They are great sailing, but I don't know how many years I will be able to keep doing it."

"I do know that this is one of the best crews I have ever taken to Hobart. And we are in for an extreme ride."

By Jim Gale/Rolex Sydney Hobart media team

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