

SA sailors in new hi-tech yacht scoop

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PORTSMOUTH — The South African sailing team scored a coup at the Admiral's Cup here yesterday by securing a new hi-tech German yacht to boost their challenge in one of the world's most famous off-shore sailing contests.

But they became embroiled in a row in the process.

The move gives the team a three-boat arsenal good enough to win the regatta on their return after a 20-year absence. However, competitors have charged that "rules were bent" to accommodate South Africa, who are the talk of the regatta.

In a contentious move, race organisers allowed the South African team to substitute the hi-tech German flyer Omen yesterday — a day before racing is due to start — for the weak link in their team, the South African-designed and built Sansui Express.

This was protested by the US, Italy, Hong Kong and Ireland, but the jury decided in South Africa's favour.

South Africa told the jury their boat had been damaged and was unsafe.

Prior to the decision, the team was despondent at the realisation that Sansui Express — the most hi-tech yacht ever built in South Africa — was off pace, with this year's creations perceived to be up to one knot faster upwind.

Omen's owner, German fashion tycoon Thomas Friese, yesterday reached an agreement with South African team captain Dave Abromowitz following two days of frantic negotiations. He has handed the six-week-old ILC-40 Omen, designed by the world's leading yacht racing designer Bruce Farr of New Zealand, over to South Africa.

Defending champions Germany were furious that the race jury had unanimously sanctioned the replacement.

Eight nations — South Africa, Hong Kong, Britain, Scandinavia, Ireland, Germany, the US and Italy — will start the battle at sea today to win a 160-year-old trophy.