



Four-time Australian Sailor of the Year John Forbes reflects on more than 40 years of having the wind in his sails.

Story by Rosamund Burton

A life on the water

Life Stories

In November 2023, catamaran sailor John Forbes was inducted into the NSW Hall of Champions in recognition of his outstanding achievements. This unassuming 54-year-old Pittwater local is a seven-time world champion, 10-time Australian champion and four-time European champion. He won a bronze medal at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, a silver at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games and placed sixth at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. He has been Australian Sailor of the Year four times.

The NSW Champions of Sport Ceremony 2023 was a gala dinner held at the International Convention Centre, Darling Harbour.

“It was a massive event, attended by about 700 people,” John reflects. Cricketer Brett Lee was also inducted, and surfer Layne Beachley, AO, was officially recognised as a Legend of NSW Sport. John attended with his wife, Caroline, and their daughters Teigan and Bronte.

“The night brought back many good memories. I was competing at world level for 19 years. It’s hard to say which was the best moment, but win-

ning the 1989 Tornado World Championship in Houston with Mitch Booth when I was 19 was great.”

John had won the Australian Championship with Rod Waterhouse, which made them eligible for funding from the Australian Yachting Federation (AYF) to go to the World Championship. But Rod Waterhouse was not able to travel overseas then and at that time the AYF didn’t recognise the crew member, only the skipper.

“So Mitch Booth and I basically went to Texas on our own, and we won that world championship by an enormous margin, which was very satisfying.”

This duo won the Australian Tornado Championship consecutively for five years from 1990 to 1994. In 1992 they won their second Tornado World Championship. Also that year they won Bronze at the Barcelona Olympics, and each was honoured with the Australian Yachtsman of the Year award.

“Both positions on the boat are important, and we swapped roles,” John explains. In 1991, he was skipper and Mitch Booth crew when they won the inaugural Nacra 5.8 World Championship.

John grew up at Mona Vale until the age of seven, then the family moved to Collaroy Plateau. His father Bob sailed Hobie Cats competitively in the 1970s, and in 1979 became the Australian importer and distributor for Nacra catamaran.

“He built those for about 10 years, and when we were young, my brother and I were down at the factory helping out. We didn’t grow up on monohulls or dinghies. I just started sailing catamarans and kept going.”

In 1982, aged 12, he competed with his father in the Nacra 5.2 North American Championship where they placed fourth, and the following year they came second in the inaugural Nacra 5.2 World Championship. By 1985, John was at the helm, and he and his brother, Rod, claimed the 1986 Nacra NSW

State Championship.

In 1987, John was sailing with 1984 Olympic Bronze Medalist Chris Cairns. They won the Kiel Week Regatta and came second in the Tornado World Championship.

John and his wife Caroline attended Cromer High together, starting dating at the beginning of Year 12, and have been together ever since. John decided several years before the 2004 Athens Olympics that he would stop sailing competitively.

“Our daughters were one and three years old. People said they grow up really quickly and you don’t want to miss it. So I stopped and spent time with the kids.

John describes sailing as “an ageless sport”, and after his stellar career the catalyst for his return, 11 years later, was his youngest daughter.

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“Bronte said, ‘I’ve never been on the trapeze on the catamaran’. So I said, ‘let’s have a go at sailing and have some fun’. We bought this old Hobie Cat 18. She was about 15 then.”

Rather than club race every Saturday, they compete in various clubs’ annual regatta which are several weeks apart. They are members of the Palm Beach Sailing Club, which hosts the Beware the Bullet Regatta annually on the third weekend in November.

Palm Beach Sailing Club used to be known as Pittwater Catamaran Club, and John was a member for more than 20 years, before rejoining when they bought the Hobie 18.

“It doesn’t have a clubhouse. We sail off the beach at Sand Point. The start boat is stored in a nearby garage and eve-

ryone takes turns to do start boat duty.” But this unassuming little club has nurtured the talents of many catamaran sailing greats, including Chris Cairns, Rod Waterhouse, Mitch Booth and Nina Curtis.

The Mitch Booth and John Forbes sailing partnership ended in the mid-1990s and for the next 10 years John sailed with Darren Bundock. In addition to sailing regattas at weekends, and competing in Australian championships over the Christmas break, three months a year they sailed overseas, and both also held down jobs. John was working in the family business in Belrose with his father.

“I enjoyed working and sailing because it gave me a break from both. I had the ability to completely switch off from

work when sailing, and when I went back to work I switched off from sailing.”

If they were in Europe for 90 days, John explains, they would be sailing for 80 of those, mostly doing intensive training with two other teams, initially the German and Austrian teams, and later the Germans and the Greeks.

“There was a lot of sharing of information, because we all wanted to go better. We didn’t care who won, as long as the three of us were there. Many people couldn’t get their heads around that.” But it paid off and this Australian pair and the German team were very dominant, between them winning many first places, and also seconds and thirds. In 1998, John and Darren won the Tornado World Champion-

ship by 18 points from their longtime German training partners, and John became the first Tornado sailor to win three world championships.

“Leading up to the Sydney Olympics the Germans lived with us in our house. We’re friends for life because of that. We won the Silver Medal and they won the Bronze, and for us that was a great achievement.”

John now runs the family business with his cousin, and since 2006 Caroline, the girls and he have lived at Bayview.

“It feels like home for many reasons. My grandparents lived across the road and my brother and I used to come here as kids. Then Mum and Dad moved here in 1992, and we bought the house next door to them when it came up for sale.”

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Assorted silverware; at the NSW Hall of Champions induction; in America, aged 13; with Mitch Booth celebrating their 1989 Tornado World title; daughter Bronte with her 2020 Hobie State Champs trophies; victory in Kiel Week, Germany in 2000 (with Teigan); with Mitch Booth winning the 1991 World Champs; with wife Caroline winning the 2023 Hobie 18 North American Championship.





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Nowadays, sailing with Bronte, the emphasis is on enjoying some father/daughter bonding and (in Bronte's words) being "competitive but not serious". John chose to sail the Hobie 18, because it has a furling jib, and no spinnaker, but is a fast boat.

"Many people like what I've been doing with Bronte, because it's not too full-on, and now we've got a fleet of 10 boats with other parents and sons or daughters."

When asked if Caroline sails, he replies that her passion is golf.

"I don't golf at all. I'm hopeless at ball sports, and strangely enough I'm not that competitive. I'm more interested in the equipment and what makes the boat go fast, more than wanting to win."

The Hobie 18 North American Championship in July 2023 had 25 boats entered, and a fleet of this size hadn't been seen for 20 years. John rang a contact in America who was able to get hold of a boat for him, but Bronte was at uni, so Caroline, who had never sailed



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: With brother Rodney, 1976; with Teigan and their 2017 Hobie State Champs trophies; with Bronte winning the 2020 Hobie State title; sailing partner Darren Bundock toppling during the 2000 Worlds in Sydney; sailing with Rodney at Currumbin in 1985.

more than one day in a regatta, was coaxed to crew.

"We'll just go and have some fun together," John assured her, and sporting their koala-styled caps they competed in the four-day regatta - and won the North American Championship.

John is currently mentoring a brother and sister sailing a Formula 18 catamaran. And

for the past five years he has been refurbishing second-hand Hobie Cat 18s. When the Hobie Cat 18 was first designed in the mid-1970s, it was a powerful racing machine. John has developed what he calls the 'Hobie Cat Reimagined Project', because today he sees this boat filling an important gap for young sailors and their par-

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