



REFLECTIONS 150 YEARS

Jim Lawler

Robin Harris: Jim, tell me of your very first memories of the Sydney Amateurs.

Jim Lawler: My earliest memory was in fact being passed from a ferry, and it was probably one of the Rosman ferries. It was either an opening day or a closing day, but for those regattas they had a ferry that went out with all the families and observers and so forth. And anyway, the race had finished and my father was out there with his lifelong mate Cliffy Meacham, who I'll elaborate on later.

They'd been out participating in the regatta. They came alongside the ferry, and I was passed from the ferry across to Cliffy's boat *Nimbus* (A80). And all I could remember looking down at the gap between *Nimbus* and the ferry, and not without my concerns, but I was in safe hands.

This was probably about 1956 or something. I was probably about five or six years of age, dutifully passed into the cockpit of *Nimbus*, and it was probably in Athol Bay, and make their way back into the bay onto the mooring where I'd accompany Dad back home. That was my first vivid memory, and I can still look at that gap between the boat and the ferry and think, "Oh my God".

RH: What might have been if you'd been dropped?

JL: With my mother at the bulwark sort of clinging on, white-knuckled! One of the salient points there, that *Nimbus* which Cliffy built, started before the war and then got held up during the war and finished off after the war, so she was a relatively new boat. That boat and Cliff Meacham and my father's relationship was fundamental to what ensued in following years with the presence of family at the club and established the foundation for sailing, including me, many, many, many years later.

Their relationship started as little kids sailing their model boats on Narrabeen Lake from one side to another. Cliffy's father would have a Packard or something with running boards and they'd bring their model boats down to Dee Why Lagoon and, one would be on one side, one would be on the other, and they'd sail their model boats. And that's exactly what I did with my younger brother, Patrick, many, many years later.

So it was a thread that started in Dee Why Lagoon, and they went through VJs and things. But it's a thread that culminated in quite a presence of our family down at the club. And it

lingers on a little bit with me now, but it produced a very strong relationship with the club and provided a fraternity there, particularly in the offshore sailing that then flowed through to many of our dear friends.

RH: Well, the Lawler name is up there on so many of the glory boards inside the clubhouse, whether it's Uncle Jim Lawler, Bob Lawler, yourself. It's been such a strong family connection with the Amateurs for so many years and with so many boats.

JL: It really started with my father, Bill Lawler, and that relationship with Cliff. As life goes on, my father was posted to various places in the country and taken away from Sydney and the city, but the sailing never left him. And during the summers, and you've got quite long vacations being posted out to those areas, you know, we'd be back in Sydney all summer.

So he'd be rekindling those relationships and sailing on weekends and things. And with the club, he had five brothers, two of whom were also interested in sailing, that being brother Jim and brother Bob. Jim was a marine engineer, and in those days he was taken away with his service with Burns Phillip into the Islands for periods of time.

So that took him sort of away, but he was still interested in sailing as well, as was Bob, but Bob was posted in Canberra working as a mechanical engineer down there. But they could see what was happening with Dad, and Jim and my father bought a little boat, like an 18-foot gaff rig centreboard sort of thing, called *Senta*. We had that in North Harbour, but used to sail it down to the Amateur starting line and do the Saturday races with the Amateurs, particularly when Jim was here, and when Jim and Bob were both here, they'd be with us.

So that was the start of an actual boat in the family, sailing with the Amateurs. That continued for a number of years. At that time, I was only, I don't know, 14 or something, so I was the little foredeck hand.

Eventually, we got a mooring in Mosman Bay, which was much more convenient over on the eastern side, below where Jim Davern's house used to be. So we had a mooring there, which was not far from Cliffy's boat, the *Nimbus*, so we were both on that side. But that was the start of the relationship proper with the club, and the family's relationship proper with the club.

That continued for some time. During that period, Dad became very firm friends with Grant Crichton. He had a series of boats amongst which were the *Questings* – *Questing 1* (A3), *Questing 2* (A3).

So his boat was on a mooring over there, a beautiful steel van de Stadt, so an ocean-going boat. Cliff had done a couple of Hobart races on *Lass o' Luss*, so that's where the offshore enticement came particularly to my father.

