



Helen Weston

Helen Weston: Well, it was my brother, who was brought by one of his friends in Manly Juniors, and the Manly Juniors out of Mosman Bay. I was rather jealous of the situation and put it to my parents that I'd like to have a go, and fortunately down there was a training program. What was provided was we'd go around the bay, around boats, moored boats, and just work it out, and get a little bit of instruction.

Richard Palfreyman: Was the instructor in a dinghy with you, or in a rubber ducky?

HW: It was shouting (laughs), and a little bit of on-land instructions, but ultimately just getting the theory and practice, and using the weather in that very protected harbour to just get a sense of how to control the boat.

RP: So were you skippering, or were you crewing?

HW: Everything, both, and we put up little spinnakers as well. But I do remember it was almost an organic imprint of that first time getting in the Manly Junior, and that little surge of acceleration, and that lovely sound of the gurgling bow wave. And that whole 'thing' just embraced my psychology, and I must have a boat, said I.

RP: So did you get into racing?

HW: I did, yes, yes, I got into the whole thing. In fact, what happened, it was a mixed blessing, because guess who ended up being my crew in a Manly Junior? My dad (laughter).

RP: So you were ordering him around.

HW: That was the beginning of a very interesting journey. But what it did also give me was that insight that where there's a benefit, there's a cost. And the benefit was having the boat, the cost was having a heavy crew, and having a leadership requirement over an authoritarian figure. So that actually created a very formative process.

RP: Well, I was going to ask you whether you'd found sailing down at the Mosman Sailing Club a boy's world?

HW: Oh, very much so.

RP: But with your dad there, you had everything.

HW: I had everything (laughs). Well, not only that, I had a disability. It wasn't my disability, it was my dad's. Because he was half blind. So not only did I have an authoritarian figure, I had to actually learn how to place him where he needed to be in an emergency.

RP: So, presumably, you were sailing a course at what started in Athol Bight, outside the bay?

HW: Yes, that's where mainly our races were, and in those days the big cargo ships would moor, and they'd be inconveniently mooring on our boys that were part of the race. I remember on one occasion, in this little Manly Junior, being descended upon by a cargo ship from the bow, and another one from the stern, and I was bang in the middle of it. And it was a total obliteration of the wind, and not only did they creep up on us, they crept up so quietly, and at exactly the right distance they both blasted their horns (laughs). So these are the sorts of memories that I was brought up on.

RP: And of course, to get out to the starting line, you had to get through all the boats and the ferries and whatnot on Mosman Bay. Was it very, very busy in those days, when we're talking about the 1960s, the 70s?

HW: Yeah, yes. Well, I was 11 at the time, so I'm 63 now, so whatever that is. But basically, you know how you begin to know where the wind is and where it arrives, and what angles, well that was a skill. And that was learnt from watching people do it, in admiration.

RP: And launching from the Green Shed, even with a smaller boat like a Manly Junior, must have been somewhat difficult. You get it rigged, you've got to get it into the water from the pontoon, and then you've got to go and do your race, then retrieve the boat and put it back up on the rack. It was a fairly energetic exercise.

HW: Yes, that's right. And systematic, and cooperation. Cooperation with not just yourself, your own team, but helping each other, and admiring each other's boats. There was, you know, that thing where his boat's better than my boat, and that's why he goes faster. But I was pretty much the only girl.

RP: So you were 11? How long did you sail from the Mosman Sailing Club?

HW: Well, I moved into Ynglings, and moored my boat next to the pontoon there for many years but raced from Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron. We were associated with the club there right up until when I moved across to the Sydney Amateurs, which was in 1980-something, 1982.

RP: Why the move? How did you make the move to the Amateurs?

HW: I'd gone through the Gwen 12 phase, and I didn't really want to go into the Sharpie phase, and the OK Dinghies were a bit too big for me as well. Somehow, we came across the design of the Yngling, which was just exactly the right size for myself and my dad, and one other.

RP: So you were still sailing with your dad all the way through this? That's fantastic. And with success, were you sort of up there at the top, or were you...?

HW: Well, I got state champion, yes, on one occasion. But I have to put a caveat on that, in that there was only three in the race. But I'll take whatever I get.

RP: Absolutely, absolutely.

HW: But having said all that, I did become a pretty good sailor. I was kind of recognised as very competent, and I could manage anything really. I could manage a southerly buster.

RP: So at the time when you joined the Amateurs, what sort of a yacht or boat were you sailing then?

HW: I had moved on to a Thunderbird, and I raced there, mainly in the Saturday races at the time. And I loved the twilights. Twilight races were just a beautiful thing. And then I moved on to the Hood 25. That's where I settled for the rest of the remainder of my time owning boats.

But I did have a lot of time racing with David Hay, and Martin Zimmerman, in his Cole something or other (the Quarter Tonner, *Friar Tuck*). And I had a bit of time skippering the Adams Ten to bring a few women on.

RP: Oh right, yes, yes, yes. The club boat, the Adams Ten?

HW: Yes, yes. And I also had a really interesting journey back on *Mark Twain*, with the two Bobs and one other, from Hobart. And just various odds and sods like Barry Rutter, who was always in the bay, and Peter Garrow, and even Rob Evans. I think I went out in his boat a couple of times. So I drifted around a few just to enjoy the camaraderie.

