

The Sunday Age

Huge day on the big bend

Ian Mannix

November 28, 2010



Rowers of all ages battle it out in one of Australia's great races on the Yarra River yesterday. *Photo: Sebastian Costanzo*

THE Melbourne Head of the Yarra lived up to its reputation as one of Australia's premier sporting events yesterday when 200 rowing crews battled the swollen river and tough competition to complete the 8.6-kilometre journey up the Yarra to Hawthorn.

Melbourne Uni won the Male Open in a time of 27:17.29, 12 seconds faster than the composite Mercantile Lindisfarne crew. Last year, Melb Uni defeated Sydney Uni by one second. The Melb Uni women's crew triumphed over Mercantile to win its sixth race in a row.

The drama for which the race is justly famous began early, with floodwaters swirling massive logs and debris into the river, which had to be cleared by marshals. A big crowd gathered at Hawthorn Rowing Club and created a carnival atmosphere despite the constant rain.

All this has been going on for 53 years, but who outside the rowing fraternity knew? As a reporter I've covered sport all around the world, but until my daughter Hayley took up rowing when we moved to Adelaide I'd never even heard of the event. Now, after just one experience, I want to go again.

The Head of the Yarra is a classic sporting event - a dramatic and thrilling time trial which combines a marathon, middle distance and sprint all in one. It is one of the rowing world's three biggest "Head races", the other two being The Boston Head in Massachusetts (300,000 spectators) and the Tideway Head on the Thames.

Hundreds of boats, crewed by the best rowers in Australia, gathered at Princes Bridge to be started at 10-second intervals to make a mad sprint to the Swan Street Bridge. Boats were routinely checked but it was described as a "good clean slugfest".

There were 10 more bridges and a dozen corners to be negotiated before the boats reached the finish line at Hawthorn. Every corner resulted in tension as boats forced their way to be in front and take the right to "yield to nothing". Officially, boats must not overtake on a bend but deciding who's in front and who's got the race line is virtually impossible, making for classic confrontations.

Boats were driven off course at the big bend near MacRobertson Bridge and provided drama all day.

Coxswain after coxswain failed to negotiate the bow turn, clashing oars or spearing towards the bank, and sweeping disastrously off course, much to the amusement of the spectators.

Scotch College dominated the schoolboys' events, and Melbourne Girls Grammar won the schoolgirls', despite a long protest from Walford College, whose crew was forced to check at the Swan Street Bridge.

Four years ago my daughter, for some unfathomable reason, took up this intriguing sport. Hayley played as a forward with the Nunawading Kangas basketball team and as goal defence for the Norwood Heights netball team. But rowing? Despite the 5am starts five days a week, and four gym sessions, and permanently blistered fingers and feet, she loves it. Loves the finesse of feathered oars; the challenge to merge grace and speed with balance and strength.

Rowers love the crew boats which makes this an extraordinary event. At racing pace it's thrilling.

During its trial on Friday, Adelaide Rowing Club's second crew failed to take the big bend at Loys Paddock despite three attempts. It raced without ever having successfully taken the bow turn.

In the race it sidestepped its way around the corner, and was easily overtaken by the local crews. Before the rowers got their breath back they were tangling again. They touched once but ploughed on. Finishing was the triumph. They squealed and relived the frightening moments and laughed like conquerors. Keeping alive a tradition that's been going on in Melbourne for 53 years. But who knew?

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/sport/huge-day-on-the-big-bend-20101127-18bi3.html#ixzz1OB6R13e5>