

America's Cup

(Watters, S., 2017)

For New Zealand the **decisive victory in the 35th America's Cup in Bermuda in 2017 laid to rest the bitter memory of its dramatic 8-9 loss to Oracle Team USA in 2013.**

Then, the Kiwis blew a seemingly unassailable 8-1 lead. Led by **Olympic gold medallist Peter Burling**, the **7-1 victory** in Bermuda was not only redemption but further evidence in support of New Zealand's reputation for producing outstanding sailors and world-leading technological innovation in design and boat building. **The 26-year-old Burling became the youngest ever helmsman to successfully lift the 'Auld Mug'.**

Its first challenge in 1986-7, established Team New Zealand's reputation as fierce competitors on the water. This was enhanced by its first win in 1995 and successful defence in Auckland in 2000. Our cup story has also included legal disputes and 'defections', villains and heroes, on and off the water – all contributing to the intrigue and drama of competing for the oldest international sporting trophy.

Sailing is a popular recreational pastime for many New Zealanders. American journalist and sailor Amanda Witherell has lived in both countries and thinks their sailing cultures couldn't be further apart. Sailing 'is not a common activity in America. The wealthy own the coastline; most people couldn't get a foot in the door of a yacht club.' Many see the America's Cup as a trophy for the wealthy, with one commentator describing it as 'a pissing contest between the world's richest men'. It may be this desire to beat the elite that has aroused so much interest - Kiwis love to support an underdog.

Kiwis on the water

New Zealand sailors have forged a formidable reputation on the water, from the Olympics to ocean classics such as the One Ton Cup, various iterations of round-the-world races and the America's Cup. New Zealand prides itself on punching well above its weight when it comes to yachting, and New Zealand yachtsmen have been prominent members of nearly all the major teams in the past five America's Cup cycles.

Naming the cup

The cup is named after the schooner *America*, which won a race around the Isle of Wight in 1851 against 14 of the best boats in Britain – including the cream of the elite Royal Yacht Squadron. [Read more here](#)

In 2013 the cup defenders, Oracle Team USA, had a strong Kiwi influence from the top down. Russell Coutts, the chief executive and former skipper, was an Olympic gold medallist who won the cup for Team New Zealand in 1995 before turning his back on New Zealand sailing. Coutts was joined in Oracle's extended sailing team by seven other Kiwis.

At the business end of the 2013 competition Oracle had just one American in its 11-man raceday crew, which featured sailors from seven countries. By contrast nine of Team New Zealand's starting crew were New Zealanders, and the other two were Australians with strong

New Zealand connections.

Oracle Team USA's owner, IT tycoon Larry Ellison, believes that today's America's Cup teams resemble motor racing's Formula One teams in being more about 'brand identity and pushing technological boundaries than about national identity and a patriotic agenda'. Emirates Team New Zealand prefers to see the cup as a 'friendly competition between foreign countries'.

'Plastic Fantastic'

New Zealand's first tilt at the cup in 1986-7 was a bold statement of intent. *Australia II's* victory in 1983 had brought the cup 'Down Under' and made it accessible to Kiwi yachties. With an abundance of sailing talent and innovative boat designers such as Bruce Farr, all New Zealand lacked was the funding needed to mount a realistic campaign.

Australia II's upset victory in 1983 was due in large part to the financial muscle of businessman Alan Bond. In 1986, New Zealand found its own benefactor in

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merchant banker Michael Fay, who had benefited from the deregulation of the financial markets which had accompanied 'Rogernomics'. Nevertheless the campaign was pitched as 'David vs Goliath', with New Zealand's multi-millionaire taking on men with even deeper pockets.

Conner walks out

In 1989, in the first Holmes show to go to air, Paul Holmes conducted a live studio interview with Dennis Conner. Holmes baited Conner into walking out of the studio by 'offering' the American the opportunity to apologise for comments he had made about New Zealand's 1987 and 1988 America's Cup skippers.

The New Zealanders would compete in the challenger series to determine who would meet the Australians. The Bruce Farr-designed *KZ 7 (Kiwi Magic)*, with its 12-m hull made of glass-reinforced plastic, was a world first. Skipped by the young and somewhat brash Chris Dickson, *KZ 7* was also extremely fast. When competition began it became apparent that the Kiwi challenge was for real.