RP: Did you do offshore sailing?

HW: Only coming back from Hobart. That was really the main one. But I did take a week up in the Whitsundays with a Beneteau, with a mob of other people, and sailed around there. It really is a prime spot for sailing, isn't it?

RP: Yeah, it's a great spot. And coming back to the club, you were obviously an active sailor there. Did you take a role in the club?

HW: Very briefly. They put me into a position of a kind of just a representative of the club for a little while. It didn't quite work out. My businesses took off, and I didn't have too much time left, really.

RP: Yeah, it's always a balance, isn't it, between work and play? With the club, do you have any particular memories of times down there? You mentioned the twilight nights and the racing, and more importantly, or as importantly, the barbecue hours.

HW: I've had such wonderful, wonderful times from the club. Those lovely evenings, looking over the reflections of the bay, and the clicking and clunking of the halyards on the masts. As irritating as that must be for people, but it's actually quite a lullaby as far as I'm concerned. Those times were so restorative. I had a difficult period in my middle years, as most people do, and I'd go down to the club and take various odds and sods out in the boat, give them the experience. But ultimately, it was so 'me'. It brought me back to my centre. The whole ambience of the Sydney Amateurs was really conducive to feeling right at home there.

RP: It's a pretty blokey club, though, too, isn't it?

HW: A very blokey club, yeah.

RP: And you didn't have any troubles fitting in, in that sense?

HW: Well, I had a couple of situations where I just got the male ethic understood. I just understood it. I think it came when I came back from Hobart on the *Mark Twain*, which was a misogynist boat. And they had quite a lot of difficulty. I just landed down there. I was doing a bicycle tour around Tasmania, and landed in the cove there, and said, "Look, I'm a member. Would you like a hand coming back to Sydney?" And they hummed and hummed and said, "Come back in half an hour". And I did. And they decided, "Yeah", or "Maybe we should."

RP: So they took that time to reach a consensus that, yes, you're OK?

HW: They did, yeah. Well, they didn't know whether I was OK or not. But I think they felt obliged to, because remember, where my boat was very close to where *Mark Twain* moored too. So, you know, there was that. And they took a punt, and we went out. This was actually my first ocean-going experience, so I was a bit nervous. A bit nervous with these blokes, too.

But on the way out (of) the Derwent, there was kind of this silence. You know, that silence of getting to know. And I could see that the chaps, their own teamwork had been so well-developed that they really didn't need to talk much. So I broke the ice with a slightly raunchy joke. That worked. And so the discussion started to arrive.

And I got sick on the way round. They put me into Hughie's bunk, which was the most comfortable for somebody who was a bit sick. So that was kind of a 'give'. That was a nice thing. And we ended up for a night in Wineglass Bay. And they said, "You'll settle after this if you have one night on a mooring". And I did.

And then over the Bass (Strait), I had the opportunity in the middle of the night to just, like you, interview people. And I got to know these guys really, really well, and how they've worked together as a team on a boat, but more generally, how blokes do it. I asked them at one stage, "Why don't you have women on the boat that much?" They said, "Well, it breaks that teamwork down". So that, to me, was quite an incisive comment.

Also, I think the blokes around Sydney Amateurs kind of just accepted me, because I could sail. And I'd been on a few boats, and they realised I had a few bits and pieces to offer. You know, by being there long enough, you get (to be) part of the scene. So that's kind of how I fitted in.

I've also had some wonderful conversations with some of the older blokes. Like, I developed a really good friendship with Peter Garrow. He was the one that introduced the Twilights, I think. And in his latter years, he took to writing books, and we used to discuss (them). I used to read his drafts, and I just loved that guy. There was a lot of chaps there that were just really, really fine men.

RP: So you live in Bega now. Do you miss the water, miss the sailing?

HW: I do. And for a long while, I left the boat up there (Sydney) with the intention to probably want access to the boat. But gradually, as life changed, I found myself less and less being able to. This took a lot of effort and money, so my attention moved away from the Sydney Amateurs.

There was a moment in time where one of the people that I got to know down here, who's actually working on the glasshouse just now, had a bit of a fork in his road. He's a sailor with great competency. And I just decided to help him because he was in a very dark space. Just to give him the boat, because I wanted to get it down here, and I asked him to fix it up and bring it down. And he just took to that.

And so it's still down here, and he keeps it down at Quarantine Bay, down on Twofold Bay, Eden. So I have the opportunity to go out from time to time. There's a lot of estuary, big lakes and estuaries around here.

And the little Hobie kayak that has a sail, pedals, paddles; I get access through one of my tenants to her one. So I'm tossing up whether to get back involved. And there's a really nice little sailing club on Wallagoot Lake for skiffs. And I kind of like the idea of chuffing back into that domain.

RP: Well, the Amateurs, of course, is a fairly special club, isn't it? It doesn't have any of the frills and graces of some of the larger clubs, and it's a very egalitarian club. Did you enjoy it because of that?

HW: The word egalitarian is the key word there, insofar as back then women were still subject to some subtle chauvinism.

And it was in a number of other clubs, which were bigger and supposedly better, that I had some experience of chauvinism. And I've never had that with the Sydney Amateurs.

It's only ever been a sailing-motivated, friendly, family place.