

By Gary Jobson, President
National Sailing Hall of Fame

September 24, 2013



The 34th America's Cup defense has turned into more of a people show than a boat show. Sure, the boats are amazingly fast, technological marvels, but the emotional highs and lows that we are feeling while watching and listening to the sailors compete is the epitome of human drama. How could anyone write a script for such a compelling narrative?

Think about these story lines: The America's Cup has been won and lost by the most successful business leaders of their eras. This is the oldest continuously contested trophy in international sports, dating back to 1851. The score is tied at 8-8. We are down to one, 30-minute race around a 10-mile course, off the city front of San Francisco. A tiny, sailing-crazed nation, with a home-grown crew, is up against one of the wealthiest men in the world, who has acquired the services of Olympic champions and superstars from seven nations. New Zealand has been one race from winning the Cup for a week, while Oracle Team USA has felt the pressure of being on the brink of defeat for seven races in a row. Tomorrow, one team will be heroes; the other will be hurting for a long time.

Today, on the 18th day of the Cup, we saw two very different races. In the first contest, the Australian skipper of the American boat, James Spithill, forced the New Zealanders into irons at the start. This is the equivalent of a football player fumbling the ball in his own end zone and the other team recovering it for a touchdown. USA 17 jumped to a comfortable lead. After the start, the boats seemed fairly even in speed in 15-18 knots of wind. With another American victory the score stood at 8-7, with ETNZ still leading the series. After the race, the Kiwi skipper, Dean Barker, sounded determined to get right back on the racecourse.

Race Two commenced on-schedule. At the start, both boats hit the line at the same time. USA 17 was to windward. Could they drive over the top of NZL? Barker was in the better inside position and luffed Spithill at the first turning mark. Downwind, USA 17 gained a length or two. There wasn't much difference in speed between the AC 72s. Both cats streaked down the course at 41 knots. About one-half mile from the leeward gate, USA 17 jibed. Inexplicably, NZL continued on. The leading boat should always cover by staying between the competitor and the next mark. The American boat was working to set up a split at the gate to sail on a different course than the Kiwis. Had NZL jibed with USA 17 they would have stayed in phase. Then USA 17 would have been forced to make two jibes to get the split. In contrast during previous races, OTUSA's tactician, Great Britain's Ben Ainslie, covered closely when they were ahead on Leg Two.

On the third leg to windward, USA 17 inched up under the lee of Alcatraz Island. I wonder if the prisoners in the 1930s would have been able to watch the Cup races had they taken place on the Bay at that time? NZL tacked over. They were crossing by about three lengths. NZL's tactician, Ray Davies, called for a tack ahead but to leeward of USA 17. At that moment, Spithill headed down a few degrees, got his boat foiling and sailed right over NZL. The Kiwis were stunned. When USA 17 tacked back into the center of course, NZL followed immediately. NZL could have extended a few more lengths and that might have helped them keep their wind clear. It is never tidy when a faster boat passes a slower boat. At that moment USA 17 took off and sailed away from NZL at an astonishing rate. It reminds me of the philosophy of boxer Mike Tyson, who said, "Every opponent has a plan until I punch them in the nose." The crew of Emirates Team New Zealand looked as if Tyson had landed one of his punishing left hooks. USA 17 crossed the line in triumph. The American team had tied the score at 8 to 8.

