

Yachting teams play cat and mouse

The syndicate which has become a new contender to represent Australia in defence of yachting's greatest prize, the America's Cup, has created as much interest with its secrecy as its performance.

The two yachts of the Taskforce '87 syndicate, backed by Perth supermarket tycoon Kevin Parry, have been shadowing the fleet of 12-metre yachts training here for Australia's 1987 defence of the America's Cup and creating a controversy by going to previously unplumbed depths of secrecy.

The elaborate precautions have extended to having screens sunk into the seabed around its yacht pen to deter spies.

Earlier this month, the yachts, Kookaburra I and II, were at the centre of a storm when they were withdrawn from the 12-metre World Championship following a dispute between the team and the organisers over revealing the yachts' measurements.

While the other 12-metre syndicates opted to compete in what they saw as a crucial prelude to the America's Cup battle, the Kookaburras sailed their own match-racing duels nearby.

But the team do not appear to have suffered from the withdrawal. Kookaburra II last week trounced one of the fastest yachts in the 12-metre championships, French Kiss, to set off a renewed wave of suspicion in the choppy seas of Australia's yachting fraternity.

From Peter Bale in Fremantle

"It gave some indication of why we've nicknamed her rocketship," said Terry Newby, the syndicate's taskforce operations manager.

Project director Ian Murray added that he believed the syndicate's secrecy had paid off. "I think it's to our advantage," he said. "The opposition are obviously not sure what we're all about."

Next to the 1983 America's Cup-winning syndicate of Alan Bond, whose Australia III won the coveted trophy, Taskforce '87 is seen as the strongest candidate for the Australian Cup defence — and Bond's chief threat.

Like the foreign syndicates who will race in an elimination series later this year to select a yacht to challenge Australia for the cup, the defending syndicates also have to compete for the right to take part in the series.

Many observers believe the polished Bond syndicate remains the best bet, but Parry's \$11.3 million (R22.6 million) team is welcomed by West Australian business people as a strong alternative should the Bond syndicate fail to live up to expectations.

Murray, who is Australian yachtsman of the year, said it was essential Australia had at least two strong potential defenders of the trophy. "I think it's very important to Western Australia which has invested a huge amount of money in facilities," he said.

"As an Australian, I wouldn't like to see it go. It would mean that we had failed in what we had set out to do and that's something that's very hard to accept."

Murray's team has raced and beaten the Bond syndicate yachts after months of bitter public argument between the teams over a series of spying charges and Murray believes the competition has also been good for the Bond team.

"It's only very recently that we've been seen as a force to be reckoned with and its spurred them on to getting back on track and that's a terrific thing for Australia," he said.

While involved in what has become a multi-million dollar industry, Murray still sees sportsmanship and national pride as central to the cup challenge.

"It probably doesn't look like sport," he said. "It's big business — which it has to be to run on the scale it's running on. But when we get out on the water, it's sport."

Murray, like most other syndicate chiefs, doubts the 1987 America's Cup challenge will see the kind of breakthrough enjoyed by Bond with his radical winged keel in 1983.

"The match races are going to become bloodbaths. To win those races in equal boats, they are going to be a hard fight all the way," he said. — Sapa-RNS