

AMERICA'S CUP HAS UGLY RECORD

by
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IT'S an ugly and ornate piece of Victorian silverware, which cost the Royal Yacht Squadron only 100 guineas (£105) to buy in 1851.

Since then, more money has been spent on trying to win it than any other trophy in history...

Indeed, the next America's Cup will cost the competing syndicates somewhere in the region of R900m in research alone.

And winning yachting's premier trophy has become the world's most ruthless and bad-tempered sporting challenge.

But the enormous sums of money involved make up only part of the legend that has grown up around the trophy.

Competition for the America's Cup has almost

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always entailed arguments over the rules, accusations of foul play and sharp practice, even open allegations of cheating.

Dubious standards of sportsmanship, though they have done little to enhance the prestige of the sport, have placed the America's Cup in a unique position.

In 1970, an argument between the United States and the Australian challenger over the removal of a lavatory door from the American boat Intrepid was a case in point.

So heated did the arguments become, that the Australian Government even began to talk of breaking off diplomatic relations with Washington — and of withdrawing its troops in Vietnam!

And today, the tradition of acrimony is being maintained.

So much so that the outcome of the latest race has been decided, not on the water, but in the courts.

Last year, the San Diego Yacht Club of California defended the Cup against a challenge by Michael Fay, of New Zealand.

A Supreme Court judge in New York had already been called in to rule that Mr Fay's monster boat — the biggest and fastest that

could be built within the regulations — did conform to the rules.

San Diego replied by competing with a twin-hull catamaran, which seemed to flout those rules — and which was twice as fast as Fay's boat.

The result was what yachting purists regarded as a gross mismatch, won with ease by the American boat.



But at the end of March, the judge ruled that boat had been ineligible, and that the Cup was New Zealand's.

Anyone still in any doubt about the hold the Cup has on the public imagination only had to watch the reaction of this ruling in New Zealand itself.

The Prime Minister voiced his satisfaction, and said the integrity of the competition had been restored.

Shares in Michael Fay's merchant bank rose by 14%!

This win-at-all-costs attitude would certainly have been alien to the gentleman who inaugurated the America's Cup in 1851.

The Royal Yacht Squadron in England had heard about a new schooner being built in New York, and they invited its owner to bring it over.

The new schooner, America, routed all the opposition in a race round the Isle of Wight, and returned to the New World with the cup that has borne her name ever since.

In 1857, the schooner's owners gave the cup to the New York Yacht Club with a deed of gift, setting out the rules governing future competitions.

It is this deed which has been the subject of bitter dissent ever since.

But the dark talk of espionage, intrigue and double-dealing reached its peak in 1983 when, after 132 years, the longest sporting run in history finally came to an end.

The cup was wrested from New York by the Australians, amid the usual accusations of cheating and double-dealing.

There was rejoicing throughout Australia, but their hold on the trophy was short-lived, as the Americans won the trophy back through the San Diego Yacht Club at the first attempt.

Sailing purists doubtless regard the quarrelling as an irritating irrelevance which has disfigured the prestige of a great sporting event.

Yet without it, the America's Cup would have remained largely an unknown event, the preserve of a few very rich men and devoted yachtsmen.

The years of notoriety have made it a sporting legend...



● Australia II, which won the America's Cup in 1983 ... Her top-secret keel was concealed from prying eyes.



● White Crusader, Britain's entry in the 1986-87 America's Cup series, leans into the wind off Fremantle, Western Australia.

White Crusader took the Fleet Race cup in the preliminaries.