And Grant having a sturdy ocean-going cruising yacht, the thought of going offshore became an enticement. So Cliff and Grant and my father did a few trips down to Tassie

and over to Lord Howe, etc. And that was the seed that was sown in my Dad's mind to start serious sailing. But it was just him, the family weren't involved in that.

But during that period, the opportunity came up to purchase *Idle Hour* (A63) from Tony Furse. So Jim and my father bought *Idle Hour*. So that became the family boat and we raced it a bit on Saturdays.

RH: How many would you crew *Idle Hour* with?

JL: Oh, probably four. This coincided with some aspirations for some Amateurs people to start sailing offshore and revolved around Bruce Cameron, an Amateurs member, to build a brand new boat, and in those days somewhat state-of-the-art, a Swanson 36 *Wathara II* (A2), with a view to taking it to France for the One-Ton Cup. You now had a kernel of my father, Cliff Meacham, Grant Crichton, Bruce Cameron, Tony Furse to become the kernel of a crew to sail offshore and take that boat to France.

RH: Did they feel then that an old guard at the Amateurs was getting behind them? Were they enthusiastic about it?

JL: I'm sure the club was. And you've got to remember the club was a vastly different animal and animal organisation in those days. The club in its capacity at the time were very supportive.

Although there was the odd Amateurs boat that had competed in Hobart races before. The offshore aspect of the club, that was sort of the beginnings of it. But family-wise, because Dad was becoming more involved in that, that left *Idle Hour* primarily in (Uncle) Jim's hands, and he continued to sail on the Harbour on the Saturday races with Jack Smith, Peter Hoy...

RH: And they did well...

JL: They did alright, and Bob would contend to come down from Canberra. So we're talking now mid-60s to late-60s. And the *Wathara II* campaign matured, and they took the boat to France and sailed over there and did the One-Ton Cup, which was, if not the first, it was one of the first Australian forays into international offshore yachting.

And then they did Cowes Fastnet racing stuff. So, Dad was looking at the big time, and he could see that, and he was really drawn to that.

RH: But you could also have seen the skill set as sailors improving enormously because of that experience.

JL: Yeah. And then, unfortunately, my Dad died in 1978 while Jim was still overseas. But by this time, and I was taking care of *Idle Hour*, just as a caretaker.

Bob was in Canberra and then posted back to Sydney. So Bob was now in a position that he could see that he wanted a boat too. This was sort of the start of a family multi-boat program.

He bought *Bettina*. So Bob now had a boat, and it was moored directly off the club. And he was sailing in the CYC offshore series, the triangles and the winter series and so forth with much gusto and started to accumulate members of the family.

So we now had myself and my brother Patrick and Bob's son, Michael, who was only a little tacker at that stage. So we had three or four Lawlers on a boat at the club, sailing that sort of fairly actively. With Bob, he was seeing that the offshore thing was more attractive, but not with his boat.

And he did a race to Hobart in 1980 with Johnny Pryor and *Priority* and decided, oh, this was great. And then did the next year's race. He met a bloke at a navigator's course in Mosman, and that bloke was Hughie O'Neill.

And Hughie got the taste of this and thought, "This is going to be great". So he did a bit of offshore sailing with Bob, but decided he wanted to grab a boat too.

RH: What an unholy alliance.

JL: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Talk about the slate of characters.

So Hughie bought a Duncanson 36 *Rebecca* (A113) and did the 1981 Hobart race on it and had Uncle Bob...my Uncle Bob...and my brother Patrick, Peter Robinson...the start of a fraternity at the club that goes through right to this very day.

Anyway, they did the 1981 Hobart race and didn't exactly cover themselves in glory. When they got there and Uncle Bob and my brother had some fairly serious consultations in the various pubs down there, Bob decided he was going to build his own boat.

RH: That was the moment.

JL: That was the moment. They hatched this plan. During that year, they got this Carter 32 hull, finished it off, and by the end of the year, had an ocean-going yacht ready to go offshore.

We did the 1982 Hobart race on it. To do the race, Bob wanted to bring back Jim, which he did. So we had Uncle Jim, Uncle Bob, my brother Patrick, Jim's son Johnny. So there was four Lawlers in the crew.

RH: Did you all get on?

JL: Oh, yeah, it was great. It was great. It was great. Very, very funny. So we did that race and got there in fine shape.

RH: Was it a rough one, that one?

