

## Fuller's King of the Harbour.

The summer hadn't promised much in the way of winds for the revolutionised King of the Harbour race format which promised downwind conditions... wherever they were. And it didn't look like the Downwind Gods were promising much in the way of luck either, when the first big nor easter Auckland Harbour had had for 3 months, blew through ...3 days before the big event!

However, on the morning of the race, a "sharpish" 16 knot sou wester was expected to fill in for the 65 paddlers who lined up at Auckland's Viaduct harbour – better than a poke in the eye with a blunt southerly we thought. Little did we know, just a few hours later, our eyes would be wide with excitement midrace as 23 knot – gusting 25 knot – winds whistled across the harbour and against the tide to produce probably the most exhilarating surfski race Auckland's ever seen.

So with the wind determining the course as The Viaduct to Waiheke Island, the tactics came into play early... especially for the third or so of the field who missed the start by 2-300m thanks to not hearing the pre start horns – ironically because of the wind!

The bulk of the field raced out into the middle of the harbour, while local knowledge served a few well who hugged the wharf-line during the initial 2-3 km up to Mechanics Bay - well away from the effect of the incoming tide. The decision then for paddlers was, do I take the more direct route to Waiheke via the main channel where the waves may be steeper but the tide more resistant... or go wider nearer to Browns Island for cleaner slightly smaller waves and less tide.

The majority of the lead group (the top 20 paddlers finished within 8 minutes of each other over a 22 kilometre course!) chose the first option which made for some thrilling downwind racing - not to mention "spitting" for the friends and family aboard the Fullers Ferry that would transport paddlers & boats back from Waiheke. It really was a fantastic concept for which kudos must go to organiser Terry Newsome for actually making it happen – many had thought about it in the past.

Olympian Mike Walker, local long distance ski paddling legend Simon McLaren, and the overseas experienced Paul Wilford & Tim Grammar lead the fray into the most technical stretch of the race – the narrow Mouthier Channel about 9 kilometres from home. Here the waves steepened noticeably from the narrowed wind against tide effect, and twisted with a lot more uncertainty from the backwash effect of nearby Motutapu and Motuihe islands.

But after speeds of over 20 km/h and averaging over 14 km/h it was Olympian Mike Walker who surged into the relatively smoother waters of Matiatia Wharf in a time of 1.29.50 with Paul Wilford hot on his heels at 1.31.05 and Tim Grammar third in 1.31.26.

In the women's event World #1 Katie Pocock lead from start to finish in a time of 1.39.18 (23rd overall), with veteran woman Dene Simpson second 1.42.38 and surfski stalwart Tracy Wilson third in 1.50.04.

65 started, and most importantly in those conditions 65 finished – although a few got much more up close and personal with the waters of Auckland Harbour than others.

All finished with a huge grin on their face and with a genuine vote of thanks for organiser Terry Newsome and major sponsor Fullers Ferries for making this event happen.

Surfski paddling is one of the fastest growing sports around Auckland's waterways, simply because the competitors' playgrounds get redesigned by the weather on a daily basis, and it not only provides you with your fitness kick, but your nature & comradely kick as well. It's so much more fun on Auckland's waterways than its roads – especially when you're racing!

You will find a list of the 2010 Fullers King of the Harbour Sponsors below and we encourage you to support our sponsors whenever possible. Without their involvement we would not have the ability to host the event.

By Mike Hall.

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I would also like to thank Steve Knowles of Sportzhub.com for the help and media coverage he has given this year's race.