

CHASING CANGURO

Following in his grandfather's footsteps, a determined Australian and his family tackle an epic 3700km ski marathon across the Mediterranean.



It started with faded clippings in an old scrapbook and ended seven years later with an epic waterski marathon across the Mediterranean Sea.

"It feels surreal, I still feel like it's a dream. I feel like I've not only followed in Harry's footsteps and chased him over the last 10 days, but also created a new journey that maybe one day my family will recreate."

By Chris Beattie

So said Aussie Alex Luther after an endurance marathon that saw him ski an astounding 3699km in a little over 10 days as he skirted the coastlines of several Mediterranean countries while recreating – and bettering – the efforts of his grandfather, Harry 'Canguro' Luther.

A chance discovery of a family scrapbook containing clippings of Harry's waterskiing

and other sporting exploits, including his own marathon endurance on the Mediterranean in 1970, was the spark that set his grandson's imagination alight. Despite hardly knowing Harry – Alex, 37, was born in Africa and only got to meet his grandfather when he visited Perth as a toddler – he found the stories of Harry's achievements enthralling; so much

so that he eventually vowed to take on the same Mediterranean challenge that Harry had completed all those years ago.

There was only one slight hurdle to overcome – up until he committed to recreating Harry's epic skiing adventure, he had never slipped on a waterski. It would prove to be the start of a major learning curve.



he eventually vowed to take on the same Mediterranean challenge that Harry had completed all those years ago

"I skied for the first time on the Hawkesbury in 2013," recalled the Sydney-based finance advisor. But the program soon escalated and it wasn't long before Alex and a group of friends were competing in major endurance ski races, including the Southern 80 and the Hawkesbury and Grafton Bridge to Bridge events in NSW.

It was the perfect training regime for his coming epic effort, providing him with the endurance and stamina he'd need to deal with the gruelling challenges that lay ahead.

As planning progressed, Alex met up with accomplished television producer Alan Hogan, who encouraged him to record his preparations and the eventual outcome of his tribute to Harry for a possible documentary – due to be released sometime in the near future.

Alex also drafted family into the venture, with his wife Belinda and sister Mitzy donating their time and energy into the planning and running of recreating Harry's Mediterranean enduro.

The choice of a boat was critical to the success of the project and a chance meeting with Dan Jones of Sydney boat brokerage Eyachts was enough to seal the deal.



Above: Pre-race concentration with observer and sister Mitzy Luther.

Below: Africa in the wake, day one.





It made a huge difference to have Axopar as our boat sponsor and they also brought Mercury onboard



Top: Driver Shane Wilson ploughs on, leg two.

Above: Barcelona Marina.

"We were initially looking at another brand, but Dan said I needed to take a look at the Axopar range he was selling," explained Alex. "I thought they looked really interesting and then I saw the 37 Sun-Top. It was perfect for what we needed. It had good carrying capacity and didn't need to be pulled out of the water every day, which was important."

Via Eyachts, Alex made contact with the Finnish manufacturer, detailing his plans to the company's founder and CEO, Jan-Erik Viitala.

"When I explained the plan and what we wanted to achieve, Jan got it straight away," said Alex. "It made a huge difference to have Axopar as our boat sponsor and they also brought Mercury onboard with the supply of the new V8 Verado 300hp outboards."