With each victory, cup fever mounted in New Zealand. Some of the opposition became increasingly suspicious of the fibreglass hull. Chris Dickson observed later that fibreglass was the preferred material here at the time. New Zealand had 'never built 12m [racing] yachts ... so ... why would you build an aluminium yacht? ... That was old technology.' Dennis Conner, the defeated skipper from 1983 who

was now sailing for the San Diego Yacht Club's Stars and Stripes syndicate, was especially outspoken, even after *KZ 7* was twice cleared by cup officials. 'Why would you want to build a fibreglass 12-metre unless you wanted to cheat?' Conner became 'Dirty Den' to many Kiwis – the American we loved to hate.

The 'Glassgate' saga introduced New Zealanders to the darker side of competing for the 'Auld Mug', with as much of the action taking place off the water as on it. For some this detracted from what was supposed to be a sporting spectacle. It appeared to confirm suspicions that the America's Cup was all about rich men acting like spoilt brats when they didn't get their way. For others, this controversy simply added to the intrigue and soap-opera quality of the competition.

Despite reaching the final of the challenger series with an incredible 37–1 win–loss record, Dickson and his crew were no match for the seasoned Conner, losing 4–1 to *Stars & Stripes*. Conner atoned for losing the cup in 1983 by defeating *Kookaburra III* to win it back.

1988: The Big Boat challenge

Michael Fay's personal crusade continued later in 1987 when he lodged a surprise challenge for the cup on behalf of Mercury Bay Boating Club. This was the first litigation over the wording of the deed of gift in the cup's 136-year history. The New York Supreme Court ruled that the challenge was in order and forced San Diego to accept it or forfeit the cup.

Fay turned once again to Bruce Farr. The result was the gigantic monohull *New Zealand (KZ 1)*, the largest single-masted yacht the rules would allow. The defenders responded by building a much faster catamaran, *Stars & Stripes (US 1)*. When the two raced each other in September 1988, New Zealand was predictably defeated by a huge margin.

Fay went back to court, claiming that the race was not the 'friendly competition between foreign countries' embodied in the deed of gift. The court agreed and awarded New Zealand the cup. But when San Diego appealed, that decision was overturned. Fay's final appeal to New York's highest court failed. Many New Zealanders felt uncomfortable about trying to win the cup in court rather than on the water.

1992: Defeat to Italy

When Michael Fay came back for one last shot in 1992, the Kiwi challenge once more found itself embroiled in controversy. *NZL 20* had established a 4–1 lead over Paul Cayard and the Italian syndicate, Il Moro di Venezia, in the challenger final when a protest over *NZL 20*'s use of a bowsprit (the pole or spar extending forward from the vessel's prow) was upheld. Team New Zealand was docked one point and forced to remove the bowsprit. The verdict dealt a serious blow to the team's morale and detracted from its boat's performance. New Zealand lost the next four races, and the series.

1995: 'The America's Cup is now New Zealand's Cup'

Two New Zealand syndicates competed in the 1995 challenger series in San Diego: Team New Zealand representing the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron, and Tag Heuer Challenge representing the Tutukaka South Pacific Yacht Club. The Tutukaka challenger, *NZL 39*, skippered by Chris Dickson, made it to the Louis Vuitton semi-finals despite operating on a shoestring budget.

Red socks campaign

For some Kiwis, 1995 conjures up memories of the red socks campaign which followed Peter Blake's revelation that he wore his lucky red socks to help Team New Zealand win. Kiwis purchased specially branded red socks to both assist the campaign financially and show their support for Black Magic.

But no vessel in San Diego that year was a match for Team New Zealand's *NZL 32 (Black Magic)*. The syndicate was headed by Peter Blake and skippered by 1984 Olympic gold medallist Russell Coutts. With a crew that included seasoned sailors like Brad Butterworth, Tom Schnackenberg, Murray Jones and Craig Monk, Team New Zealand had the crew and the boat to win the cup.

Black Magic's 5–0 thrashing of the defender, *Stars & Stripes*. Victory was all the sweeter because 'Mr America's Cup' – Dennis Conner – was at the helm of the US boat. As *NZL 32* approached the finish line in race five, television commentator Peter Montgomery declared that 'the America's Cup is now New Zealand's cup!'