JL: No, it was pretty easy. It was pretty easy. A lot of downwind. We were looking at competitors like *Impeccable* in those days, with Johnny Walker's *Impeccable*. You can imagine how chuffed Bob would be having put the boat together.

RH: A wonderful sense of achievement when you got there.

JL: Yeah, exactly.

Jim was eventually posted back to Sydney, so now we have Bob permanently in Sydney, Jim permanently in Sydney. And Jim thought it would be a great idea to get a boat himself.

During this period, that interest in offshore sailing had transcended to others. We had Hughie O'Neill, he bought *Mark Twain* (A113). So Hughie was seriously committed to offshore sailing as well. And Jim Davern came on the scene with *Morning Tide*. He'd done the '81 race.

A while after that, when Jim came back from Singapore, he said to me, "What do you think about we get a boat that we can sail offshore?"

And I said, "Oh, that'd be great, Jim". We sold *Idle Hour* and Jim bought *Morning Tide*, which is 33...

RH: Wonderful.

JL: And so now...

RH: S&S 34...

JL: 34, sorry. Now we have two boats very similar in performance with Bob's Carter (*Firetel*) and Jim's S&S (*Morning Tide*). So the 'family feud' started (laughter). Bob's son, Michael, was now doing his apprenticeship in marine engineering.

I said I'd sail with Jim. So we had the family with two boats now, basically with a smattering of Patrick and Bob and Mick and me and Jim doing all of the short offshore races and Southports and Hobarts and stuff. There was always a sheep station at stake.

RH: Can I interrupt you for a moment? Did your mum ever come by?

JL: She was not part of this equation. No, no. Well, that was just the way it was. And Bob's wife Laureen, I mean, my mother and Bob's wife were just like sisters, absolutely close.

RH: They must have had some wonderful conversations over the kitchen table.

JL: They had other things to do, but it had nothing to do with sailing. But mind you, during this period with Bob now very active down at the club, he was on the Board, ascended to Commodore. As Uncle Jim said, "One Lawler on the Board's enough".

So Uncle Jim managed to tiptoe around that. But the club was very social as well. It had gone through revitalisation from me sitting outside the pub up at Neutral Bay to now a club that could provide moderate social activity.

RH: But there was also a focus. I mean, I know there were the round the cans races, but there was a focus on the capacity to go offshore, wasn't there, with these boats?

JL: Well, it was sort of contagious. I mean, the club was very strong in those days, sailing on the Harbour. But this alternative became more enticing to a section of the club. If you had Hugh O'Neill coming in, he now had *Mark Twain*, a much, much better boat.

RH: Some might argue about that.

JL: Oh, no, it was a terrific boat. It was really a magnificent boat for its day...Sparkman & Stephens. But then you had people like Mike de Burca appearing on the scene with another Duncanson (*Emma A194*), who was very, very keen.

RH: Was Randall (Wilson) involved at that stage?

JL: Oh, Randall was involved with Hugh. Yes. He was his right-hand man. So, we had quite a strong contingent. And five boats represents a lot of people as well. So, all of a sudden, there was a very significant segment of the Amateurs that represented an offshore component. And we were doing the usual bluewater races and Southport races and the Hobart, and there were trips out to Lord Howe.

RH: Now, Bob was still on the Board. He was very active then. And the club was going through a fair bit of change at that time. A more diverse group of people, older, younger, but there's a great camaraderie and preparedness to sort of swap skills and knowledge, isn't there? And I think that's one of the great characteristics of the club. There's always plenty of advice.

JL: Yeah, well, I don't know how much it contributed to the family. What it did provide, that there were a number of people that from time to time, life commitments, job commitments, took them away. Bob, there was always a place for Uncle Jim. So, when Christmas came and there was Hobart, Jim would come back. He might have been living in Karachi or Singapore or something, but that link with the club was there. And that was repeated on many occasions.

Our great mate, Ian Macintosh, with his little Maxi boat (*Sawasdee*) that he had in Singapore that he brought back to Australia. During that process, Jim said, "Why don't you come down and have a look at the club. That might be somewhere that you might like to plonk yourself". When Macca was coming back from Singapore, (he) shipped the boat

back in a container (and) we unpacked it for him, and he came down, looked at the club, and, "Oh, this is for me".