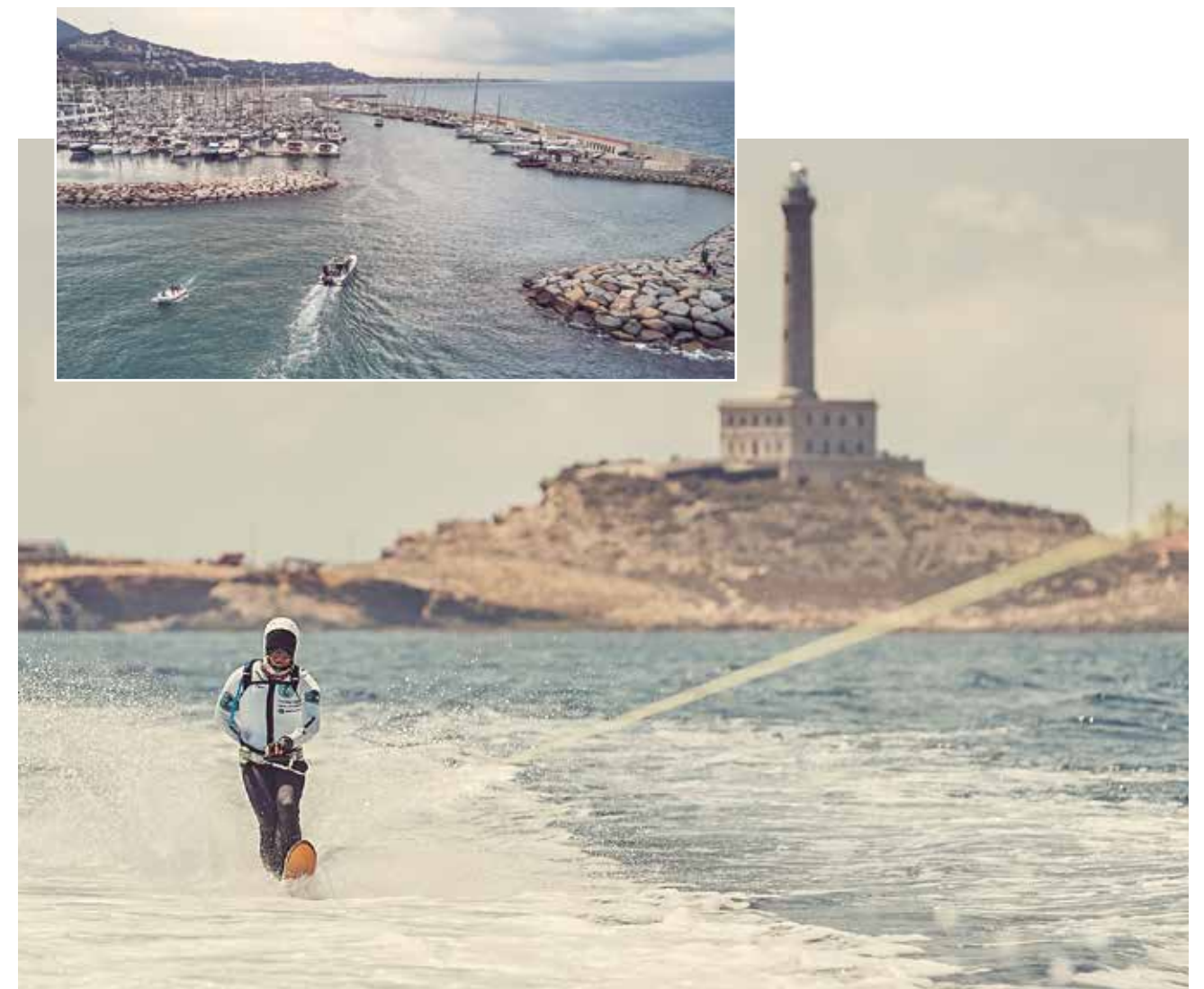
With such an epic undertaking ahead of him, Alex was committed to ensuring planning and logistics were as thorough as possible.

DETAILS, DETAILS

"My nickname is actually 'details' and I was determined to ensure that we covered as many aspects of the project as possible prior to heading off," he explained.

Part of the lead-up involved a reconnaissance road trip of the route in 2016 to inspect the various marinas and other facilities the team would need to use along the way. Retracing Harry's route, the Chasing Canguro team would embark from Tangier, Morocco, at the western entrance of the Strait of Gibraltar on the tip of Africa and follow the coastlines of Spain, France, Monaco, Italy and Croatia, before retracing its footsteps to the finish line at Cervia, Italy.

An important aspect of the marathon would be visiting the Principality of Monaco, which Harry



visited during his own tour of the Med in 1970. Alex also hoped to arrange a royal reception for himself and the team as well as a berth for the Axopar at the ultra-exclusive Yacht Club de Monaco. As it turned out, the Monaco stopover would provide a memorable moment for the Chasing Canguro team.

With boat, motors, timetable and logistics organised, the team set off from Tangiers on June 26 to cross the entrance to the Mediterranean to Adra, on the southern Spanish coastline, covering a distance of 264km in a time of five hours and fourteen minutes. Average speed for the crossing on day one was just over 50km/h.

While sea conditions were mostly calm and ideal during the team's initial recon two years earlier, they were anything but for much of the majority of the actual trip. At times being knocked off his ski due to the rising seas, Alex and his crew still managed to maintain an average pace either side of 50km/h for the remaining 10 days.

His longest day on the ski was the stretch from Barcelona to Monaco on day four, with Alex on the end of a ski rope for almost 11 hours, covering a distance of 558km. But despite the gruelling effort, he says it was worth it as the team powered into the marina late in the day.

"It was very emotional coming into Monaco," recalled Alex. "We'd actually picked up Jan from Axopar and Jussi Sepponen from Mercury Europe near St Tropez late in the afternoon, and we felt invincible as we came into the harbour."

ROYAL RECEPTION

While the crew had previously spoken with officials about the possibility of having HSH Prince Albert of Monaco greet them when they arrived, they were almost resigned to the fact that their much-later-than-planned arrival would rule out a royal reception.

As it turned out, the Prince made the effort to greet the overdue entourage, providing a

Inset: Barcelona, leg five.

Main: The historical coastline has changed little in 48 years. Valencia, Spain.



Popping champagne with Prince Albert at the Yacht Club of Monaco was amazing



memorable highlight for the Chasing Canguro team.

"It ended a very special day for us," said Alex. "Popping champagne with Prince Albert at the Yacht Club of Monaco was amazing. He was such a cool guy. Very easy going and down to earth to talk to. He was even cracking jokes and was genuinely interested in the whole project and the history with Harry etc."

There were times throughout the trip when conditions came close to breaking the team emotionally, primarily because of the toll the waves were having on Alex. This was especially so on the run down the western coastline of Italy.

