



David Salter in action

On 23 February 2022 yachting journalist David Salter gave a talk to the Cruising Division in which he traversed some of the current issues in competitive sailing. These are some of the many provocative opinions Salter expressed during his talk:

- * That the use of stored power - electrical and hydraulic - has distorted offshore racing to the point where it is unfair.
- * That the boats currently used in the America's Cup aren't boats at all - they are actually low-flying aircraft.
- * That sailing has diminished itself as an Olympic sport by having too many classes.
- * That sponsorship and professionalism have made Corinthian yachting marginal and uncompetitive.

Here is the complete text of his talk:

Some knotty problems By David Salter

It's a pleasure to be here with you all at the Squadron, and to see so many familiar faces. I've been a visitor at this club for more than 40 years but never a member. At one point Jim Hardy even gave me a Squadron jumper so I'd only have to pay member's prices at the bar. Then you went and abolished the discount. But I kept the jumper!

Sailing has been my preferred pastime for as long as I can remember.



I started racing 'up the river' in VJs aged 12. At 17 the legendary Mick York took me on as crew in his Tasman Seabird. I was instantly hooked on offshore racing. My first Hobart was in 1965 and my last just a few years ago.

My trade is journalism. I started in newspapers and magazines, then soon switched to TV current affairs and documentaries. But I always kept my hand in with a bit of writing. As I declined towards retirement it was a pleasure to dump television (which can be pretty tedious) and concentrate on writing about yachts and yachting people – 'Folks and Boats'.

But straight reporting in itself can get pretty dull, both to do and to read. It's hard to avoid the repetitions. How big is the boat? Who built it? When did the owner buy it? What horsepower is the donk? What races have you done? What was your most enjoyable cruise? All the usual stuff. Blah blah blah.

Much more interesting, at least to my mind, are the *issues* of sailing as a sport. Like any instinctive journalist I'm always drawn to conflict. Not physical conflict but the conflict of *ideas*. That's where the best stories are usually found.

In that context, sailing is a bit like the proverbial duck crossing a pond. Above the water all seems serene and tranquil. But unseen, below, those little legs are thrashing about like buggery. The authorities who mostly govern the conduct of our sport – Australian Sailing and the Cruising Yacht Club – like to give us the impression that we're all in harmonious agreement. The truth, of course, is otherwise.

Now, I know that many of you are mainly cruising people to whom the issues of competitive sailing are neither here nor there in a practical sense. I enjoy cruising too – especially over to Lord Howe, the delivery back from Hobart, or a trip up to Port Stephens. But most of my sailing life has been spent racing. I'll assume you take at least an academic interest in the sport, in how it has developed, and in the problems that might lie ahead. That's what I'd like to tackle here tonight.

As a sort of overture to the grand opera, let me throw three of the more obvious absurdities at you:

* Until quite recently, the old Rule 26 – the ban on advertising – was absolute. There could be no commercial brand names or logos displayed on a boat's hull, spars or sails. You'll remember that not so long ago a yacht was denied its Sydney-Hobart win because they flew a spinnaker with their sponsor's name for the short run up the Derwent to the finish.

Nowadays, you risk disqualification if you *don't* fly the sponsor's flag from your backstay throughout the entire race. Journalists covering the event risk having their accreditation withdrawn if they don't include the sponsor's name in every mention of the event. A few years back one of my colleagues was expelled from the CYC media centre just because she'd had the temerity to write a feature for her newspaper that merely *explored* the sponsorship issue.

* Next, again until recently, both sections of Rule 42 – the rules that govern "Propulsion" – were strictly enforced. The only way a boat could compete was to use wind, water and human strength to set and trim the sails and to steer.



Now, every major ocean race in the world has an exemption in its NoR to specifically *allow* the use of non-human stored power – that is, electrical or hydraulic machinery – to set and trim sails, cant the keel or move water ballast around the boat.

Also under Rule 42, tricks like ooching, sculling and pumping – that is, trying to make your boat go faster by unnecessary body movements and sail or rudder trim – were forbidden. Now, just about every small boat class allows it. At the last Olympics all the for'd hands on their trapezes were pumping in and out so furiously they looked like they were trying to have sexual intercourse with the gunnel.

* And third, the America's Cup. In our lifetimes we have seen this event – the absolute pinnacle of yacht racing – become a grotesque distortion of its original intent. Sir Frank Packer – who launched Australia's first challenge from this very club – wouldn't know *what* was going on. He certainly wouldn't recognize it as *sailing*.

