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Wake up sailors! We are going to see a unique, and most likely, one-time sailing event that I think will be an unbelievable spectacle. So far, the blowout races, breakdowns, one-boat contests, and weather delays have marred the America's Cup. But we should all put that in the past. Beginning Saturday, September 7 this battle is going to be emotional, hard-fought, fast and exhausting. Can the tiny nation of New Zealand reclaim the America's Cup, or will business titan Larry Ellison hold on to the Cup in his home waters?

As always with the America's Cup, the stakes are high. The winner chooses the next venue, boats, format and date. The actual Deed of Gift was envisioned to be a challenge-driven event, however the defender ends up making the rules. You can be sure both New Zealand and the USA have future challengers in their hip pocket that will be pulled out just after their boat crosses the finish line when, and if, they win. The future look of the 35th Defense is certainly an open question. But, right now, we will see a lot of sailing before anyone can talk about the future.

I have been in a good position to watch both the defenders and challengers this past month, aboard the race committee boat Regardless. On the water, I also used the AC LiveLine graphics and television pictures to help me with my part of the NBC commentary team, along with Todd Harris and Ken Read, who were back on shore. There were a lot of interesting things to see on the water. These included subtle differences in boat handling, speed and maneuvers. I also paid attention to pre-race warm up routines. Proper tune up is important in sailing, just like every sport.

Like everyone else here in San Francisco, I am wondering who will win the match? The truth is, no one has any real clue, and that will make this regatta so much fun to watch. I am sure both boats will get their share of wins. It's easy: just get a better start, sail faster, cover when ahead, and don't make any mistakes. Nothing to it, right? No, of course not. This will be a hard event to win. There is no doubt both teams are hungry for victory.

Emirates Team New Zealand is a well-prepared team. They have more time on the water than the other three teams here. New Zealand is a joy to watch. The crew is a well-choreographed unit on nearly every maneuver, except during Race One of the Louis Vuitton Cup final, when NZL nose-dived while rounding the windward mark. Two of their crew were washed over the side. It was a scary moment. New Zealand had a hydraulic failure in Race Two, and was unable to finish. Since then the Kiwis have been flawless.

New Zealand skipper Dean Barker will have to sail the series of his life to win. Around the waterfront he seems calm and ready. On the racecourse he faces Jimmy Spithill from ORACLE TEAM USA. Spithill is a ruthless competitor and fearless helmsman. He will push his boat and crew to the limit around the racecourse. Historically, Spithill has finished ahead of Barker more often than not. The battle during the two-minute pre-start sequence will be epic. Both helmsmen will be well coached on each other's tactical moves. Both crews will have to flawlessly execute their boat handling. There will be very little time to gain an advantage. The boats will have to enter the starting box precisely on time, and get their boat in a position for the final sprint to the line. The AC 72s can sail one length in one second. If you are late by three seconds you are in trouble. It will be close, and I expect frequent protests by both boats. The Umpires will have their work cut out to make the right calls. I also expect most of the protests will be waived off with green flags (no foul, keep racing). If we see lots of protests you will know the emotions are running high. I predict in ten starts Spithill will win five, draw two and lose three. We will see.

In the one unofficial scrimmage between NZL and USA two weeks ago, the speeds seemed to be about even on a downwind leg. During one simultaneous jibe NZL appeared to gain more than a length. The defending team has had good in-house racing. Spithill has the advantage of sailing with the varsity crew, and is always on the newer boat. He wins many of the races, but their trial horse skipper, Sir Ben Ainslie, has also won his share, and always pushes hard. These races have helped the USA improve. New Zealand looks more polished while maneuvering than the American boats. In this area I give the Kiwis the edge. However, their advantage will diminish as the races progress. The Cup final is a best of 17 series. Both teams will learn with each race.

Every day on San Francisco Bay the best tactical choices will change depending on the current and wind strength. I give Oracle the edge here. On board is tactical wizard John Kosteki, who grew up racing on San Francisco Bay. He rarely makes a bad call. New Zealand's tactician, Ray Davies, is a cool hand. Davies and Barker grew up together at the same yacht club, and are close friends. That will help when things get tight. And, they will. Like Kosteki, Davies also makes few mistakes, but he did not grow up in these waters. New Zealand does have an excellent "local knowledge" coach in American Dee Smith, who also

grew up racing here. Smith will certainly give Davies all the correct trends, but he is not on the boat like Kostecki.

Only one leg of the 10-mile course will be to windward. I hear over and over from various experts that the USA has a slight edge over New Zealand when sailing to windward. Again, no one really knows, but I have witnessed both boats foiling up wind without losing very much windward distance. At times the boats hit 30 knots! Yep, that is sailing upwind. I haven't seen it often. My guess is that upwind foiling will be something that will be rolled out during the Cup. In fact, the teams will likely have many secret speed elements that we won't see until the racing starts.

Both teams have very strong designers. Both design groups number over 30 engineers and naval architects, and probably have lengthy lists of things they would like to test, but time is running out. Maximizing time on the water before the cup will be important. The designers will be able to make adjustments during the match. As mentioned, every race will be a learning experience. Making improvements to various design elements will be an important part of this regatta. But we will not know what is happening in the background. The result of this work will only be apparent during the races.

The wind limit for the America's Cup goes up to 23 knots (from 21 for the LVC), which will be adjusted for the current. In a flood tide of 2 knots the wind limit is 25 and in an ebb tide of 2 knots the wind limit drops to 21. Oracle has spent most of their time training when the wind is under the limit. New Zealand goes out when the wind is well above. Against Luna Rossa the Kiwis seemed to be faster when the wind was light. It is possible that one boat will have an edge in one wind condition and not another. If this happens, the strength of the wind could be the deciding factor.

On our broadcasts I have called the AC 72s "fast, scary and fragile." After watching 12 challenger races and 14 defender practice races, I am adding a word to my description... graceful. An AC 72 sailing at 47 knots while making wide turns at a turning mark is a thing of beauty.

Like any sporting event the winner is often the one who wants it more. New Zealand is a country of only 4.5 million people. This is a smaller population than my home state of Maryland. ORACLE TEAM USA's syndicate head, Larry Ellison, wants to win badly. It is in his DNA. Let there be no doubt that the Kiwis are also highly motivated. They know what it is like to have the

Cup in their home waters. ETNZ is made up of nine New Zealand sailors and two Australians (who live in New Zealand). Ellison's crew is a multi-national group from the USA, Holland, Italy, France, Australia, New Zealand, and Antigua (depending on the starting line up). The difference in the past was the man who first won it for New Zealand and later successfully defended it. Sir Russell Coutts is the man in charge of ORACLE TEAM USA. You can imagine how the Kiwis would like to defeat their former hero. Likewise, Coutts would like to continue his undefeated winning streak in the America's Cup. Coutts has won four America's Cups, and has yet to lose a single race.

The races will only last 30 minutes or less. The speeds of these machines may never be seen again in the America's Cup. Both teams expect they can, and will, win. The contest will go back and forth. Unlike the Super Bowl that is over in 3 hours, the America's Cup will likely extend for two weeks. New Zealand seems to have more fans around the waterfront of San Francisco, but in the end I think ORACLE TEAM USA will defend... barely.