"After six hours on the water on day seven approaching the port of Camerota, we turned a corner and were suddenly faced with massive chop and winds. My sister Mitzy broke down and said she couldn't bear watching the impact it was having on me," recalls Alex. "But I had to be tough and tell her I didn't need her empathy – I needed her encouragement. After all, we had come here to test ourselves."

Despite the brutal conditions, Alex and the team still covered 405km over nearly eight and a half hours on the day.

HARKING BACK TO HARRY

When he crossed the finish line at Cervia on the final day of the trip, Alex said it made his grandfather's achievement all the more impressive, given the technological limitations of the day.

"Thanks to advances in marine technology, we were able to offset the rough sea conditions and



Above and top: Personal greetings from Prince Albert of Monaco.

Right: Monaco departure, leg nine.



adverse weather by going further offshore, and our increased fuel capacity, hull performance and use of radar made things easier – all things that Harry would never have been able to utilise back in 1970."

PAYING THE TOLL

Physically, the run had taken its toll on his body, but Alex's punishing training regime ensured it was manageable.

"My body held up very well considering what it was put through," he said. "My right knee took a beating in the rougher conditions, but other than a few blisters on the hands and some chafing, all the training and preparation paid off.

"But we could not have completed Chasing Canguro without our amazing sponsors, Axopar and Mercury," he said. "It was also great to have the support of the Principality of Monaco to help recreate some of the history of Harry's exploits.

"And, of course, I wouldn't have been able to do it at all without my team. It was fitting that they crossed the finish line ahead of me because they did a lot of the work on land and water to make it all possible."

At the time of going to press, Alex said he had already had discussions with Axopar about undertaking another adventure, although he didn't think it would be quite as physically demanding as Chasing Canguro.

"And we're still working on the documentary series. We have lots of great footage so the challenge will be to choose the best of it and pull it all together."

You can find out more about Alex and his team's exploits by going to: chasingcanguro.com.au.

Above: All stops out, off the west coast of Italy during leg 13.

Below: A job well done.





THE LEGEND OF CANGURO

Born in Sydney in 1932, from an early age, Harry Mark Luther showed signs of his competitive nature when, at the age of 19, he rode more than 3000km on a pushbike from Ballina on the NSW north coast to Bendigo in Victoria to compete in a local cycling event.

He was also attracted to motorsports and competed regularly on road courses in an MG sports car that he maintained himself.

After marrying Alex's grandmother, Margo, Harry moved to Green Valley in Sydney's west and took on a job as a delivery driver for Pepsi. It was not uncommon for him to carry multiple 24-bottle timber crates in each hand – a feat of strength that would serve him well during his coming waterskiing exploits.

Harry first skied in his mid-30s and soon fell in love with the sport, transitioning into competition in 1967 at a time when waterskiing was a popular mainstream pastime and sport.

In 1969, he entered the Bridge to Bridge race, which would become Australia's most iconic waterskiing event. His boat was *Miss Pepsi*, a Mercury-powered *Pride Fury*, and he entered the

twin rig class with the smallest boat, starting in 76th position. Not only did Harry and his team go on to win the event for their class, they created a new course record, having passed 68 other boats in the process.


Race wins and Harry's competitive reputation continued to increase – he was the first skier to take Australian waterskiing offshore, completing long-distance marathons from Windsor to Wollongong, and Sydney to Newcastle.

In 1970, he entered the Pola-Cervia race that spanned the Adriatic Sea, covering 80 miles (128km). It was Europe's most popular waterskiing event, and Harry decided to ski the Mediterranean as a warm-up. It turned out the 'warm up' would become a world record 3144-mile (5010km) marathon waterski from Tangiers to Cervia. Fresh from this achievement, Harry went on to win the Pola-Cervia race on July 24, 1970, becoming a world champion title holder and setting a record time of one hour, 51 minutes and 15.12 seconds.

Harry spent the next four years racing in Europe, earning the monica 'Canguro' and breaking multiple records, including one memorable effort on Lake Como, Italy, being towed by a hydroplane drag boat, driven by

Eugenio Molinari – the much-celebrated and world-record-holding shipbuilder and driver. Towed by Molinari, Harry became the first waterskier to break 100mph, reaching 107.116mph (172km/h).

So highly was he regarded in Italy that a prominent ski competitor of the time, Bruno Cassa, when faced with unkind seas said: "Luther, in my estimation, is not a skier. He is some sort of machine. He sees nothing but smooth water, even in seas like this."

While *Miss Pepsi* was retired in 1974, Harry maintained his interest in competitive cycling, both in Europe and Australia. His final race took place in March, 1988, in Perth. Harry was sprinting in the final stretch of a road race when he crashed heavily, the fall and severe head injuries proving fatal. But the inspiration he provided to his grandson Alex saw the Luther name once again ride high on the waves of the Mediterranean. 



Left: Harry with Miss Italy 1970.

Below: Post the Adriatic crossing.



Above: Harry and Margo Luther with *Miss Pepsi*.