

Murray Stewart all set for Dubai – taking out the Wharf Bar King of the Harbour

Rounding North Head a few boatlengths in front, with 13km of downwind behind him and 3km of flat grind to go, Murray Stewart knew that the race was within his grasp. Muzz lead the 2009 Wharf Bar King of the Harbour just about from start to finish, holding off serious challenges from Nathan Smith, Dave Kissane, Dean Gardiner and Nick Holt. In beating a quality Australian field this weekend, Murray has thrown down the gauntlet for next week's Dubai Shamaal, showing that he will definitely be in the mix. It also means that he has two wins to Tim Jacobs' three for the 2009 Bing Lee LG Epic Kayaks Oceanseries – so it'll all come down to the Twenty Beaches in December to decide the overall champion.

Last minute course change – to downwind!

The Wharf Bar King of the Harbour is traditionally a circuit course from Manly Wharf around North Head to Manly Beach and back. The 2009 course was set to be the same – that is, until early last week when Seabreeze, Windguru and Buoyweather all concurred that a fresh northeast wind would hit the Northern Beaches on Saturday afternoon. After a few logistical cartwheels (and great cooperation from the Warringah Council and the Maritime Authority) the race organisers from Manly Surf Lifesaving Club changed the course to be a downwind run from Fisherman's Beach at Long Reef around North Head to Manly Wharf. This of course delighted the 120-odd paddlers planning to line up for the race.

As Nathan Smith summed up before the race "it doesn't matter whether they're elite paddlers or middle of the pack, everyone just seems to want downwind!"

Murray and Nathan lead from the start

Right from the starter's air-horn, Murray and Nathan put a small gap into the field. As the chasing pack passed Long Reef, each paddler picked their line and scattered. Murray and Nathan aimed for Bluefish Point, 1,500m before North Head. Bluefish is the first large point in the sheer 30m cliff face that runs between Fairy Bower (near Manly Beach) and the Quarantine Station (near Manly Wharf). Since the runs were coming from the NE, a 'straight' line actually meant having to surf left on almost every bump. Dean Gardiner, who took what appeared to be a ridiculously narrow line, reckons that he was the only one who took a truly straight line on the day, and ended up hitting the coast right at Bluefish. Dave Kissane followed Dean's line, with the two old rivals not more than 10 metres apart for the first 15km.

The runs, whilst in the right direction, were hard to get onto, requiring good top speed to pull down. Once you were on them, they didn't give a long ride either. Paddlers had to use every opportunity to rest before sprinting for the next run. By all accounts, that's how Murray won the race. According to his kayak coach, Guy Wilding, who was watching the race from the judge's boat, Murray was under-stroking Nathan the whole way. Whilst Murray sprinted for each run, using the efficient stroke he has developed on the kayak, he also rested on each run, able to put his paddle on his lap for a few seconds each time. This meant that when he got to Bluefish, Murray was still relatively fresh, knowing that he had 1,500m of cliff face runs to go before a 3km flat water slog to the finish. Nathan, on the other hand, had spent much of his energy getting to Bluefish, and hit the wall around North Head. To be fair, Nathan is only doing one session a week on the ocean ski, with most of his training focussed on surf Ironman. Nathan has pre-qualified for the 2010 Nutri-Grain Ironman series, meaning that Ironman is his priority at least until next March. Well, Ironman and his marriage next week!

Short, choppy runs around Bluefish

Around Bluefish, the runs became shorter, choppier and much more technical. For the more experienced, this was fantastic – with the top guys using every bump off the cliffs to their advantage. For the guys further back in the field, this was the worst part of the race. With cliff faces dropping straight into the water on one side and the open Tasman Sea on the other, it's easy to become nervous if you fall off your ski.

A common question from a lot of guys is about how to surf the rebounds off the cliffs. Dean Gardiner and Dave Kissane's advice at a recent Ocean Racing forum held at our local kayak club was to be aware of the runs, look for every bump from every angle, and just try to keep the nose of your ski going downhill all the time. (If you're interested, the discussion was filmed on www.mykayakcoach.com - a site run by Jimmy Walker, a top kayak coach, who was also on a jetski taking coaching-style videos at the Wharf Bar King of the Harbour).

