

# Of ships and sails and dedication

**D**ENNIS CONNER, the man whose defeat opened the gates of the America's Cup, is ready to win it back from Australia with his feared Stars and Stripes.

He leans his big, ponderous frame backwards in the chair behind his desk and inserts several eye-drops. In a face ravaged by tens of thousands of hours' exposure to sun, wind and salt, the eyes are permanently bloodshot.

"They hurt continuously," he says. He wears a welding visor for protection, his skin is cracked and crumbling in spite of daily ointments when out on the water, and he worries about the possibility of skin cancer.

Here is a man who gives his body and soul to his hobby. Some would call it his obsession. He will be giving even more now in the attempt to take the cup back home — to California, not Manhattan.

He is relentless, preoccupied and brilliant; sensitive, yet mostly undemonstrative. Somehow his interior decorating business and his family have coped.

"You can rationalise everything," he says laconically, "but the America's Cup is not really the right thing to do if you want to be father of the year."

With a pleasure addict's bravado, he says he has not doubted the wisdom of his sailing investment for one day of the past 27 years.

He has, too, a poor opinion of the media — as Daley Thompson (British Olympic decathlon champion) does — for not understanding his sport in detail. Though, in contrast to Thompson, he concedes he has a responsibility to try and educate them.

"It's a shame they don't work as hard as I do," he says meaningfully, casting his beady, bloodshot gaze upon the correspondent of this newspaper which somehow managed, by inadvertent midnight editorial malfunction, to report his demise as skipper of America II at the end of the third round. I make our apologies with real sincerity.

One of my enduring memories will be that final, heartbroken Press conference he gave after defeat in Newport, deserted by the officials of the haughty New York Yacht Club, left to carry the global flack on his own. He had just about managed to keep back the tears then. "It wasn't fun," he says. "But that's their style. I was carrying the flag. There's no purpose in flinging mud their way. The fact now is that I'm still here racing, and they're back in New York."

## David Miller

Losing in 1983 was an emotional event, he admits, but it did not get in the way of his competing again. He could either feel sorry for himself, or win it back.

"I like sporting events and I had no remorse. I had just had a slower boat." The voice carries an undercurrent of menace for those still in his way this time. Those who may think he again has a slower boat.



Yet respect for Iain Murray (skipper of Kookaburra III) is probably stronger than within any other camp. One of his initiatives after the experience of Newport was to enlist outside expertise.

Derek Clarke, the computer analyst from Victory 83, and Peter Hollis, from the Bond syndicate, were hired. Lawry Smith, the able but temperamentally difficult skipper of Victory 83, was engaged solely to help tune the three boats.

"Iain is the quietest of all helms-

men I have ever sailed with," Clarke says, "but he has tremendous inner strength — a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Almost all the time he is contained, yet no other skipper has the capacity to apply himself to every aspect of the campaign and to have the graft he does."

"We have a few tricks up our sleeve, some refining of keel work," Murray says. "We are still learning to live with the boat, discovering what we can get out of it."

It's one thing to have speed, but racing is another matter."

Yet Warren Jones, from the beaten Australia IV camp, maybe has the truest view of all.

"The challengers don't have any edge on the defenders," he says. "They think they know what's going on. They don't. And we don't either."

After three-and-a-half months of racing, the America's Cup is now moving towards its climax. □ — *The Times.*