The boats aren't really boats at all – they're low-flying aircraft. It's considered a disaster if their hulls actually touch the water during a race. Most of the crew take no part in *sailing* the boat – they spend the whole 20-minute race, head down, bum up on the coffee grinders generating enough power to run the boat's control systems.

Meanwhile, the notion of “friendly competition between nations” as set down in the original Deed of Gift has been jettisoned. It's not nations anymore, it's corporations. A single campaign now employs more than 100 people for three or four years and costs at least a hundred million.

The Cup itself has become a commercial entity to be sold to the highest bidder. The current holders, Emirates Team New Zealand, have so little regard for national pride that they're about to sell the hosting rights to a port that's neither in their home waters nor that of any of the likely challengers.

OK. Those are just three huge, fundamental changes to our sport. I'll get back to them in a bit more detail later. But first we have to ask ourselves this question: How have we allowed this to *happen*?

As the obvious starting point, let's take money.

We can't deny you've got to have a few bob to even own a yacht these days, let alone race one. But a would-be marathon runner can get into the sport for the price of a pair of running shoes. Meanwhile, if you want to be truly competitive in the Sydney-Hobart, get ready to burn through a lazy million or three. That's the dimension of the difference today.

But it wasn't always so.

There were always owners with deep pockets whose boats tended to be newer – and bigger. But if you take a look at the Sydney-Hobart results from 1945 to 1985 there were a lot of smaller yachts with amateur crews that sailed to a podium finish. They were good seamen in wholesome boats, and their abilities were properly rewarded.

Not any more. Over the past thirty or so years the power of money has gradually distorted traditional offshore racing into a different shape. During the 20th Century the launch of any major new boat was big news, to be featured in *Seacraft* or *Modern Boating*. Today, yet another brand



new TP52 added to the fleet seems commonplace. The multi-million dollar campaign price tag doesn't even rate a mention.

The fatalists always like to tell us that there's nothing we can do to counter the power of money in sailing. 'It's always been with us', they say. And in any case, they claim, sailing is no different to any other sport in that regard.

Well, they're only half right. It's undeniable that rich men – and it's almost exclusively been men – have dominated the elite levels of sailing for more than a century.

But here's the big difference. A millionaire who loves horse racing might spend a fortune buying and training his thoroughbreds, but he doesn't hop in the saddle and ride his best nag in the Melbourne Cup. Likewise, a mogul who's mad about motor-racing might finance a V8 supercar team but he's unlikely to get behind the wheel to drive at Bathurst.

Yacht racing is different. The bloke up the back who pays all the bills is often a pretty ordinary sailor. But, if they've bought the right yacht and sails, and employed the best professional crew, they can win a Hobart – even if they took no significant part in actually sailing the boat or deciding its tactics.

What other sport allows that kind of indulgence?

Let's look at the same issue from another angle. No amount of money can transform a hack tennis player to the level where they might beat Rafa Nadal at Wimbledon. A squillionaire weekend golfer – no matter how much he spends on coaching and the latest clubs – will never lift the trophy after 72 holes at the British Open.

Why? Because, while the likes of Nadal and Tiger Woods are indeed professionals, the sports they compete in are *individual* contests that don't rely on equipment. All tennis racquets and golf clubs are much the same. Each player is entirely the master of their own fortune.

Yachting is different. It's a team sport where the equipment – the boat, sails and rig – are the dominant factors in any success, and where the crew can be the world's best hired guns. Money makes that difference.

Last Summer I did a twilight race on Pittwater on a very big boat where the owner proudly told me the mainsail had cost him more than \$200,000. He steered for a couple of legs – then went below because it got a bit chilly. The crew were well-paid pros.

We won, of course, but to me it was a hollow victory. Most of the other boats were smaller, older, run-of-the-mill craft being sailed by happy bands of amateurs. They were out there for a bit of fun doing something they loved. *We* seemed to be there simply to win. To me, that's not sport.

And money hasn't just changed the *spirit* of sailing, it's distorted the physical nature of the sport as well. At the beginning of this talk I touched on the issue of stored power. It has now been allowed in offshore racing for more than a decade. I believe it is unfair. Let me explain.

I might not have an issue with stored power if *all* yachts in the fleet were competing on genuinely equal terms, but they aren't.



