



Rich man's playground or a true test of sailing?

Alan Robinson

THE millions of dollars that have been poured into it could have watered, fed and clothed the starving Ethiopians. Instead they are fuelling the sail of the century.

It is the America's Cup extravaganza that is holding the yachting world spellbound — and even driving the test cricket off the front pages of the West Australian newspapers.

Australia holds it, America is yearning to get it back, Britain is putting up a good show and New Zealand is the hot favourite to take possession when it is all over.

The price of success can be sensational, the price of failure painful in terms of both pride and pocket.

The New York Yacht Club which had to have the trophy prised loose from its premises after Alan Bond's Australia II had the event in 1983, is believed to have spent nearly R40 million and two years of sweat and scientific study to build a better boat.

The trophy was theirs for 132 years, but it looks like staying out of reach now. In Friday's racing, John Kollus's America II in the colours of the NYYC, was outsmarted by second-placed French Kiss and squeezed out to fifth among the challenging boats.

Observers say that has virtually blown Kollus's chances because only the top four go on to the semi-finals. But there are seven more races still to go.

And all is certainly not yet lost for the United States, with the "budget" vessel Heart of America, which this week saw off both America II and USA, putting in a storming challenge.

And Dennis Conner, the man who lost the America's Cup to Bond, remains in contention in third place in his Stars and Stripes. His bid is also estimated to be costing around R40 million.

In fourth place is the British hope White Crusader, skippered by Harold Cudmore, who has been given a "mere" R16 million to spend in Freemantle.

But nobody, simply nobody, looks like catching up with New Zealand, which has won 26 of 27 races, the last 17 of them in succession.



New Zealand's KZ-7 looks set to win.

The Americans have made no secret of their resentment — or is it jealousy. They have protested about the Kiwi boat's design and construction and they will tell anyone who wants to listen how much they detest skipper Chris Dickson.

Certainly, the New Zealander comes across as supremely confident if not insufferably arrogant, but he has a superbly disciplined crew, a very fast boat, great seamanship and an infuriating habit of winning.

Perhaps what riles the free-spending Americans even more is Dickson's habit of crossing the line with one finger raised to his trailing rivals.

Alan Bond, who is certainly not guaranteed to win the defenders' section contested by Australian yachts, feels the America's Cup is getting out of hand.

It is rather like a Presidential election in the States, he says, where the winner is generally the one with the most money to spend.

He freely admits to spending R32 million to win the chance of retaining the trophy, but that is nearly R10 million less than his great rival, Perth businessman Kevin Parfy, head of the Kookaburra Syndicate. Kookaburra III is currently in the lead in the defending section.

Says a disgruntled Bond: "I have no doubt at all that the country which wins it here will have to spend between R125 million and R140 million to keep it. This whole game is now beyond the reach of any one individual."

Bond has many supporters when he says there should be a radical change of format, with all the contesting yachts of the same design.

That, he says, will make the America's Cup a true test of sailing skill rather than a rich man's playground.