

Out of the race: the spurned yachtsman



"My reputation as a man and a sportsman is at stake here" ... Richard Purcell on his yacht, Margaret Rintoul II, yesterday. Photograph by STEVEN SEWELL

By ALAN KENNEDY

Richard Purcell has had enough. The man accused of failing to help an ailing yacht during last year's Sydney to Hobart disaster has withdrawn from this year's event, saying he will not take part until his name is cleared.

Purcell, the skipper and owner of Margaret Rintoul II, had intended to compete. But he is appalled by the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia's decision to establish a committee to investigate whether he failed to give assistance.

"My reputation as a man and a sportsman is at stake here,"

Purcell said yesterday. The CYCA's committee has been forced to adjourn its inquiry until after the coroner's inquest into the race, which turned to tragedy when a typhoon storm hit the fleet on the afternoon of December 27. By the time it abated, six sailors were dead.

Purcell said there was no basis for the inquiry, which he accused the CYCA of launching to divert attention from itself.

"I am not going to let them get away with it," he said. "And why should I? They have said I could be barred for the rest of my life... I am 48 years old and I have been

sailing since I was 12, and I have never had anything like this. They look on the wrong bloke when they look at me. I am tougher than all these blokes put together."

Purcell was in the cockpit of his Margaret Rintoul II when the storm was at its savage worst. He caught sight of a flare from the stricken *Sword of Orion*, which hours earlier had lost crewman Glynis Charles overboard. His body has never been found. The boat had been rolled, it was dismantled and the deck was breaking up. "The seas were mountainous and the decks awash with tonnes of water,"

Purcell said. "One of [my] helmsmen had already been knocked down twice. Others were in no condition to take the helm or their turns at watch."

Purcell himself was seasick. He said he shone his torch at *Sword of Orion*, hoping his crew would realise he had seen them. But he was upwind of the battered yacht. Without an engine, in the huge seas, he finally concluded that any attempt to go back would place his crew at great risk.

He recorded *Sword of Orion's* position and gave it to race control. The rescue helicopter used this to find the yacht and lift

his crew to safety. But after the race, Purcell was cited for failing to render assistance. The CYCA's Commodore, Mr Hugo Van Kersschaver, suggested it was "not dissimilar at all to not stopping after a car accident" — for which he apologised.

The coroner's findings are not expected until late next year at the earliest, but Mr Purcell said he was confident he would be cleared of any wrongdoing.

"I know that no-one sitting on hand is going to tell a bloke in charge of a vessel out at sea how to suck eggs," he said. "It would create all sorts of strife."