

Chinese New Year in Sydney
by Abigail Nathan – Sydney Phoenix

The Chinese New Year Festival is one of the more colourful and vibrant events on the New South Wales dragon boat racing calendar. This is only natural since the races are a key part of the New Year festivities and celebrations, but much of the atmosphere is down to the race course itself. Situated as it is in the heart of Sydney's Darling Harbour, under the watchful gaze of Cockle Bay's classy restaurants and bustling bars, and just a few minutes' walk from Chinatown, it's an ideal spot to ring in the new year with the local Chinese community.

Crowds help, too. Darling Harbour is always buzzing with tourists and locals at the weekends, but festivals such as Chinese New Year draw even more people, so it doesn't take much to lure them all to the water's edge to cheer on the teams in what can only be termed a "splash and dash". The course is short at roughly 200-or-so metres... a diagonal course leading from under a pedestrian bridge towards the wharves at the opposite end. From inside the boat it's hard to judge where the finish line is, but most teams have little time to concern themselves with this as frantic sweeps call for paddlers to stop the boat before crashing into the pylons almost as soon as they cross the "line". Many teams actually spend a few training sessions practicing their emergency stops for precisely this reason.

For the Year of the Rat races, Sydney was lucky enough to get a day of rest from the rain and storms that had been battering the city. Although the sun didn't quite manage to fight through, it was reasonably calm for most of the day. Despite the lack of sun, there were plenty of colours on show, not only from the sea of team uniforms undulating around the marshalling areas, but from the festival decorations themselves. This year, giant statues were dotted around the harbour depicting each of the 12 Chinese animal signs. Hungry hordes were also kept at bay by the many Chinese food stalls lining the walkways around the harbour and nearby parks.

The morning began with the traditional eye-dotting ceremony, and the boats looked very fetching with their peacock-feather headdresses. Most of them even stayed on, despite some fairly boisterous racing. Loading of the boats was somewhat delayed as the dragon boaters were sharing with the pricey yachts in the marina outside Cockle Bay, which meant double-loading at some points. However, once the races were under way, they were close! Hard to pick from the sidelines, even the announcers had trouble working out who had won.

The finals were actually so close that only milliseconds separated the top teams. The **Premier Mixed B Final** was taken out by *DSA-yellow* at 1:03.25 with *Sloths-B* coming in close behind. **Premier Mixed A Final** was *Pacific Dragons-A*'s race at 00:58.59, but *Sloths-A* weren't too far off. The **Junior Mixed Final** was won by *CBR Grammar-A*, and at 01:07.18 they had a pretty good lead on the mixed team of *St Clare's/St Edmonds-A* who came in behind them. The **Masters Mixed Final** was another close win and *Northern Beaches* at 01:03.44 came out just in front of *Bei Loon-A*. Only six

milliseconds separated the top two in the **Junior Women's Final** with *St Clare's-A* at 01:10.32 beating *CGGS-A*. The **Premier Women's Final** was the *Pacific Dragons'* race at 01:04.92 with *Sloths* closing in behind them, while the **Masters Women's Final** was taken out by *Nowra* at 01:11.32, with *Bei Loon-A* on their tail. The **Junior Open Final** was easily won by *CGS-A* at 01:02.14 with *St Edmonds* a few seconds behind them, and the **Masters Open Final** was won by *Bei Loon* at 01:01.45, closely followed by *NHDBC*. The fastest times of the day were, of course, in the last race of the day, the **Premier Open Final**, where *City Dragons* took out first place with 00:55.90, pushing the *Pacific Dragons* into second.

All in all, a fun day. Only a couple of crashes, which always adds a bit of excitement for the spectators and gets the adrenaline pumping for the competitors. The wind caused a bit of trouble later on in the day, with sweeps having to realign the boats under the bridge a few times. There were a few other unexpected delays as paddlers made way for the tourist "adventure jet boats" and water taxis that needed to pick up and drop off passengers at the jetties near the loading site... but then this is the harbour city – what better place to be messing about in boats?