

QLD Ensign Beneteau Cup: A few French horns and handicappers challenge

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'QLD Beneteau Cup 2011, Gary Richardson aboard his new Oceanis 40 named after his wife's favourite Grandmother, Vera May' Tracey Johnstone ©

This weekend's Ensign Yachts Queensland Beneteau Cup and French Yacht Challenge is designed to be a friendly affair.

However, ask Darwin sailor Gary Richardson if he can stop himself from turning into a serious sailor when he and his Vera May team hit the start line. The answer is a clear no. Not surprising for a chap who is the current British national champion in Solings

Richardson took ownership of his brand new Oceanis 40 earlier this afternoon. Standing in the cockpit surveying the list of jobs to be done before racing starts tomorrow morning, his excitement at owning the boat and having the chance to get it out on the race track so quickly is infectious.

'I am excited, of course. I know this is a fun regatta and I am going into it with fun in mind, but I am absolutely certain that when we are on the start line, I will be thinking about winning it. Second is the first of the losers I keep telling my children. On the start line the horns will come out,' Richardson warns.

Sailing with him will be Ensign Yachts' Florian Coroller along with several family and friends.

Richardson will be encountering some fairly stiff competition this weekend. He will have the equally large Rob Robertson's Beneteau First 40 with Ensign Yachts' Lee Randall on board and the 50-foot The Matrix with Jane Virtue and Dave Waller on the helm.

At the smaller end of the scale will be the brand new Beneteau First 30, G2, owned by Southport's Paul Laurence and the older and defending Beneteau Cup champion, the First 34.7 Brilliant Pearl helmed by Mooloolaba's Gary McCarthy.

As a PHS regatta the handicapper will have quite a job setting the handicaps for those true racing boats. Then he will have to add in the older, quieter achievers who can just as easily knock off, on handicap, some of the hot-shot race boats. Take Michael Schmidt's Jenneau 32 footer, winner of the French Yacht Challenge in 2010 and Rob Smith's First 29.5 Beneteau, Lady Jaqualyn, which placed third in the same event. Both of those skippers are ready for a serious battle on the water and some friendly French boat owner camaraderie on the land.

And then there is the Ensign Yachts Mini entrant. The 6.5m yacht from Southport was designed to meet the Mini Transat rule as a single-handed race boat.

Ensign boat manager, Lee Randal, explains 'it will bring another element to the French Yacht Challenge as it is a purebred race boat. There is no cruising element to it at all. We have organised close friends and very good sailors, Alex Toomey and Luke White to race it. It will be a handicappers challenge.'

The plan for tomorrow is to send the fleet on a comfortable passage race of about 18 nautical miles to Green Island then Hope Banks before heading back towards home base and the Cleveland mark. With a forecast of 10 to 15 knots from the north to north-west, the fleet of 30 yachts should have a pleasant time.

Currently Sunday's strong wind forecast will present some challenges for the race committee with Race Officer, Sylvia Talbot, already considering the safest and most rewarding course area for the two scheduled windward/leeward races.

Organised by the Queensland Beneteau Owners Group and hosted by Royal Queensland Yacht Squadron, the annual regatta is being held off Manly and is open to monohull French-built yachts. QLD Beneteau Cup and French Yacht Challenge is sponsored by Ensign Ship Brokers, Doyle Fraser Sails, Ullman Sails, Muir Marine, The Hatchman, JSA Marine, North Sails, Manly Marina Cove Motel, Nautilus Marine Insurance, Bias Marine, Bottoms Up Marine, Sailtech Sailmakers, Dulon, Boaststyle, NU Bolt and Hose Supplies.

The full entry list is available from the event website. www.sailina.ravs.com.au

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