Game on at North Head

So, Murray and Nathan hit Bluefish first, with Dean and Dave close behind, and Nick Holt still within striking distance. By North Head, the top 6 were separated by only 50 – 100 metres. Nick, who has been flying in training recently, had followed Murray and Nathan's line and was right on their tails, with Mark Minchin just behind him. Dave and Dean had smashed each other the whole way on the narrow line, whilst Tommy Woodriff had taken a very deep line and popped up at North Head within site of the leaders. As they entered Sydney Harbour, it was game on to see if anyone could catch Murray in the flat.

The last 3km was in flat water with a slight headwind and very few small runs. Knowing that he was racing in Dubai in only a few days, Murray put in a solid 500m effort after North Head, giving him a lead from which he could control the final few kilometres. Dave Kissane managed to grind ahead of Dean to win the seriously competitive over 40s and take out second place on the podium. Nathan Smith was unable to hang on Dave & Dean's washes as they passed (yes, Dean proved that he CAN paddle in the flat!). Nick Holt also overtook Nathan just before the finish, giving him a hard-fought 4th spot. Mincho, another member of Tim J's weekday Spit Bridge training squad, finished only a few hundred metres behind Murray in 6th – a personal best race for him this season. A good indication of the depth of the field and ferocity of the competition is that the top 10 were separated by less than 3 minutes.

These results mean that 3rd spot in the 2009 Bing Lee LG Epic Kayaks Oceanseries is really up for grabs in the Twenty Beaches. The third flight to Molokai 2010 (sponsored by Dave Kissane's Lifestyle Financial Services) will be fought out between Tony Schumacher, Dave Kissane, Nathan Smith and Nick Holt.

A notable mention should go to Hawaiian Pat Dolan who is in Sydney for a month with his brother Ryan training with Guy Wilding's kayak squad. Ryan and Pat are in the US kayak team and Pat represented the US in the Southern Shamaal last year. Pat has spent a lot more time in a kayak recently than a surf ski and has not paddled the course before. He still pulled out a ninth-place finish and had enough energy to be tearing up the dance floor in Manly at 3am!

Kirsty and Tim win again

Kirsty Holmes pulled out another win in the ladies race, ahead of local girls Mel Pelly and Kim Lowe. Tim Kirkby again took out the juniors, finishing 24th overall. Tim's dad, Michael, fell victim to the unpredictability of Mother Nature and Long Reef. A 4ft wave peaked in exactly the wrong spot 1km from the start and caused Michael's 3month old V10 to collide with his elder son Ben's ski and snap in half. Ben sacrificed the chance to beat his younger brother as he paddled back to fetch a rescue boat to pull his dad out of the water, and had to settle for second junior once again.

At the end of the day, as the troops were sipping on free schooners of Pure Blonde and watching the sun set over Sydney Harbour from the Manly Wharf Bar, there was much reflection of the race that had just been, and the big race to come in Dubai. Can Muzz, a young all-round paddler from Manly take on the world's best? Can Sydney's long distance golden boy, Tim Jacobs, go back-to-back? Can the rest of us ever live down letting a couple of 40-plus guys take out 2nd and 3rd??

Good luck to the Aussies competing in Dubai (and the paddlers from other countries who will need some serious luck if they're going to beat them!).

Results summary:

1	Murray Stewart	Fenn Elite	1:01:52
2	Dave Kissane	Epic V10	1:02:18
3	Dean Gardiner	Fenn Elite	1:03:00
4	Nick Holt	Fenn Elite	1:03:09
5	Nathan Smith	Epic V10	1:03:31
6	Mark Minchin	Fenn Elite	1:03:44
7	Tommy Woodriff	DD3 Albatross Maxi	1:03:54
8	Michael Locke	Fenn Elite	1:04:00
Double	Peter Boer & Malcolm Hall	Fenn Double	1:04:10
9	Pat Dolan	Epic	1:04:18
10	Michael Clues	Fenn Elite	1:04:29
11	Dean Little	Epic	1:05:22
12	Paul Buttel	Fenn	1:05:41
13	Dave Tudor-Jones	Epic V10	1:05:52
14	Blake Ballard	Fenn Elite	1:05:58
15	Dane Sloss	Epic	1:06:09
16	Robert Barry	Fenn Elite	1:06:14
17	Jamie Stewart	Fenn Elite	1:06:30
18	Matt Gittoes	Fenn Elite	1:06:49
19	Bill Wilson	Fenn Elite	1:06:51
20	Dave Cansdell	Fenn Elite	1:08:34

Ladies:

1	Kirsty Holmes	Fenn Elite	1:13:26
2	Mel Pelly	Fenn Mako 6	1:18:10
3	Kim Low	Spec Ski	1:18:33