

# There's no way they can keep down Big Bad Dennis

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**L**ike it or not, Big Bad Dennis Conner is back in the America's Cup finals. The skipper who once angered an entire nation, and who is simultaneously praised and panned even in his hometown, has pulled off another miracle comeback and is attempting to win the America's Cup for the fifth time in 21 years.

Conner defends the trophy for the second time in his home waters beginning yesterday against Team New Zealand. It's his unprecedented seventh America's Cup campaign, and his sixth appearance in the finals.

"One of the few things about being old is you know things," the 52-year-old Conner says. "Having won this thing four times and lost it once, I can tell you it's a lot better to win than lose."

Conner is the only man to lose the Cup and then win it back. Along the way, he's never been far from contro-

versy. Conner's two previous encounters with the Kiwis helped define that image.

In 1987, he beat Kiwi Magic en route to winning back the Cup he lost to Australia II in 1983. He also infuriated New Zealanders by implying that the Kiwi sailors might be cheating because they had built a 12-metre yacht out of fibreglass. Thus his nickname, Big Bad Dennis.

A year later, he and the San Diego Yacht Club were embroiled in one of the most bizarre episodes in America's Cup history. New Zealand's Michael Fay issued a surprise challenge, which Conner turned back by sailing his catamaran to two easy victories over Fay's 40-metre boat.

At the Press conference after the second race, Conner called New Zealand boat designer Bruce Farr a "loser".

"Conner's an interesting character," said Gary Jobson, a former America's Cup sailor

who's now an ESPN analyst. "People either love him or they hate him, and there's no middle ground. People certainly respect his sailing ability and those close to him are loyal.

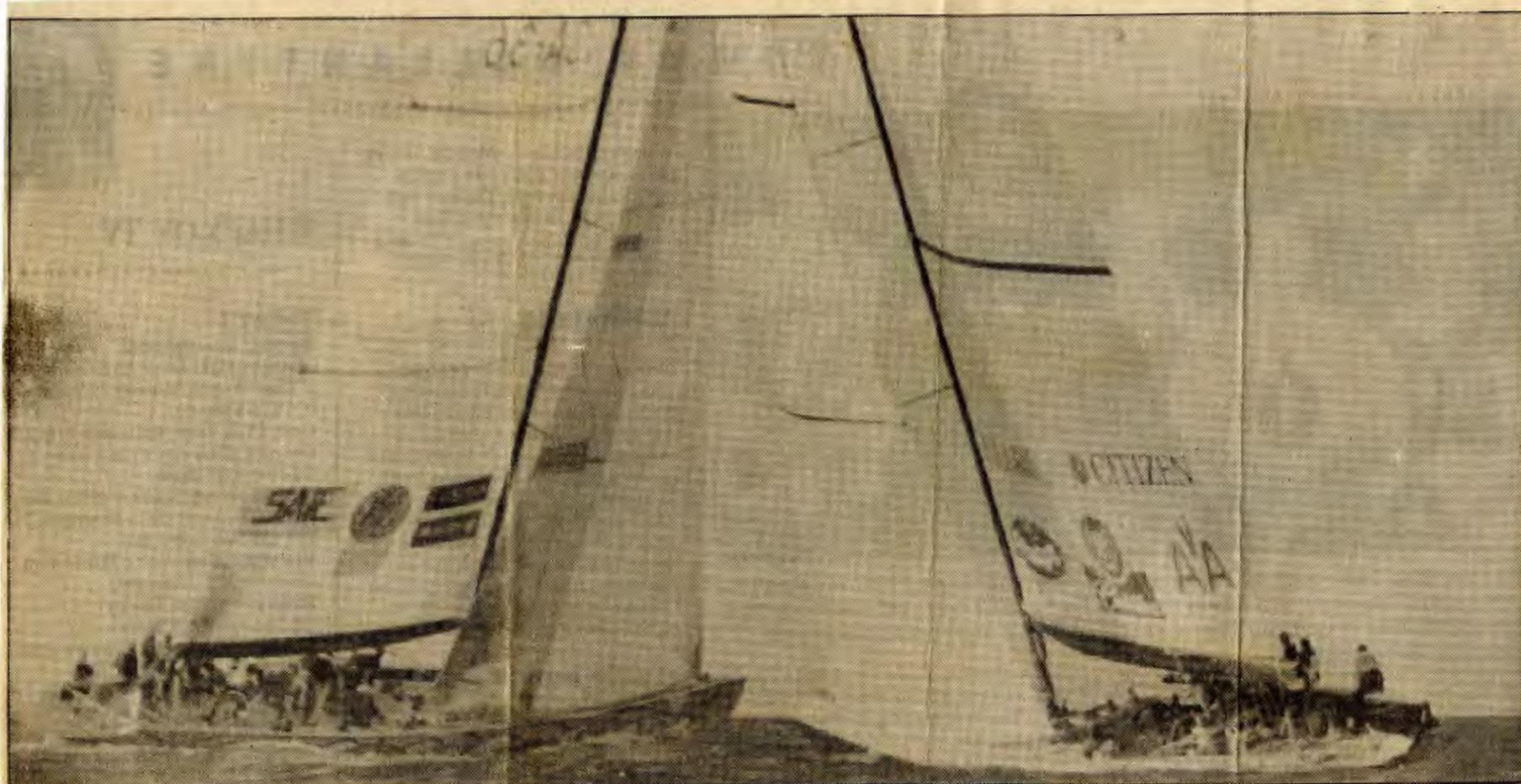
"He's a very difficult man to get to know," Jobson added. "He's guarded and stays inward with his little circle."

The love-hate relationship was on display this week when Conner was honoured at a rally attended by Mayor Susan Golding.

On the airwaves, radio talk show host Stacy Taylor polled listeners on who was a bigger Cup villain, Conner or Bill Koch, who stirred his own controversy by adding a man to his previously all-women's team.

Conner won.

"They think he's the Ty Cobb of yacht racing, because he appears to be totally lacking in social skills or social grace," Taylor said. — Sapa-AP



**CROSS PURPOSES:** Dennis Conner's Stars and Stripes, right, and Young America cross tacks during the America's Cup defender series off San Diego. Young America won this race but Conner had the last laugh, going on to win the series and a place in the finals against Team New Zealand.