The American budget dwarfed that of the New Zealand team. Victory was seen as a triumph for technical ingenuity and seamanship over financial clout. The team was welcomed home with ticker-tape parades and commentators described winning the cup as achieving 'the Everest of sailing'.

Defending the Auld Mug

Auckland's Viaduct Basin became 'America's Cup central' for the defence of the cup in 2000. This time an Italian syndicate, *Luna Rossa*, emerged from the Louis Vuitton series to challenge New Zealand. The Kiwis carried on from where they had left off in 1995. Their resounding 5–0 victory prompted Peter Montgomery to declare that the 'America's Cup is still New Zealand's cup.'

By the time of their second defence in 2003, Team New Zealand had had a significant change of personnel. Peter Blake had stood down as syndicate head after the victory in 2000, only to be murdered while on an environmental voyage up the Amazon River in December 2001. Many of the afterguard from New Zealand's previous campaigns – most notably skipper Russell Coutts and tactician Brad Butterworth – had joined the Swiss-based challenger, *Alinghi*.

Some New Zealanders reacted badly to their decision to jump ship, questioning their loyalty as New Zealanders. Resentment deepened when *Alinghi* sailed away with the cup against an unreliable *NZL 82*.

2007 and 2010: Valencia

In 2007, the rebranded Emirates Team New Zealand won the Louis Vuitton Cup with a 5–0 whitewash of the Italian boat *Luna Rossa*. The experienced Grant Dalton headed the syndicate, with Dean Barker as skipper. New Zealand lost the cup challenge 2–5 to *Alinghi* (which had Butterworth at the helm).

Following the 2007 race, the America's Cup once more sailed into murky waters. Larry Ellison, the owner of the Oracle team which had been heavily defeated in the Louis Vuitton semi-finals, forced the Alinghi syndicate and the Société Nautique de Genève to accept a deed-of-gift challenge (repeating Fay's 1988 tactics). The fifth-wealthiest man in the world took on fellow billionaire Ernesto Bertarelli in the 'ultimate pissing contest', and won.

For the 2010 race Bertarelli built a carbon-fibre catamaran with a mast 203 feet tall. Ellison topped that with a carbon-fibre trimaran with a hard wing 223 feet high – so tall that it couldn't sail under San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. Both vessels had sails so enormous that motorised winches were needed to adjust them. BMW Oracle Racing defeated Alinghi 2–0 in the best-of-three series, then decided that the next America's Cup competition in 2013 would be sailed in catamarans in the hope of making the sport more attractive on television.

2013: San Francisco – 'billionaire death race'

The AC72 (America's Cup 72 class) boats chosen for 2013 were revolutionary in design and extremely expensive. Foils lifted the hulls out of the water, enabling the vessels to reach speeds close to 50 knots (92.6 km/hr). Following several

high-profile incidents, some commentators asked whether sailors' safety had been compromised to make the event more spectacular. Respected yachting writer Adam Fisher pondered whether the new breed of boat might effectively 'sink the America's Cup.'

Safety fears were realised in May 2013 when the AC72 of Swedish challenger Artemis Racing 'pitchpoled' – flipped end over end – and broke apart. Crew member Andrew 'Bart' Simpson, a British Olympic gold-medallist, was killed. When Oracle Team USA's new boat had capsized seven months earlier, the strong current had swept '\$8 million to \$10 million worth of AC 72 out the Golden Gate'. Paul Cayard, the CEO and tactician of Artemis Racing, said that it would be a 'miracle' if there were no more such disasters. The harder crews pushed the catamarans, the more likely they were to tip over. Such concerns prompted the headline: 'Billionaire death race: inside America's Cup and the world's most dangerous sailboat'.

After *Aotearoa* easily won a lack-lustre challenger series, Cayard's prediction almost came true in race eight of the contest for the cup. New Zealand fans had their hearts in their mouths as a lack of hydraulic power at a crucial moment during a turn meant that the large wingsail didn't move in time. As the starboard hull rose out of the water, *Aotearoa* came within one degree of capsizing. The New Zealand challenge – seemingly on track for victory – could have ended then and there. Phlegmatic skipper Dean Barker conceded that the incident was 'close to being as nasty as it could be'.

