

# Nautical Acrobats

## Thrills at the Punt Club

- By -

George H. Johnston

This afternoon the racing season of the Williamstown Sailing Punt Club will begin. It was about this time nearly two years ago that a member of the club invited me to "come along to the club and have a sail." On the following Saturday I was there, attired in silk shirt and cream trousers, which however did not seem to meet with the approval of my friend who remarked "Those aren't any good. Go upstairs and get these on" [handing me a pair of] tattered khaki shorts [and an old sweater].

Soon afterwards we went down to the slipway where the punt was lying. A rather small craft I thought. About 18ft in length, very narrow, with a heavy spread of sail and [an opening] in the long expanse of deck [which was a small] cockpit in which to [put your] feet. "Hop in" [invited] "Snowy" my punting friend. "Now steady! Don't go tipping yourself into the ditch so soon." This as I [blundered] about on the unstable decking. How she [rocked] and dipped! We seated ourselves side by side, the skipper holding the tiller and the mainsheet while I attended to the jib.

As the two sails filled and swelled the punt [leaned over] and off she sped with speed and [impatience] most amazing. At the time the wind was fairly light and the boat was keeping more or less upright. "Sandy" [looked] over his shoulder and [remarked] "Bit of a squall comin' across. Be ready to lay over when she hits us."

A puff of wind struck the back of my [neck], the [surging] water at the bow [increased], the main-sheet tautened and the punt heeled over until the mast was almost flat with the water. I was just thinking of the swim ashore when I noticed "Snowy" performing an amazing aerobic feat. He had tucked his feet under the cockpit and was lying over the side, back bent like a bow and his head touching the waves - all in an endeavour to help balance the force of the wind in the sail and keep the boat upright.

"Go on" he grunted. "Grab that rope and lay [over]."

With some little hesitation I obeyed. The strain was just beginning to find the weak muscles in my back when the squall eased off and we were upright again. "Snowy" grinned. So did I, but rather feebly. This sort of thing happened about every three minutes, and I found that it was the most exciting part of punt sailing. It is a great feeling as you grab the jib-sheet, and, leaning out, exert every muscle of your body in a combat all of your own with the winds of the sea.

"Think we'll jib(e) her and run across for Port Melbourne," said the skipper.

"Be ready! Jib(e)-oh!"

The foot of the mainsail bellied inboard, and I was just beginning to wonder when ----

“Look out! Bob your head!” cried my friend. I hurriedly obeyed. The boom, a long wooden spar, smashed across to leeward; a flog of canvas and I found that we were sitting on the opposite side of the boat and sailing on a different course. Noting my puzzled stare “Snowy” tried to enlighten me.

“You see, when we changed our course the wind suddenly came from one side of the sail to the other, swinging the sail right across the boat with a bang. If you don’t duck your head the boom’ll catch you and over you’ll go!”

So we kept on. Tacking, running before the wind, jibbing(sic) and coming about, lying over in the squalls, and gliding along when the breeze was fitful. When we were returning to the club a furious squall rushed out of the south, and, despite every effort to lay over, the punt was forced over until she was capsized and on her side in the water.

“Well, now what —,” I began.

“Snowy” simply leant over the side of the boat, placed his feet on the centreplate - a keel which can slide in or out of the boat - gave a jerk, and the boat was upright. There was no water left in the tiny cockpit for it was self-emptying, and we were immediately sailing away, as if nothing had happened. We arrived at the club, wheeled the boat into the shed, and put away gear.

## Foundation of the Sport.

The Williamstown Punt Club was founded some years ago, the vessels originating as the old duck-shooting punt, flat bottomed and flat sided. Now the type has been improved practically to perfection, for it combines maximum speed with great seaworthiness. These sailing punts are the only vessels of their type in the world. They are almost completely decked over, thoroughly watertight, and no matter how much they tip over they cannot sink. The record time for the six-mile course is a little more than 60 minutes, which is a great speed for such small boats.

A few years ago one reckless member wished to see how fast a punt really could go. So he set his largest suit of canvas and fixed up another mainsail on the other side of the mast, making a huge spread of cloth and twice as much as a punt is built to carry. He then put his boat dead before the wind and scudded down the lagoon at a smashing pace, the two huge sails bellying out on each side. Unfortunately the idea was carried a little too far, the skipper lost control of her, and she hurtled along straight for the pier. In she went. The forestay struck the obstacle, bent like a bowstring, catapulted the punt back with a jerk, and then she capsized, giving the intrepid record-breaker a nice little ducking for his trouble. But he always declared that his boat made an easy 15 knots.

Some boats excel in heavy weather, some in light, some in moderate winds; one or two do not excel at all. But the boat which has the best average is the Irish Rufus, a name derived from a famous race-horse, in whose stable the punt was built some years ago. Later she was sold and renamed Lapwing, and her new owners’ first race was their first sail in a vessel of this sort. The other competitors in the race had crossed the finishing line, washed down and put away their boats, dressed themselves, and some had gone home, before the Lapwing arrived.

## **An Eventful Race.**

Irish Rufus, however, was the main figure of one of the historic races of the club. In this race all the punts started before a very light breeze, with fitful cats-paws. As some boats excel in light weather these were soon together bunched at the front. Irish Rufus had made a bad start, and as she is best in heavy winds she was soon a long way behind. But half-way round the course a stiff northerly came up with startling suddenness. Every boat leapt forward, and the leading bunch plunged around the second buoy and down toward the third. Here every boat jibbed(sic) over to take the new course, and the strength of the wind in their large sails caused every boat to tip up, leaving all the crews floundering "in the ditch." Then Irish Rufus ploughed down, came around the buoy, and cleaving her triumphant way through her capsized opponents, finally romped home an easy winner.

Among the best boats of the fleet are:- Miss Vic (a sister-ship to Irish Rufus), Whiteworker, Valerie, Banshee (a beautiful model and the latest addition), Seaplane, San Lue, Satuta, Solaris, and, of course, Irish Rufus.

The Satuta is another craft with an adventurous career. Built some years ago on the Albert Park Lake, she was never intended to be a punt, being built for a cat-rigged sailing canoe. First named Mascot, then Weimar, she was re-christened Satuta (a Solomon Island word for "The Arrow") when her new owners registered her in the Punt Club. There are not many parts of the northern half of the Bay which she has not traversed, and, though only a fraction more than 15ft in length, she has been in many hard blows. She has been washed ashore at Seaford during a heavy southerly gale. Last season she was capsized in a huge sea off Elwood, the force of the water being so great that she was rolled completely over. The thick wooden mast snapped like glass, and the wire-rope stays were torn asunder. This little performance was of great interest to a large number of spectators on North Road jetty, who seemed to regard it as a lifesaving demonstration. Again, last season, she left Elwood to cross the Bay to her home port of Williamstown. A stiff southerly was blowing and she plunged into the seas so much that the stout iron centre plate was bent at right angles.

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**Note:** Some words in the text of the first four paragraphs are indecipherable due to the extremely poor quality of the original document. Words that have been included to fill in for the missing words are shown in brackets [ ].

The original document can be seen here:

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