

Firebug Boat Building Program – Mordialloc Sailing Club



On the 6th of February 2010 we launched seven new Firebug dinghies at the Mordialloc Sailing Club in Melbourne, Australia. The launch brought together friends and family to see the hard work of their owners over the past four months as they proudly displayed their efforts on that windy summer day.

Ten months earlier my nine year old son had just completed his first sail training in the highly successful "Tackers" program. This left myself and other wondering, "where to from here"? Unlike a lot of other sports sailing has so many options. It seems that the big push is towards the Optimist dinghy for all the right reasons in a consumer orientated commercial world of time poor people, but I have never been the one to buy into this dogma. This is a spiral of commercial one upmanship of which I could not afford.



Boat Building

Somebody mentioned how when they were young they built boats during the winter and then went sailing in summer, now that was an idea I liked. A few years earlier I had bought a set of Firebug plans from Peter Tait but in the end I bought one second hand. We only had it for a short time before we sold it when we shifted to Australia from New Zealand but this seemed like a good choice for what we wanted to do. Looking on the Firebug website we found an account of how Ray O'Brien had done the same thing in Christchurch and so that was that, a boat building program was born.

Together with another club member, Sue, I put together a proposal for what we wanted to do and presented this to our Commodore. It was simple really: We wanted to build seven boats and would like to process the money through the clubs accounts, we will do everything else. Would you like the possibility of seven new boats at the club? Sounds like an easy "yes" doesn't it, but Sue and I had only been at the club for a few months and there was risk to the club's reputation if things didn't go well. Thankfully he backed our proposal.



Website & Preparation

We decided to launch the idea through a website especially setup to manage the boat building program (www.getintosailing.com), but with higher ambitions in mind. Being a project manager I set about developing a schedule, terms and conditions and a comprehensive Bill of Materials, including cut out plans so we new how much it was going to cost and how long it would take. Leaving ourselves a bit of contingency we set the price at \$1,800 AUD with a ten week build timeframe and on that basis we launched our website in late **July 2009**.

Initial plans were for Sue, I and one of the sailing club members to build a boat, so three down four to go. Quickly a friend of mine joined in then two more that came via the website and some advertising we had done at local schools. Sue is a real whiz at using free advertising through community channels.



In early September, one month from the start, I left for a family holiday to the USA with the program nearly fully subscribed. Our first stop was New York and I had two more requests via email, now we had eight! Sue offered up her place and we were back to seven and then one of them pulled out, Sue you are back in. The next stop was Plymouth Massachusetts and I got a call from a woman wanting to know if there were still spots open. Her and her sister and their two daughters wanted to join in, no woodworking experience but do you think it would be ok? "Sure" I say, Sue you're out again.

Over the next three weeks I had to turn away another five groups, we were running hot.

Video

Earlier in the year I had started on my son's boat so that by the time the build program started in early October it was finished apart from the deck. This was a great resource for the builders as not all people are good at visualising things from plans. I also recorded the build on video and loaded them onto YouTube. This is now a twelve part series that covers the build with additional videos on rigging and making a beach trolley. These are all available via our website www.franciscanboatworks.com

Build

In early October six groups turned up at my place to start the build of their boats, three father and son groups, a young couple, a father building for his young son and the two sisters and their daughters. This was the start of a fantastic process that lasted for four months, initially for about four hours every Sunday morning but later in the build this included some week nights as well.



The groups built and painted their boats with my help and guidance while I sourced all of the parts and fabricated the spars with the sails bought from Firebug HQ in New Zealand. One of the nice things about the Firebug is the ability to personalise the look of the boat through the sails and paint scheme. We ended up with a variety of colours ranging from traditional white to a rainbow of colour.

Following in the foot steps of Ray's program we made the afternoon teas a bit of a treat with birthdays celebrated and home cooking shared. Through this and the boat building the group of individuals came together in their joint endeavour to build their own boat. However it soon became evident that our target of Christmas finish was not going to be met and later in the build we set a launch date of 6th February 2010. This gave a date for everybody to aim for, and aim they did as several put in long hours to get their boat finished.



Launch

That is how we came to be standing there on the beach on a summer day in February, accompanied by friends and family, to launch our boats at the Mordialloc Sailing Club. It was unfortunate that in the end the wind got up to 35 knots and nobody got on the water but that did not dampen the sense of achievement for all those involved.

While this program was never about gaining members for the club some of those involved have gone on to become members and attend sail training. It is a concept that seems odd to sailing people but there are a lot of non sailors that just want to build a boat. There is something magical about building something and that will take you on small adventures out on the ocean blue, a connection with explorers past. Rewarding also are the friendships that have been formed amongst those involved.



In running this program I have gained a lot of *experience* and information that may be useful to others who might want to do the same. Just drop me a line, I am most willing to share.

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