The high-speed racing and quickfire format of the tele-friendly San Francisco series meant that Larry Ellison had certainly got his wish, with even sceptics and non-sailors conceding that many of the races were thrilling to watch.

Helped by a two-point penalty imposed on the defenders before the series began, New Zealand swept to a commanding 8-1 lead. Crowds gathered around the country at a variety of public venues to watch the racing, hoping for a repeat of the glory days of 1995. These fans became increasingly nervous as the Kiwi challenge was literally becalmed. Having established a match-winning lead in race 13, Team New Zealand was denied final victory when the race was abandoned by the race committee as it had exceeded the 40-minute time limit. Some local commentators and supporters declared the rules to be a farce. Others began to wonder if this was a sign that the Kiwis just weren't meant to win what turned into the longest-ever America's Cup series.

This proved to be the case as the defenders peeled off eight straight victories to win 9-8 after the most remarkable of comebacks. The American boat seemed to get faster and faster as the racing progressed, and towards the end there was a sense that there was nothing Team New Zealand could do to match their opponents.

Shattered New Zealand fans took little comfort in the knowledge that Kiwi ingenuity and skill was at the forefront of the design and construction of both boats.

The business of sailing

As well as being a popular recreational pastime for many New Zealanders, sailing is big business for boatbuilders and designers. The export of boats, marine technology and equipment was worth \$850 million to the economy in 2008. The Labour government saw potential economic benefit for the country in winning and therefore hosting a defence of the America's Cup, and committed \$36 million to the 2013 campaign. Opposition politicians questioned the economic case for taxpayer support.

Only the hulls of America's Cup boats must be manufactured in the nation of the challenging yacht club. The major components and fit-outs of both teams' vessels for the 2013 series were built in New Zealand. The Warkworth boatbuilding facility of Oracle Team USA employed an average of 80 people, most of them Kiwis. The 2013 America's Cup campaign contributed around \$300 million to the local marine industry.

The sophistication of the vessels meant that the 2013 syndicates required at least US\$100 million to be competitive. These costs clearly impacted on the competition. Organisers anticipated at least a 14-team battle for the Louis Vuitton challenger series; only three crews turned up.

Bermuda, 2017

The next Louis Vuitton challenger series, at Hamilton, Bermuda in 2017, featured five challengers, including Emirates Team New Zealand – and Oracle Team USA,

which was allowed to compete in the qualifying rounds after further rule changes. While the wingsails were reduced from San Francisco's 72 feet to 50 feet for this regatta, these smaller catamarans were capable of continuous foiling and impressive speeds in most wind conditions. Team New Zealand maintained its reputation for innovation by replacing the grinders who traditionally adjusted sails and the boom using hand-operated winches with four 'cyclors' riding stationary bicycles. The two other crew members were helmsman Peter Burling and skipper-trimmer Glenn Ashby.

Team New Zealand defeated Swedish team Artemis in the challenger final to set up a rematch with Oracle for the Auld Mug. Team New Zealand won all four races on the first weekend of America's Cup racing to lead the first-to-seven series 3–nil. (Team NZ started on minus one because of Oracle's victory in the challenger qualifying round.) In the second weekend of racing New Zealand extended its lead to 4-0 before Oracle got on the board. This sparked murmurings about a possible Oracle comeback, with memories of San Francisco still raw for many Kiwi fans. In the end these fears were emphatically extinguished as Team New Zealand won the next three races to claim a 7–1 victory.

Further information

This web feature was written by Steve Watters and produced by the NZHistory team.

Links

- America's Cup (Te Ara)
- America's Cup (Wikipedia)
- Billionaire death race: inside America's Cup and the world's most dangerous sailboat (Casey Newton, *The Verge*)
- The boat that could sink the America's Cup (Adam Fisher, *Wired*)
- The trickle-down technology of the America's Cup (Alden Bentley, *gCaptain*)

Books and articles

- Harold Kidd, Robin Elliott and David Pardon, *Southern breeze: a history of yachting in New Zealand*, Auckland, Viking, 1999
- James Robinson, 'That sinking feeling', *Metro*, September 2013

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