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2007

America's Cup history

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The America's Cup trophy has a longer history than the actual event itself. The Cup was built in 1848 by Royal Jeweller Robert Garrard of London and initially called the 100 Guinea Cup. It was then purchased by the first Marquess of Anglesey who presented it to the Royal Yacht Squadron as a racing trophy.

Prompted by public demand in 1851, a syndicate of wealthy Americans travelled across the Atlantic to race against a British fleet around the Isle of Wight for the Cup. The race, if you could call it that, was won by a huge margin by the United States contingent. They were so far ahead that when the Queen asked who came second the only appropriate reply was "Madam, there is no second."

The trophy was then renamed the America's Cup and a deed of gift was drawn up defining the regatta as "perpetually a challenge cup for friendly competition between foreign countries." There were only four rules to begin with, challengers must give six weeks notice to race and must advise the defender of their rig specifications, matches were to be held between official yacht clubs not individuals and should the two not agree on conditions of the course the defending club's course is to be sailed.

The America's Cup regatta has come a long way since that fateful day in 1851 and nowadays there are a lot more rules and regulations, and it takes a lot more to win the Cup than simply out-sailing the competition.

The Cup resided in the New York Yacht Club (NYYC) for the next 132 years, although due to the American Civil War yachting and the regatta was put on the back burner for several years. But from 1870 onwards numerous American crews successfully defended the Cup 24 times from various British, Canadian and Australian challenges.

As the years went by problems with the initial deed of gift became apparent, such as not specifying how many races constituted a series and whether the challenger should have to race a whole fleet or just one defending yacht as was the case for James Ashbury in 1870, or even which way marks were to be rounded. In all cases any confusion resulted



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in the United States as defenders having the deciding vote and keeping the Cup.

More rules were added to the deed in 1882 - that all challenging yachts must arrive under their own sail, all races were to be held on salt water and no losing yacht may re-challenge within two years - and more again in 1887 - increasing the time between challengers from six to 10 months, the course was to be an ocean race and challengers had to give notice as to their precise yacht dimensions.

By the early 20th century the boats were becoming sleeker, faster and ultimately more fragile, so wind restrictions were introduced to races. Although the British were catching up in terms of boat development, with Shamrock III in 1903 being the first British entry to be steered by a wheel instead of a tiller, they were still lagging behind in terms of ability and professionalism.

War again disrupted the America's Cup in the early 1900's causing a 17-year break between Cup regattas. When racing resumed in 1920 it looked as if the British had made some ground, winning the first two races, but the USA syndicate took the final three and once again kept the Cup.

Up until this point the regatta had been raced in a number of varying sized schooners, but in 1930 the NYYC agreed to race in the universal J-Class, which stood until the second outbreak of war in 1939 when the majority of the J-Class yachts were destroyed.

In 1970 more than one challenger approached the NYYC for the first time in America's Cup history. Initially there were four but Britain and Greece dropped out before racing began, leaving Australia and France to battle it out in the qualifying series. Australia won and went on to face the USA, and although the Australian boat Gretel II was by all accounts faster the tactical ability of the Americans outclassed the Aussies and they were defeated.

By the 1980's campaigns were becoming increasingly ruthless and racing getting closer. The 1983 regatta was a milestone in America's Cup history for two reasons. Firstly, seven yacht clubs from five different countries presented challenges for the America's Cup - the most challengers to enter the regatta so far. And so a decision was made to devise a series to select the official challenger to race against the USA defender. Louis Vuitton took this opportunity to officially link themselves to the event and thus, the Louis Vuitton Challenger Series and Cup were born.

Secondly Alan Bond and his wing-keeled yacht Australia II defeated Britain, France, Italy and Canada in the Louis Vuitton Challenger Series, and then went on to defeat Dennis Conner and his crew onboard Liberty in the America's Cup. For the first time in its life the Cup boarded a plane and travelled down to the Southern Hemisphere.

The close Western Australia location in 1987 provided the perfect opportunity for New Zealand to enter the America's Cup arena. Michael Fay and his glass fibre hulled boat KZ7 took part in the Louis Vuitton series but were defeated by a very prepared Dennis Connor and his four-boat campaign, who then went on to re-claim the Cup. However, this time it was the San Diego Yacht Club's trophy cabinet that became its new home.

One year later the Cup was challenged again and the events of the 1988 regatta would chance the America's Cup forever. New Zealander Michael Fay proposed a challenge to Dennis Connor - one high-tech super yacht each. New Zealand Challenge were very proud of their huge glass fibre yacht requiring more than 40 crew, but the Americans turned up with their 60 foot catamaran which was no contest and won rather easily. A very ugly and costly court battle ensued which New Zealand won and was awarded the Cup in writing for a brief period until the Americans appealed and took the trophy back.

A four year breathing/cooling down period was needed after the last shambles and the 1992 campaign went ahead a lot more smoothly after the introduction of the 75-foot yacht as the International America's Cup Class (IACC). The Italians came forward with a fleet of five boats, skippered by Paul Cayard and sailed successfully against New Zealand, Japan, Sweden, France, Spain and Australia in the Louis Vuitton Cup. They then came up against Bill Koch and his American crew who once again proved unbeatable in the America's Cup.

By 1995 the Louis Vuitton series had billowed to seven challengers - two from Australia, two from Japan, and one each from Spain, France and of course New Zealand. Team New Zealand had a relatively modest budget compared to the other challengers but the sheer talent and camaraderie within the team saw the Kiwis blitz the challenger field and then continue that good form to take the America's Cup from the USA, defeating Dennis Connor's crew in Young America 5-0.

The impact of New Zealand defending the America's Cup had a bigger impact than anyone could have ever imagined. Under the watchful eye of Sir Peter Blake the waterfront was transformed to a modern viewing platform filled with trendy restaurants and bars and plenty of berthing space for big super yachts from around the world. The actual Louis Vuitton regatta held the most challengers in Cup history with 11 syndicates vying to take the trophy and for once it was not an American crew sailing for the America's Cup. It took all nine Louis Vuitton matches for Prada's Luna Rossa to claim victory, but their elation was short lived as they were whitewashed by Russell Coutt's Team New Zealand 5-0 in the actual America's Cup series.

In 2003 Coutts had jumped ship to Swiss challenger Alinghi and he sailed into history as he led them to victory over Team New Zealand 5-0. It meant he had won every one of the last 14 America's Cup races he had competed in as skipper, the most by any America's Cup skipper.

The victory by Alinghi means the America's Cup is being held in Europe for the first time in 150 years with Spain's Valenica winning the race to host the 2007 event.

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