

China crew ready for ocean adventure

Expectations high this year for the only Chinese mainland entry in grueling Sydney to Hobart yacht race

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A light breeze blows across Sydney's Rushcutters Bay. Outside the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia (CYCA), crews are preparing their boats for this year's Sydney to Hobart yacht race.

On Boxing Day, Dec 26, a fleet of 91 yachts will head down Sydney Harbour for the start of the event — a grueling sprint down the east coast of Australia, across Bass Strait and into Hobart, Tasmania.

"I think we have a good chance to finish high up," said John Qu, manager of *Noahs II*, the only Chinese mainland entry in the 628-nautical-mile ocean racing classic.

"The crew is ready to go and give it everything they have got," Qu told *China Daily Asia Weekly* with pride.

For Chen Fulin, this will be his fourth Sydney to Hobart, having crewed on the last three Chinese entries.

In 2015, *Ark323*, from the Noahs Yacht Club in Shanghai, became the first Chinese yacht with an all-Chinese crew to enter the Rolex-sponsored Sydney to Hobart and was a milestone in Chinese sailing.

Although yachts from Hong Kong had raced before in the Sydney to Hobart, *Ark323* was the first from the Chinese mainland.

The dream of Chen and the rest of *Ark323's* crew, however, did not come to fruition, because not long after the start of the race in Sydney Harbour she collided with Sydney yacht *Ragamuffin 52*. *Ark323* was forced out with hull damage and *Ragamuffin 52* was penalized, but that was of little help to the Chinese.

Not to be deterred, *Ark323* was back the following year, 2016, and so was Chen. The yacht finished 65th overall out of a fleet of 88, despite suffering mainsail damage at sea. The crew carried on under reduced sail and still beat boats to the finish.

Last year, Chen was back, and so was *Ark323*, but rebranded as *Derucci*. Its line honors position was 21 out of 102 yachts.

"This year I hope we can better that," said Chen, who is helmsman on *Noahs II*, which is also from the Noahs Yacht Club.

Chen took up sailing at the Noahs Yacht Club just five years ago and has proven himself to be one of China's rising stars in offshore racing. At just 25, Chen started out as a windsurfer but was quickly won over to sailing.

"Windsurfing is a great sport but it is solitary. Sailing is more of a team sport," he said.

"We (the crew) have been together now for less than nine months, but most of us know one another from China and we work together well



The crew of *Noahs II* pose on their yacht. *Noahs II* is the only Chinese mainland entry in this year's 628-nautical-mile Sydney to Hobart ocean racing classic.

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as a team. What I am hoping for is that this year we can improve on last year's result and come in among the top 10 for line honors."

Li Hongquan, skipper of *Noahs II*, said the Sydney to Hobart is more challenging than the races in China he has taken part in.

He said the Sydney to Hobart is a good opportunity for the Chinese to get familiar with ocean racing and promote the sport in China.

"If we get a good place this year, it will be a big boost for the sport," he said.

Now in its 74th year, the Sydney to Hobart is regarded as one of the great blue water classics, drawing competitors from around the world.

The 70-foot *Noahs II*, designed by Australian Don Jones, has an all-Chinese crew of 16 whose ages range from 18 to 37. "They are the best of the best," said manager Qu.

Team coach is Australian Steve McConaghy, who has been sailing for nearly 40 years and is a veteran of a dozen Sydney to Hobart yacht races.

A tactician and helmsman, McConaghy has sailed in nearly every major sailing event there is in Asia and China — such as the Coronation Cup Thailand; Round Hainan Regatta; China Cup; China Coast Regatta off Hong Kong; Singapore Straits Regatta, from Batam, Indonesia; Malaysia's Royal Langkawi International Regatta — and dozens of races

in the Gulf and the United States.

"He spends a great deal of his time in China nurturing young yachtsmen and women," said Qu.

According to Qu, the crew is "experienced" and are eager to prove themselves in "what is one of the most challenging ocean races there is".

Yang Bing, 37, is the assistant coach. He has been sailing now for 18 years and this is his first Sydney to Hobart.

"I am really looking forward to this race," Yang said. "We work well as a team and I think we have what it takes to finish in the top 10."

Originally built to compete in the 2005-06 Volvo Ocean Race, *Noahs II* changed her name from *Southern Excellence II*. She has reaped some great results in previous races.

The Volvo Ocean Race is a round-the-world yacht race held every three years. Originally named after its initiating sponsor, British company Whitbread, it today carries the name of its current owners, Sweden's Volvo Cars and multinational manufacturing company Volvo Group.

Following this boat's purchase by Noahs Group early this year, a number of systems have been upgraded to improve her IRC (International Racing Certificate) ranking and to suit requirements. Equipped with a new mast and rigging, the team expect this yacht could take them to a glorious victory.

Sven Guo, the navigator, is competing for the first time in the Sydney to Hobart. "There will be a lot of pressure on us as we are a new team, but we will give it everything," he told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

Sailing for just two years, Guo said he got into the sport "because I was bored sitting in an office".

"I saw Noahs Yacht Club was looking for people to crew, so I joined and here I am."

The Sydney Hobart Yacht Race was first conducted in 1945. The race takes competitors down the east Australian coast, through the unpredictable and potentially treacherous Bass Strait, up the Derwent River and finishing in the Tasmanian capital Hobart, at Constitution Dock.

The CYCA's 2018 Sydney Hobart Yacht Race promises to be another potboiler, with one of the strongest-ever fleets chasing line honors and the overall win to secure the Tattersall Cup.

Yachts from the Australian states of New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria will join the international set representing the Chinese mainland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Poland, Russia, the United Kingdom and the US.

In this year's fleet are five supermaxis (100 feet in length), 13 international entrants, 10 Transpac 52s

(TP52s), one of the healthiest representations of 60-70 footers seen in years, smaller boats, and veterans that linger, resilient against the power of the newer models in the field.

The TP52 is a class of yacht used for competitive yacht racing. The class is recognized by the International Sailing Federation, which entitles the class to hold an Official World Championships.

"When you look at the list of entries, there is a real feeling of depth and quality," said CYCA Commodore Paul Billingham.

At the pointy end, the 'supers' (supermaxis) and the larger boats will have in mind *Comanche's* race record set in 2017 — one day, 9 hours, 15 minutes, 24 seconds — as they sail down the coast to Hobart.

There are four other supermaxis in the running. The crews of Peter Harburg's *Black Jack*, Lee Seng Huang's *Scallywag*, the Oatley family's *Wild Oats XI* and Christian Beck's *InfoTrack* will be holding nothing back. *Scallywag's* owner Lee is group chief executive chairman of Hong Kong company Sun Hung Kai & Co.

Who knows how it will end, as all five supermaxis have undergone modifications, paying special attention to their weak points.

But for China, all eyes will be on *Noahs II* and her crew, who say they are racing not only for themselves but for the pride of China.