

The foreshore scenery is the Esplanade, Speers Point between Thompson Road and Morse st



SKATES

by Wayne Thompson

Our old home "Elenora" from 1966 1989 is behind sail NO. 944.

The driveway!

At 1 am one weekday in November, Alan Searl was fixing a power pole. This particular pole in Belmont, a lake-side suburb of Newcastle, NSW, had barely escaped with its life after a skirmish with a 'dirty big semi'.

Being a shiftworker, Alan's job as a maintenance operator requires him to perform unusual tasks at odd hours, and it can be demanding work. But Alan likes a challenge. In fact, even his hobbies are demanding. He sails a Skate.

"What the heck is a Skate?," I hear you ask. Imagine travelling in a powerboat at 20 knots. You take a 10 foot plank and shove it at right angles over the gunwale, then clamber out and sit on the end. Now you know what it feels like to sail a Skate.

Alan Searl and his mates do this every Saturday at Teralba Amateur Sailing Club on Lake Macquarie. A regular fleet of around 12 boats gathers in the far north-western corner of this estuary to 'walk the planks'. Skates are far from being a popular class, however,

rather they are just one more on the seemingly lengthening list of Australian classes that have only a few pockets of devotion around the country. For Skates, these are Lake Macquarie, the St. George Club in Sydney and Perth.

The specifications of this boat are really quite extraordinary. Looking somewhat like an oversized Vee Jay, the Skate is the only other boat to carry planks rather than trapezes as a means of leverage. In a light breeze, the planks are the main cause of the Skate's ungainly appearance. But when the wind comes in, a well handled Skate is one of the most spectacular and graceful craft you will ever see. Once upon a time the leaning boards were heavy chunks of bowed wood that weighed around 13.5 kg. Nowadays the planks are fashioned from two parallel lengths of 50 mm aluminium tubing with foam sandwich between. Lighter, stronger and fewer splinters.

No longer are the hulls of wooden construction, either, although some



Mark Grant Sheldon.



older boats are still around. Still, the ply hull must have some merits. Just ask Pete Winney of St. George who in 1987 took one of the last wooden hulls built, re-decked it in fibreglass and rode it to the national title!

According to Alan Searl, most of the new foam sandwich boats are just on the minimum class weight of 54 kg and in fact Alan's own boat required some leading to bring it up to weight. As for the shape of the hull, after seeing these boats in action, one could hazard a guess as to why they are called Skates. They are as flat as flat can be, a planing hull in the true sense of the word. They really do skate over the water surface although as Alan points out, the hull's hard chines make the tiller very sensitive, especially when going downhill in a heavy breeze.

All this aside, we have so far ignored the Skate's most prominent feature, its huge sail area. In a sail area to hull size ratio, the Skate is rivalled only by the skiff classes. In 1982, the class rules were changed to allow the use of double luff kites much larger than their 7.4 m² flat cut predecessors. Combine this with the Skate's planing capabilities, and you have one of the hairiest rides of any boat.

Alan estimates the boat's top speed



The 10 foot planks and big sail area make Skates powerful reaching boats.

to be around 20 knots "but it seems a lot faster because you're so close to the water." He freely admits that he's hooked on the adrenalin rush provided by his Skate. "I'm the sort of idiot that thinks the faster they go the happier I'll be," he says, "and it gets a little bit scary when you're hanging on the end of your plank and the forward hand is hanging on to the knot on the end of the rope. I still get a buzz out of it."

The exceptional capabilities of the Skate were demonstrated a few years ago on a local regatta called the Open Lake Championship, an event run each year by the Lake Macquarie Yacht Club. It is more a celebration of the sport of sailing than a race because any class of monohull in existence is eligible to compete. Sailboards, ocean going yachts, 16 footers, 505s and all sorts of miscellaneii were vying for the unofficial title of king of the lake. Newcastle businessman Fred Williams was once again competing on his enormous A class scow, a huge ironing board which, with several of the crew on trapeze, was downright unbeatable. But nobody figured on a fellow named Geoff Hughes who sailed his Skate flawlessly in the stiff southerly to come home just three minutes behind the scow. This was an unbelievably small mar-

gin that was talked about in local sailing circles for months.

This is one of modern sailing's great David and Goliath stories, made all the more newsworthy by the Skate's difficult nature.

"They are a very demanding boat to sail," says Alan. "A lot of people start sailing and lose interest because they are a handful, especially in a heavy breeze . . . you spend the first season doing a lot of swimming. It took me nine years before I won my national title. Charlie and I had been sailing together five years before that."

"Charlie?" I enquired. His real name is Neil Simpson, but "even his mother calls him Charlie."

On a Skate, the forward hand's job is equally or more difficult than the skipper's.

"The skipper can't go out and sail by himself, he must have a competent crew. The poor old forward hand has got to try and hang on. He has to be a monkey to get in and out on a 10 foot plank on a tack."

At 14 feet in length they are a relatively short boat for the speed they are doing, and the huge planks are needed to gain the necessary leverage. Therefore a heavy crew is not essential — a good weight is around 140 kg.



Alan Searl (skipper) and Neil Simpson on Aussie One.

Whipp It, sailed by P. Davidson and J. Oakley on Lake Macquarie.



Alan won his national title on the Swan River in 1986-87, in which he won four heats. "I was a smart arse, I didn't have to sail the last heat but I did and I won it."

He finished third in last year's series on Botany Bay, an extremely close event in which any one of six boats could have won the title in the final heat. The titles were held at the Yarra Bay Club near the bay entrance, "a good spot in a nor'easter, but you have to watch for mobile wind shadows (tankers)."

At home, the Lake Macquarie clan are a very social bunch, often meeting at a local watering hole after the race for a beer and a 'bit of a stir'.

"We're all one big happy family," Alan says with a laugh. This, coming from a man who turned up at his sister's wedding reception wearing a monkey suit. As I was taking pictures of the fleet at a club race, the sailors insisted on striking poses and wearing huge grins wherever I pointed the lens. But times have changed since Alan first stepped on a Skate.

"When I started sailing there were all single blokes, now we're all married with kids. The yahoos from the old days are coming back, some with 12 year old sons sailing Sabots."