

President's Report 2026

The Melbourne Amateur Regatta Association (MARA) exists to preserve and promote the proud tradition of the Australian Henley Regatta, which has been conducted on the Yarra River since 1904. As the only remaining short-course regatta on the Yarra, Henley continues to provide a unique racing experience in one of Melbourne's most iconic sporting precincts. Its central location offers excellent accessibility for competitors, supporters, and spectators, providing a rare opportunity to enjoy high-quality rowing in the heart of the city.

The 2026 Australian Henley Regatta was held in fine conditions on Saturday 21 February. While the weather and race operations contributed to a successful event, participation levels were significantly impacted by the New South Wales State Championships being conducted on the same weekend. Data from Rowing Manager indicated a 23% reduction in seats and a 22% decline in athlete numbers compared with the previous year, presenting a considerable challenge for a regatta of Henley's size.

Analysis undertaken by Immediate Past President David Yates identified several noteworthy trends. Overall entries declined by 29% compared with 2025, with participation across several traditional categories lower than anticipated. In particular, Year 10 girls' events attracted only nine entries despite a substantial pool of eligible school crews. Club events, including B Grade and Club categories, experienced their lowest level of participation since at least 2013. Encouragingly, the two new events introduced in 2026 exceeded expectations and attracted strong interest, demonstrating the value of continually reviewing and refreshing the program.

Scheduling remains one of the major challenges facing Henley. The regatta continues to compete for entries with both the Junior and Intermediate Schoolgirls Championship Regatta in Geelong and the Ballarat Head of the Lake. These clashes significantly limit our ability to attract Year 10 female crews and school coxed fours. Unless changes can be made within the Rowing Victoria calendar, growth opportunities in these categories will remain constrained.

Despite these challenges, the regatta was successfully delivered. Following issues encountered in 2025, Rowing Victoria assumed responsibility for timing services, while Rowing Victoria umpires undertook the marshalling and starting duties for the time trials. These changes contributed to the efficient operation of the event and were well received.

Melbourne Amateur Regatta Association Inc.

(Australian Henley)

Reduced participation also impacted spectator numbers along the riverbank. While this created a quieter atmosphere than in previous years, there was still strong engagement from those in attendance. The Committee's annual subscribers' luncheon, held on the Henley Landing, once again proved to be a highlight of the day. Support from VOWA President Andy Guerin and Murray Keeble, who coordinated a large group from Mercantile Rowing Club, contributed to excellent attendance in the marquee. Feedback from guests was overwhelmingly positive, with many expressing their intention to return in 2027.

The regatta village also remained a popular feature, with food vendors, coffee outlets and The Regatta Shop attracting steady patronage throughout the day. The coffee vendors, in particular, continue to be a favourite among competitors and spectators alike.

Financially, the most significant challenge remains the Parks Victoria fee associated with river usage. As Treasurer Rob Zahara outlines in his report, these costs continue to place pressure on the viability of our on-water operations. The Committee continues to seek opportunities to offset these expenses through operational efficiencies and revenue-generating activities. Volunteer staffing of the upstream river-closure buoy again helped reduce costs, highlighting the important contribution made by our volunteer workforce.

A significant transition occurred during the year with the retirement of David Yates as President in November. David joined the Committee in 2013 and served as President from 2018. During that time he provided outstanding leadership, strategic direction, and a tireless commitment to the ongoing success of the Australian Henley Regatta. On behalf of MARA, I extend my sincere thanks for his service and am delighted that he will continue to contribute as a member of the Committee.

I would also like to acknowledge the dedication of our Committee members, whose commitment ensures the continued success of the regatta. Special thanks are extended to John and Sally McKenzie for the considerable work undertaken prior to their overseas travel, and to Alan, Kata and Henry Borger for once again making the journey from Queensland to support the event.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank our volunteers, Boat Race Officials, Rowing Victoria, subscribers, sponsors and supporters. Their ongoing contribution enables us to maintain the unique character and accessibility of the Australian Henley Regatta. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Phil Wright for his efforts in coordinating our volunteer workforce.

Looking ahead, the Committee remains committed to strengthening participation, enhancing the event experience and ensuring the long-term sustainability of this historic regatta.

General Secretary: John McKenzie, +61 (0)414 655 126, email: info@australianhenley.org

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The 2027 Australian Henley Regatta will be held on Saturday 20 February 2027. We look forward to welcoming competitors, supporters, volunteers and spectators back to the banks of the Yarra for another memorable day of racing.

Leeanne Ambrose

President

Melbourne Amateur Regatta Association

David Yates

Immediate Past President

General Secretary: John McKenzie

M: +61 414 655 126

E: info@australianhenley.org

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