

Off on a Crusade in the Transpac

Words and Photos
by Ivor Wilkins

Three years ago, when Anthony Leighs launched his turbo-charged Elliott 35SS race yacht, *Crusader*, he articulated an ambitious programme including the major New Zealand passage races, offshore events in the South Pacific and ultimately the iconic Transpac Race.

The goals were ambitious in the sense that, by his own admission, Christchurch-based Leighs was making a big step up in sailing. His previous experience was confined to a Young 88 and here he was taking on a state-of-the-art canting keel racing machine.

But Leighs surrounded himself with a very competent crew made up of Squadron Lion Foundation Youth Programme graduates and *Crusader* quickly established itself as a significant force.

Now as the boat heads for California, *Crusader's* Transpac mission brings to mind the heyday of New Zealand offshore racing, when privateers shipped their yachts to major regattas around the world and helped establish the Kiwi sailing legend.

Part of Leighs' brief was for a yacht that

could be broken down and shipped inside a 40ft container. In late May, with the keel off, the mast separated into two sections and the hull tipped up vertically inside the container, *Crusader* was trucked from Auckland to Tauranga, ready for shipping.

The 2,225-mile Transpac Race from Los Angeles to Hawaii is one of the world's great ocean races. Dating back to 1906, it is typically a big boat race, starting upwind with a charge to find the southern portion of the Pacific High. From there, competitors hope to encounter a trade wind sleigh-ride downwind all the way to Honolulu. The current record of 5 days 14 hours 36 minutes was set by Neville Crichton's *Alfa Romeo* in 2009.

Reaching and running in 18 – 30 knots are dream conditions for *Crusader*. Even though she will be one of the smaller boats in the fleet (the smallest eligible size is 30ft), if she lives up to her record as a giant-killer in offshore conditions, she might well raise some eyebrows – as she has ever since her launching.

"We haven't really optimised the boat for the race," says Leighs. "I think it is going to be good for *Crusader* – a lot of VMG

Crusader in typical mode, leaping out of the sea at speed. Below: Anthony Leighs – on a crusade.



running, hopefully keeping an optimum angle. The key will be keeping the boat as light as possible and keeping the crew in good shape. It is a long time at sea in a 35ft boat. The only inventory we have added is an extra running kite and a staysail. We have had some encouraging trials running and reaching with a staysail set inside the spinnaker."

As he contemplates undertaking this blue ribbon race, Leighs acknowledges it represents another big step in his sailing journey. "I can't describe how far I have come in the time I have had this boat," he admits. "The first day out, I had never set foot on a boat with an asymmetric spinnaker before. It has been a huge learning curve."



Crusader's offshore racing debut came with the 2012 Coastal Classic, which will be remembered as one of the breezier versions of the 120-mile blast. As yachts broached in the gusts off North Head on the exit from the Waitemata Harbour, the black missile rocketed out of the blocks, leaving a massive rooster tail in its wake.

"That was just three weeks after launching the boat," Leighs recalls. "We started in 30-40 knots of wind. The speed was phenomenal. I really wondered what I had got myself into."

Starting with that memorable, spray-drenched sprint, what he had got into was a barnstorming assault on a number of impressive results in some high profile events. Reaching the Russell finish line





in just 10 hours 2 minutes 51 seconds secured not only the record for yachts under 10.66m, but also the next size band up for yachts under 12.19m.

"I did very little helming on that race," says Leighs. "I just kind of hung on. Now, I really enjoy it when it gets quite breezy."

He recalls a more recent outing coming around Cape Palliser during the Royal Port Nicholson Yacht Club Central Triangle Race. "It was blowing 25-30 knots, we were probably carrying too much sail, there was a big swell running."

Leighs was on the helm and recalls the exhilaration of the moment. "It was fantastic driving in those conditions. We held the A5 gennaker and were showing speeds in the high 20s on the dial."

They were also on the way to another notch in *Crusader's* gunbelt, winning every leg of the tough race that takes competitors on a 750-mile triangular course through some very gnarly territory – from Wellington to Akaroa, Akaroa to Napier and Napier to Wellington. When the results were tallied, *Crusader* had won all three legs on line, IRC, PHRF and General Handicap. Against



Top: *Crusader's* racing debut in the 2012 Coastal Classic set two new records.
Above: Setting off on the Fiji Race, which she did not finish due to hydraulic issues.



a fleet comprising mostly bigger yachts, *Crusader* had totally cleaned out the trophy cabinet. They also added an Auckland-Tauranga race victory to their tally.

Late last year, Leighs and his crew of Brett Elliott, Nick Bastow, James Glidden, Chris Maddock and Josh Tucker continued their barnstorming run in Noumea where they took on French round the world ace, Frank Cammas in a race around the island. Once again, they took the silverware, finishing more than four hours ahead of the favoured French team and clipping a similar time off the race record.

With the confidence of solid results and several giants slain along the way, *Crusader's* Transpac mission is simply expressed. "We are going to do as well as we possibly can and would love to pick up a trophy on the way," says Leighs.

- *Crusader* is not the only Kiwi interest in the race. Squadron member Manouch Moshayed's 30m maxi, *Rio100*, was radically re-shaped at Cookson Boats to a design by Bakewell-White Yacht Design and is to make an attempt at winning the famous Barn Door trophy.



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