

John & Heather Lidgard 'Prince(ess)s of the Pacific'



There can be few, if any, RNZYS members or other Kiwis who have sailed so many miles and won so many races as John and Heather Lidgard.

Think more than fifteen times round Planet Earth, or to the Moon and most of the way back, and you're about onto it. And almost all of it in the Pacific, be it into or out of Suva, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Vila, Noumea, Rarotonga, Nukualofa, Papeete, Hong Kong, Osaka, Anchorage, Vancouver, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Acapulco, Panama/Colon, to name just the bigger ports.

Do you get the feeling of their remarkable sailing partnership? Heather the navigator, John the designer and builder, both excellent sailors.

Here are just a few of the high points of our Pacific "royalty," on the planet's largest ocean. Always with the RNZYS burgee in place.

The Heather(s) Story

Designed and built by John, the 22' yacht *Heather* (named after guess who) was launched in 1949. The flattery worked and Heather and John married in 1953, now closing on their 66th anniversary. After two years of fun sailing, *Heather*, the boat, had to move on, her length at 22' being decreed too short for the Balokovic Cup. Can't not enter the big B. But this wasn't the end –

In 1986 a somewhat tired *Heather* (right) was repurchased...



and restored to her former glory as this 2001 photo shows....



2001, Anniversary race marking the 50th birthday of the Kawau Island Yacht Club. 52 year old Heather, John on the helm, son Duthie for'd hand. Photograph - courtesy Ivor Wilkins

Not to be outdone by her nautical namesake or her husband, Heather Lidgard took on the challenging task of navigation in 1965. Remember the pre GPS days? Sextants, chronometers, beautiful but tricky items, taking sights from a rocking boat without much sun etc. By 1966 she was a highly respected navigator, handling major races such as Auckland - Fiji, Sydney - Hobart, Melbourne - Osaka, Auckland - Port Vila and many others. So good in fact, that she was able to teach John to navigate, a new skill which quickly steered him to first place Sydney-Noumea in 1967.

Heather + *Heather* – a wonderful pair.

Southern Cross Win, 1971 – beating the Aussies and a British Prime Minister

Kiwis are well across the issue of rivalry with our neighbours to the west – especially in a year of the Rugby and Netball World Cups. But it goes back a long way and across other sports. One of New Zealand's most famous wins was in the 1971 Southern Cross Cup.

Here's the story written from Breeze, February 2007 by Ivor Wilkins –

“The early rise of the One Tonners, most notably Chris Bouzaid's Rainbow II, mark the genesis of New Zealand's international yacht racing reputation and boats designed, built and raced by John Lidgard were very much part of that era. His yacht Runaway became part of the New Zealand legend when, with Pathfinder and Waianiwa, it established a record that most likely will never be repeated.



State of the art for its time, Runaway steaming up the Derwent to come 2nd in the 1971 Sydney-Hobart

The three yachts formed the New Zealand team for the 1971 Southern Cross Cup and finished the high-scoring Sydney-Hobart race in 1st, 2nd and 3rd place to secure the Southern Cross Cup victory. As individual point scorers, Waianiwa was top with Runaway 2nd equal with British Prime Minister Ted Heath's Morning Cloud and Pathfinder 4th. It was an extraordinary achievement and when the trio returned under sail to Auckland they were met by cheering crowds of similar size and enthusiasm to those that in later years turned out to greet the Whitbread heroes.”

Omitted from this otherwise excellent and satisfying story is the name of the navigator and light weather helmsperson on *Runaway* – Heather Lidgard.



The Winners of the Southern Cross Cup - left, Brin Wilson; centre, John Lidgard; right, Chris Bouzaid

The Osaka Story

In 1987 Heather and John were captivated by the prospect of joining the 1987 Melbourne – Osaka 2 Handed Race . A mere 5377 nautical miles.

Reward left Auckland for Melbourne 14 February, and Melbourne for Osaka, 21st March.

The first short leg down Port Phillip Bay to the Balgowrie Yacht Club saw Reward 5th across the line and winning her division by more than one hour. Not bad for a day race of around 40 miles. That was the good news!

At the 'host' Balgowrie Yacht Club, competitors were fed and beveraged in a marquee on the lawn, with prizegiving inside the clubhouse. But for some strange Victorian reason, only members were allowed into the clubhouse. So, odd host, no trophy.

One suspects that Reward, missing their trophy, were but one of several boats taking off for Osaka the next day with revenge on their mind!

Over the next 38 days, Heather and John edged steadily away from the rest of the cruising division. In fact, their 'neighbour race' was against the tail ender of the top racing division - an incentive that got them to Osaka in 38 days, 4 whole days ahead of the second boat in their division.

You can perhaps understand why the crew look pretty pleased in this photo.

But the race was just the start. After 'sushi-ing' out in Osaka, John and Heather left for a modest cruise home via the Aleutian Islands, Alaska, British Columbia, California, Mexico, Marquesa Islands, Tahiti, Rarotonga, Tonga, and then (pew) New Zealand. At least another 15,000 miles.

What a 'cruise'! What a team!



The fast and beautiful cruising yacht, Reward with the Melbourne-Osaka crew on board, ready to go.



Heather and John receiving the Melbourne-Osaka trophy April 1987

The inaugural Round North Island Race

While Team Heather and John had great success in the western and northern ends of the Pacific, John notes in 'It's in the Blood' (available in RNZYS Cornes library) - that *'I had convinced myself.... that the New Zealand coast was the equal of any cruising ground we'd seen.'*

And they'd seen quite a few, so why wouldn't they race here as well?

There were many, and one of the more interesting was the inaugural Two Handed Round North Island race in February 1977. The favourite was *Gerontius*, a Farr 42 skippered by a rising star from Devonport, Peter Blake. The only male/female team, John and Heather, sailing their new 36' *Result*, were consistently in the top 3 into each stopover.

Typically for this race, conditions varied widely, perhaps the toughest running into Gisborne where a violent gybe had John *'bounding forward like a young lion but completed the task back in the cockpit crouched like an aged pussy cat'*.

They finished 3rd on line, but the final conditions favoured the smaller boats, with *Marimba* winning. Sigh.



Result under full sail leaving the Waitemata Harbour

But there's more.....

There will be few, if any couples with a combined membership tally of 100 years (John 60, Heather 40). And who have carried the RNZYS burgee close to 100,000 miles around the Pacific. It's a remarkable dedication to sailing, both cruising and racing.

The stories above are but a scratch on the surface. The difficulty in preparing this tribute was what not to include – like building the original *Patiki*, building and owning 18 yachts, numerous wins offshore, a major role in formation of the Kawau Island Yacht Club, Heather navigating an all-women crew in the first Sydney/ Hobart to allow this format, wins in Coastal Classic, Balokovic Cup, RNZYS club racing. And on it goes.

At 88, John still regularly helms 10m *Nimble*, launched around 1980, racing in 2019.

A remarkable couple and a fine model for all members of RNZYS - just love being out there on the water, sails working hard, doing the best you can. Like John and Heather, you will surely qualify for a "reward".



John and Heather Lidgard with the Reward Cup, at the RNZYS, August 2019