

Yachting

Best of luck — 200 000 times!

FREMANTLE (Australia) — More than 200 000 goodwill messages flooded into Fremantle yesterday as New Zealand battled to end Stars and Stripes' stranglehold on the America's Cup challenge final.

About 5 000 people waving banners and New Zealand flags lined the waterfront cheering the crew as they left the harbour before the race and most returned to celebrate a 38-second triumph over the San Diego yacht.

A group of Maori dancers in warpaint, clad in skirts of flax and wielding traditional wooden weapons performed the "haka" war dance to uplift the crew and strike fear into their opponents.

New Zealand is the best-supported team in Fremantle when it is winning, but the facsimile machines at the syndicate headquarters here have been inundated with messages from New Zealand since the fibreglass yacht fell two races behind the Americans in the 1-2-of-seven series on Wednesday.

Hundreds of New Zealanders wearing T-shirts bearing the fierce image of the Maori sea-god Tangaroa, a wide-eyed creature with a protruding tongue, stood cheering the crew.

The formidable support meant a lot to skipper Chris Dickson. "The people on the waterfront cheering us on were worth about a 10th of a knot."

The win opened up the series and gave "plastic fantastic" followers a new-found belief that the Kiwis can win yachting's most cherished prize at the first attempt.

Two days ago, New Zealand's run of 28 successive wins had been shattered and the mood was gloomy. Stars and Stripes had taken a commanding lead and the supporters' shop was selling Kiwi memorabilia at reduced prices. — Reuters.