

Fair Winds And A Sunny Sky For Start Of Tasman Race

The crack of a gun, sharp at 10.30 this morning, sent nine yachts on their way down harbour and out to sea, their goal 1240 miles across the Tasman Sea, one of the most turbulent stretches of water in the world.

The winds were fair as the craft slipped down Rangitoto Channel, led by the Tauranga cutter, Leda—and the yachts carried with them the hopes of the thousands who saw them go that those winds would remain fair all the way.

Auckland could not have had a better day for the start of the big race—brilliant sunshine and almost cloudless skies, and a brisk breeze from the sou'-sou'-west that flicked tiny "white horses" on the crests of the waves.

Crowds of people lining Tamaki Drive and the overlooking hills, and hosts of small craft of all descriptions gave the crews a grand send-off.

For anything from 10 days to three weeks, perhaps even longer, the nine small craft will battle their way across the Tasman to Sydney. Their progress will not all be swift and effortless with cloudless skies and following winds and billowing extras as it was this morning.

Late on Monday, it has been forecast, they will be slogging into strong easterlies and driving rain.

The start went off smoothly. At 10.15 the yachts were in the start area, weaving round in the open water which was kept clear for them by patrols, shuffling for the best position when the gun went. A matter of a few seconds would make no difference in a 1240-mile race, but tradition would not permit a slovenly start.

Skippers timed it nicely.

As the last flag dropped from the flagpole at Orakei wharf, and the gun barked its command, the nine yachts swung into line and spinnakers already hoist billowed out, filled, emptied and filled again.

A great cheer went up from the shore, from the hundreds of small craft milling around the starting line.

To Messrs Trygve and Magnus Halvorsen, winners of two Tasman races in their 36-foot sloop Solveig, went the honour of first crossing the line.

Wilson Brothers' Leda was about a length behind her, with the diminutive short-ender Hope close behind to leeward.

Mr M. Anthony's cutter Rangl, first away in the previous race that started at Auckland, was next, followed by the short-ender White Squall; the massive wishboned-masted 59ft Tara (largest yacht in the fleet); the 28-foot sloop Ghost (smallest yacht in the fleet); the all-steel Sydney cutter Southern Maid, and the Whangarei Ketch Sea Wolf.

Wind Drops

Soon after the start the wind dropped, puffed and dropped again.

Spinnakers on the three leading craft, not yet properly set, filled and backed and twisted round the stays.

But long before the fleet swept past North Head, all the craft had their sails drawing nicely.

As they passed North Head, Leda, standing out to the east of the channel, was still leading, but Rangl, fairly snoring through the water with her favourite breeze and angle of sail, overtook her before they reached the first leading beacon.

Well inshore, Hope, a good few lengths ahead of Southern Maid, held the wind and caught the just-ebbing tide.

Ghost and Sea Wolf also hugged the shore as they rounded the head.

By this time all attempt to control the small accompanying craft had been given up.

But the contestants didn't mind. They were on their way and there had been none of those embarrassing little mishaps at the start which yachtsmen dread.

Last farewells were hurled across the sparkling water from yacht to launch, frequently interrupted by a sharp bark from the skipper to adjust a sail or bowse a rope.

Leda was again in the lead when the fleet passed Tiri—20 miles from the start—just after 1 o'clock. Tara was second and Solveig was third.

The Way Ahead

By nightfall the fleet will be well spread out. Some may even be out of sight of each other.

From then on most boats will plug along on their own, following their favourite courses, in most cases unaware of the whereabouts of their rivals.

The excitement will all be over and the crews will settle down to a hard, driving routine.

And the weather will not all be good.

This is the forecast given to crews just before they sailed:

In the period up to 10 a.m. tomorrow the weather between Auckland and North Cape will be partly cloudy with isolated showers.

Winds will remain steady at between eight and 10 knots and little or no swell.

Easterly winds should prevail tomorrow and the weather should still remain fair to fine.

Late on Monday the yachts will run into bad weather with driving rain and strong easterly winds.

This weather can be expected to continue for two or three days.

● The race, which is run by the Royal Akarana Yacht Club, will finish in Watson's Bay, Sydney Harbour. There is no monetary prize. If easterly winds prevail the crossing should be a fairly fast one of nine or 10 days. But if variable weather is experienced the average time for the crossing will probably be a fortnight.