I'm not denigrating any other club, but it just had that inviting family appeal to it. And that was repeated with our other great mate, Bruce Dover, and others, and me included when I came back from overseas.

There was always that link. You came back, you walked down the stairs and you were back at the club, and it was like being back home, which I don't think you get in any other club, which is mostly attributable to the club and the nature of its ethos...but was also, in this case, facilitated by the family.

I think my family being there and having that presence and that continuity. So, you just walked into a circle of friends and the camaraderie that went with it, and particularly when you're exposed to sailing offshore, that is a certain cement that knits you together that you don't really get in the inshore scene.

Uncle Jim was going up the steps, and the Amateurs post box is there, and there's this guy delivering the mail, and he's chucking the mail in the letterbox there, addressed to the sailing club. Jim engaged him in conversation, and he said, he's doing the mailman job, but he's back from, I don't know, Bermuda or somewhere where he was sailing over there and he was intrigued by all these letters addressed to the sailing club. And Jim said, "Well come down", and to cut a long story short, Ricardo (Rick Fitzgerald) ended up at the sailing club and became a very valuable asset, and was well and truly ingrained with us, and he's still a great friend of a whole bunch of us.

RH: The other one that I can recall is the erstwhile copper from Prague, Vaclav Herman, who literally just bumped into Uncle Jim one day, was it at the Rugby Club?

JL: Yeah, probably, yeah, down in Manly.

RH: And got invited to come for a sail, and he became almost a permanent fixture.

JL: Yeah.

RH: So much so that he ended up overstaying his visa in Australia.

JL: I think the point of all this was it's a function of the club, and the Amateurs, and the environment that it's created, inherited, continued over 150 years. It's created this family environment that continues to this day and will continue in spite of all of us. But during this period that I've been lucky enough to experience with my family, it did build on that, and the club's environment and ethos facilitated that.

So it was a symbiotic sort of relationship that for a period of 20, 30 years provided a really enjoyable, fulfilling, satisfying environment for a lot of people and built a lot of very, very close friendships that continue to this day. The lingering thread of all this is, from my

family's point of view, from the Lawlers point of view, is that we've gone through the wave that's diminished now and I'm the last man standing.

But (in) the club's 150th year I've been lucky enough to start when it was less than 100 years (old). So, I've had an on-and-off relationship with it now for 65 years or something, and I've gone off and been separated like many of us have, but we've always come back, and we always had that thread, not only to the club, but to the people that we've been associated with, which in our case (was) a very close family. And that's all a result of the club, and I'm sure that is repeated in other circles in the club. But from my point of view, our family has had a very strong influence and we were very fortunate to have an environment that they could enjoy as a family. We had five of us there at one stage.

RH: I like the notion that the crew, particularly when they're going offshore, they stick together, they trust each other, they laugh a lot, but they also bring that laughter ashore and that connection ashore, and you can see that evident down at the Amateurs. It's one of those very powerful presences there, and I think it goes back not just... I'm not just talking about the Lawler family, but so many of those members that have had a long-term commitment to the club.

There's always someone with whom you can share an anecdote, tell a lie, share a laugh, and it's resulted in some of the more absurd behaviours that we're both familiar with, things like the antics on a Bob Brown race or an Idle Hour race. Once upon a time, we used to bury a keg of beer at Store Beach and everyone would go and raft up. Those things sort of bring a sense of melancholy, don't they? Because they really were an extension of that family activity.

JL: Well, I think that unpretentious environment facilitates that. Most people, in my experience at the club, what you see is what you get. I think that's a great thing, and they're able to sort of be themselves, and that goes back a long way. I can remember as a little kid, you know, you say Store Beach. Unfortunately, we don't do it anymore. But the Idle Hour day down there. They used to take a piano over there.

RH: A what?

JL: A piano.

RH: I thought you said piano.

JL: No, there were times where they actually took a piano over there. And stayed over night.

RH: Who took a piano there?

JL: Oh, someone on one of the boats, and I'd be rushing out to the boat to go to bed, to be kept awake for half the night with the guffaws and...

RH: And someone playing honky-tonk on the beach.

JL: Well, and sort of ribald songs and things on the beach. But that sort of scant regard for pretense, goes back a long way, and is a very strong club tradition.

RH: Because we can't do that now. We'd upset the penguins.

