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Surf's up . . . but sadly Sharky won't be there



In the surf is how Les 'Sharky' Iredale is best remembered. In this 1983 film picture he is shown on one of the surf skis he built himself.

By JOHN LEWIS

THE sun may shine and a good wave or two may roll this weekend on Groper Rock or on the reef at Nobbys.

If so, I guess I'll be there and so might Don the waterbed man, and Brian the engineer, and Grahame the insurance man, and Bruce the college lecturer, and the red-haired lady in the red wetsuit, and a small flotilla of other surf ski riders.

The trouble is that Sharky won't be there and that's going to take some of the zest out of the winter sun on one's back and a good swell building up off Groper.

Sharky (I discovered only from the funeral notice on Monday that his full name was Leslie Ashworth Iredale, of Mitchell St, Stockton, and that he was 64) was one of a varying group of ski riders who gather summer and winter 'out the back' at Nobbys at weekends and public holidays.

We surf other beaches, but Nobbys is base camp, the open-air club house, the spiritual home. In most instances we know each other only by a nickname, a christian name or an eccentricity of surfing style. There's a unity that flows from a love of the surf, of being past the aggressions of youth, in enjoying a spot of banter between wave sets.

Sharky had a special place in the group. When I first met him he rode a big, ugly, grey surf ski he had made himself. He good-humouredly parried jibes about the craft and he told me one day that he had put carrying handles on it and had taken it as passenger's luggage to try the surf on Bali. Later he replaced it with another home-made cream model of almost equal ugliness. After a time

he made it look worse and perform better by adding a bulbous nose like W.C. Field's.

While the rest of us rode sleeker, slick, commercially made craft, Sharky stuck to his own creation, paddling it across the harbour from his Stockton home to Nobbys and back again.

It was a trip Sharky made countless times and, on one memorable occasion when he was a 15-year-old Newcastle Boys High School student, he made it swimming fully clothed and toting his satchel of schoolbooks.

He was riding home on the old Stockton vehicular ferry and accidentally dropped his schoolbag over the side. He plunged in after it, retrieved the bag and swam to the Stockton shore.

Last Sunday morning Sharky was out strutting his stuff on the reef at Nobbys. Later, after paddling home to Stockton he complained to his wife of feeling cold. He went to bed and died in his sleep.

THIS isn't an obituary so I won't go into great detail about Les Iredale being a husband, a father and a grandfather; about his being a great surf club swimmer; about his being a metallurgist at the BHP for 20 years before taking early retirement in 1982; about his being a member of the 1952 Sydney-to-Hobart Yacht Race crew on the Newcastle entry, *Nirvana*.

I believe he got his Sharky nickname because, in his body surfing days, he was always furthest out waiting for the surfing god Hughie to serve him up a boomer.

I know he was immensely proud of the surfboard prowess of his sons; that he and I debated when and if he should sell his BHP shares; that he enjoyed camping on the Myall; that he and his son-in-law were building their own fibreglass windsurfers; that in one pig of a shore break at

Nobbys he snapped his home-made paddle in two and lost it, only to find it washed ashore on the beach at Stockton near his home.

But my most lasting memory of Sharky is him on a big wave. Of how he and his lumpy brute of a ski became one as they curved down a crystal mountain and danced ahead of the foam towards the shore.

Only surfers know the elation of owning a wave, feeling its power and harnessing it.

Every surfer has his own approach and Sharky eschewed the rock disco manoeuvres of the top competitive wave ski and surfboard riders. His style was all poetry and grace and grey-headed sagacity.

I suspect Sharky would have laughed at being so described because he regarded himself as just an ordinary knockabout bloke.

I suppose he was, but he was also a personification of the good things about Newcastle.