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SIR PETER BLAKE © *America's Cup*

Sir Peter Blake

The Early Years

America's Cup

America's Cup
1992 - 1995

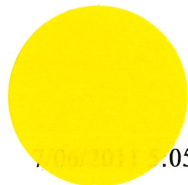
America's Cup
1999 - 2000

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Sir Peter Blake and the
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America's Cup 1992 - 1995

In yachting, as in most sports, there is lively debate over which of its various disciplines represents the absolute summit of achievement. There would probably be general agreement that the major yachting peaks include the America's Cup, the Whitbread Round the World Race - now the Volvo Ocean Race - the Jules Verne Trophy, the Vendee Globe solo round the world race, once but no longer the Admiral's Cup and the Olympic Games.

How they stack up against each other is where arguments will rage. But, for its history, prestige and general public recognition, the America's Cup always ranks at or near the top. Despite all that, Peter Blake became a somewhat reluctant devotee of the Cup. For him, bluewater racing held the most attraction. He loved the classic challenge of man against the elements, the test of seamanship and endurance and the sense of adventure that goes with major ocean passages.



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He recognised the skill, commitment and expertise that surround the America's Cup, but he disliked its claustrophobic politics and the constant battles over rules and interpretation and one-upmanship that is so much part of the Cup game.

His first hands-on experience of the America's Cup came in 1992 and did little to change his view of it. At the urging of Douglas Myers, who had a considerable investment in the New Zealand Challenge through his Steinlager sponsorship, Blake agreed to join the team in San Diego. His appointment was late in the piece, however, by which time the camp was severely divided. Blake was in an invidious position, with little real authority to change a situation where the factions were well entrenched.

To make matters worse, the campaign unraveled in a bitter and protracted war of attrition in the protest room over the use of a bowsprit on New Zealand's *NZL-20* - an obscure *cassis belli* typical of the fine-print arguments that thrive in a Cup community heavily populated by lawyers.

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— Sir Peter Blake

Ever loyal to his patrons and backers, Blake served his time and did his best. But it would have come as no surprise if he vowed 'Never Again' and - contrary to his habit of reversing frequent vows never to race around the world again - actually stuck to his resolve. Instead, like many other Cup suitors, he found himself drawn back in its quest.

After the disappointment of 1992, Sir Michael Fay and his partner David Richwhite decided three Cup attempts were enough and they bowed out. This

left a void and New Zealand was in danger of losing all the momentum and expertise gained since the first Kiwi attempt in Australia in 1986-87.

Alan Sefton, a former yachting journalist and publisher, had been closely involved with all three of the Fay Richwhite Cup attempts and was also very close to Blake through his Whitbread campaigns. As the deadline for entries in the 1995 Cup series loomed, Sefton and Blake put in a New Zealand entry, even though they had not secured sponsorship. Blake had to mortgage his house in Emsworth, England to fund the \$US75,000 entry fee. "If the entry fee had been \$5000 more, New Zealand would not have been here," Blake said in San Diego, "because I didn't have any more."

Explaining his motivation, Blake recognised that the America's Cup was a completely unique event. "In the past it has been full of mystique and dirty tricks, of political manoeuvring and espionage." But, he added, "peel away the cloak and dagger stuff and it is just another yacht race with similar needs to any other long-term campaign that must have the right people if it is to succeed."



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Blake was drawn not only to the enormity of the challenge – he once described the America's Cup as the toughest event to win – but also to the prestige that would accrue to New Zealand if a Kiwi team could win it. Convinced it was winnable, he said "I really do believe in New Zealand's yachting industry and expertise". Much of that expertise was drawn from sailors schooled in Blake's earlier campaigns, on board *Ceramco*, *Lion* and *Steinlager 2*.

His faith proved well founded. On Sunday May 14, 1995, Team New Zealand's *NZL-32* took the final gun to trounce the American defender by 5-0. America's Cup victories are usually measured in seconds. *Black Magic's* average winning margin was 2 minutes 53 seconds, emphasising the scale of the New Zealand team's superiority. "A little boatspeed can make you famous," said *NZL-32's* skipper **Russell Coutts**. His opponent, the redoubtable Paul Cayard lamented: "I have never been in a race where I felt I had so little control over the outcome ... I didn't even feel as if I was in a sailboat race."

Returning to a hero's welcome in New Zealand, Blake was showered with accolades and received a knighthood. In the 144-year history of the Cup, New Zealand became only the second country outside of the United States to win it. It was a huge achievement, but it created an even greater challenge: now New Zealand would have to defend the trophy and no country outside of the US had ever managed that before.

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Sir Peter Blake

"Having vision is not enough. Change comes through realising the vision and turning it into a reality. It is easy to espouse worthy goals, values and policies; the hard part is implementation."

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