JL: No, we can't, but (it's) nothing new...it's part of the club ethos that goes back a long way, and certainly a long way in memory, which would be 60-something years ago, that experience.

RH: Similarly, the raft-ups up at Smiths Creek after the Bob Brown race, and there have been some very, very funny occasions with all sorts of people getting together on different boats.

JL: Well, we can't lay too much blame at the Lawler family for any of this.

RH: But it's worth it.

JL: Well, I'd like to think that that tradition of the club and my family's sort of presence there have helped continue that tradition and also a tradition of loyalty to the club, because I think we've been fairly active in doing good work down the club. Which, in my presence, started off with Dad in 1977 or something.

He, at that stage, was very active offshore sailing, doing a lot of sailing with Syd Fischer. He was the navigator on *Ragamuffin* and sailing offshore overseas with various people. But he got very sick. He got cancer. During his last year, was one of those instrumental in gaining the present starters boat (*Captain Amora*), procuring it, finding it, and getting it rigged up as the club's starters boat. And that was one of his final projects before he died in '78. So I'd like to think that over the years, the family's been a contributor to the club as well.

RH: Oh, very much so.

JL: Overtly or covertly (laughter), which continues to this day with honorary members of the Lawler family with Trevor Cosh's and Robin Harris's and Ian Macintosh's and Bruce Dover's, and it goes on. I think we fitted in quite well being people that come from a background of being able to do things from an engineering point of view and so forth, and that's still bright and healthy at the club.

And with Uncle Bob, he was probably the shining example with that, with his position on the Board and engineering background. And, gee, the things that have been achieved down there in that environment is just, again, testament to the ethos of the club. And I think we've been lucky to contribute to that as a family over those years.

RH: Absolutely. I mean, whether it's been changing the piles beneath the shed or organising all sorts of heavy engineering things, Uncle Bob was always involved in that sort of stuff, as was Trevor (Cosh), and Trevor remains one of the maintays of the club. It's

interesting to contemplate how much, in dollar terms, has been saved over the years by that active volunteerism.

JL: Yeah, hopefully that baton can be handed over and that ethic can be handed over to a new generation.

The combination of family and boats has sort of dwindled after Jim sold *Morning Tide* and bought *Charisma*, which was a very active Amateurs boat for a number of years doing Hobart races and Southport races, etc.

But then when we lost Jim in the '98 (Hobart) race, it went to his son, John, took it over...he's a master mariner, cruised a lot, and then, I don't know, a bit like the family dog, I couldn't sort of part with it entirely. So, Johnny and I both have it. He's a silent partner, but I take care of it these days and it's still on the Amateurs registry. These days it happens to live in Tasmania, where I have a presence. So there's one little solitary flag...(laughter)...from the family still fluttering away there.

RH: And *Charisma's* looking mighty fine too.

JL: And hopefully that'll continue for a little while. She was quite an important asset on the club registry and continues to be so.

RH: And many of the extended family, including yours truly, have had the pleasure of sailing on *Charisma* in various events and social occasions.

JL: Anyway, it's dwindled down to that, but we've got a flag still flying.

RH: Yeah. I just want to spend a moment on an anecdote that has always intrigued me, and it's the story about Uncle Jim entertaining royalty. Are we allowed to talk about it?

JL: It is referred to as the Royal Yacht...(laughter)..in some circumstances. *Charisma* did its best to represent Australia in entertaining royalty with Prince Edward, who was out here on official engagement at one stage.

RH: Oh, that was a safe choice.

JL: Yes, yes, probably. But (as a) selection, it was probably the most benign. Anyway, there came a request that he was here, and had an afternoon spare, given his itinerary, and what would he like to do? And he said he'd actually like to go out on the Harbour.

At that stage Jim had bought the boat from Sir Eric Neal, who was the head of the Duke of Edinburgh Awards?

RH: Yes, former head of Boral.

JL: Former CEO. And I think at that stage, might have still been. Because of that relationship and the fact that Jim had bought the boat off Sir Eric, Eric rang Jim and said,

"Listen, Edward would like to go out on the Harbour...very quiet, no fanfare. Would you be willing to take out *Charisma*?" And Jim said, "Oh, of course".

Anyway, the arrangement was made and Jim gave me a call. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Oh, I'm at work".

"Oh, can you spare the afternoon?"

"Oh, what for?"

"Oh, I can't tell you"...(laughter)...sort of thing. "But if you could be down at the club, it's sort of 12 o'clock, that'd be great".

"And have you got a *Charisma* shirt?"

(more laughter)

"Oh, yeah".

"So let's have a *Charisma* shirt".

(So I) arrived in the club, duly appointed, no one much around, except for a very inquisitive, bloody journalist by the name of Bruce Dover. He was lurking around the club waiting to pick up his daughter from school.

So here's the two Jims sort of coming down around the dinghy shed with their *Charisma* shirts in the middle of the week, (a) very rare event.

RH: Lurking, I believe is the word.

JL: Heading towards the dinghy.

"What are you blokes up to?"

"Nothing".

"I've got to keep going".

And of course Bruce is like my favourite Martian, with his antennas...(laughter)...just absolutely salivating.

Anyway, we disappeared and we took His Highness out and had a very pleasant afternoon with him, actually. He was enjoyable company and appreciative. Very discreet, police boats keeping their distance and so forth. Experience goes with that echelon of society.

RH: Hence it being called the Royal Yacht.

JL: Yeah, it might have been lost in history now, but yes, the Royal Yacht is an acceptable term (laughter).

Anyway, *Charisma* was entered in the 50th Hobart race (1994). So we're all ready to go to Hobart in the 50th Hobart race. Peter Luke, who was one of the founding fathers of the Hobart race, had a boat called *Wayfarer*, was on the (CYC) committee and with Jack Earl and others was instrumental in probably facilitating the concept of cruising in company to Hobart, but it morphed into a sort of a race concept. So, yeah, he was a competitor in the first Hobart race.

He presented himself at the CYC and said, "Listen", and then he was in his late 70s, if not 80, and presented himself to the CYC and said, "Look, would there be any chance of getting a ride down in the 50th, given that I was instrumental in starting this?"

And they were a bit dismissive and sort of said, "Oh, no, not really".

Anyway, word got out, I don't know how it did, but word got back to Jim that this was going on and Jim rang them and said, "Listen, tell him to make contact". Which he did. Anyway, Jim said, "Come with us". So he did the 50th Hobart race with us as an elderly gentleman, but still fit...not in sort of full racing mode. But anyway, he came with us and was delightful company, knew that he couldn't do the stuff that we were doing...(but) he would stand a watch, make cups of tea...it was an example of the difference, the difference in person, being Jim, and the difference in the attitude of the club. And I'm sure it goes cap in hand.

And he did the race down with us, and he did the delivery back. And I think that's testament to the individual attitude of particularly Uncle Jim, and I'm sure the same answer would have come from a number of other people. But it also represented the unpretentious attitude of the club to recognise what others had contributed before them.

RH: Yes.

JL: And the respect. And I think it's hand in glove with the club and partly my family, but it goes with the territory, and that's what I think is so important about the Amateurs. They have that respect and understanding and acknowledgement of other things, other than just the fastest, sharpest boat on the scene.

RH: Yeah, there's not a lot of ego on those boats, is there?

JL: Not a lot of ego, and that's not to denigrate any other club, but it's just different.

RH: Uncle Jim, of course, had a profound effect on so many of us, but one of the things that I regularly observed was the calibre of men and women who would get on the boats with us at his request. And I'm thinking of people like John Sheridan, Trevor Cosh, Peter Robinson, Charles Davis...always people of integrity, and they were very much an extension

of his character, if you ask me, but that's just a personal view. But he did attract very good people around him, didn't he?

JL: He certainly did, and he just had that fortunate nature that was not dictatorial, as you find with a lot of those in command of boats. It encouraged a collegiate and strong camaraderie.

RH: And a lot of loyalty too.

JL: And a lot of loyalty. Me in particular was very, very fortunate to have Jim as a family member, and there are episodes in my life where I don't know what I would have done without him. So I was fortunate, the family was fortunate, and the club was fortunate, and a whole bunch of comrades who were lucky enough to come into that fold directly because of Jim. Very, very fortunate to have him for that period.

RH: Jim Lawler, thank you so much. This has been a fascinating conversation.

JL: Don't know about fascinating (laughter)...we'll leave the fascinating bits out!