The supermaxis and their smaller imitations are certainly very exciting machines, but they should be racing against each other – like with like – and not against the smaller conventional yachts over whom they hold immense advantages.

This is, of course, a suggestion that won't be welcomed by the CYCA, Rolex or the owners and sponsors of the more prominent trophy contenders. But I believe it's an argument that deserves a serious hearing.

Anyone outside the world of yachting is astonished to learn that the boats they so admire, such as *Wild Oats*, have to keep an engine running all the way to Hobart to deliver power to hoist and trim the sails, cant the keel or move water ballast around the yacht.

To me, the sport of ocean racing is a unique test of skill, strength, stamina and tactics. It should not be a contest between people pushing buttons.

Sure, technology has its place. Improvements in hull design, rigs, sails and electronics are all welcome but they should not supplant, or subvert, the basic human elements of fair sporting competition.

If a boat cannot be properly sailed using muscle and brain-power alone then it is (at least in my contention) actually a *motor-sailer* and should not be competing against conventional yachts.

The pragmatists will all say 'That horse bolted long ago. Get with the program. They've changed the rules, so everyone should just accept it.'

In one sense that is undeniable. Stored power and moveable ballast *are* here to stay, or at least until they are superseded by some new technology that delivers even greater power-to-weight benefits. The authorities that govern ocean racing and stage the major events are unlikely to return to the old rules.

But here's the contradiction: If the organisers are so keen to embrace almost anything that increases speed, why does the Sydney-Hobart still refuse to accept multi-hull entrants? The big trimarans have proven their safety if sailed properly, and they offer by far the most spectacular offshore sailing on the planet.

Meanwhile, consider this: *Wild Oats XI* pulled out of a recent Sydney-Hobart after a simple mechanical failure in its canting keel mechanism. The implicit admission behind that retirement was that even with its keel locked in an upright position (and in moderate wind, aft of the beam) the maxi would not have been competitive. So they threw in the towel.

That decision underlined the distressing reality that big boats using stored power cannot be sailed safely – or effectively – with human energy alone.

There are other aspects of this mismatch that make the contest even more unfair. Engines never flag from exhaustion, get seasick, injured, or need sleep. They run at peak efficiency 24 hours a day. Access to this limitless power-on-demand means that crews on the maxis don't get as tired as their comrades on human-powered yachts.



That is a significant advantage that cannot be sensibly counterbalanced by handicapping. TCFs can only apply fairly across a fleet if *all* the boats are of a generic type, and are sailed using the same general principles.

Next, canting keels and moveable water ballast – made possible by that ever-running engine – mean the maxis can carry proportionately more sail area at any given wind speed than fixed-keel yachts, and sail with less bulb mass. Again, those are huge advantages.

At the same time, stored on-board power can exert forces well beyond human capacity. Hydraulic or electric winches grind in huge jibs, bring the traveller up the track, haul halyards and furl and unfurl headsails and spinnakers at incredible speeds. Pumps fill and empty water ballast tanks in seconds – all at the push of a button. 12-to-15 tonnes of load on the runners of a supermaxi is not uncommon. Try that by hand!

And a supercharged maxi will cover the course very quickly. Consequently, they enjoy the significant weight-saving benefit of needing to take less food and water per person, and the crew's strength and concentration are required over a much shorter period.

The combined effect of all these advantages is extraordinary performance. As anyone who has raced against the 100-foot behemoths will confirm, after a few hours their sheer speed means that the middle-of-the-fleet boats will often be racing in quite different conditions.

Handicapping, which is predominantly based on the measurable physical metrics of the boats and their sails, struggles to even out these advantages. To my mind it is therefore unreasonable for a yacht using stored power to win the Hobart race on handicap. Yet that is what happened in 2005, 2012 and 2016. And it will happen again.

Now before you dismiss all this as no more than the bleatings of some sour old fuddy-duddy pining for the glory days, let me say that I have nothing against the motor-sailers *per se*. They are awe-inspiring machines. I've sailed on them enough times to understand their appeal, and how they work.

But I've also raced on the old conventional maxis – such as *Apollo* and *Condor* – where it took four strong men on the coffee-grinders just to trim the genoa (and everyone had to sit on the rail to help keep the boat upright). Sure, we were much quicker back then than an S&S34, but the underlying design parameters, rating rules and demands on crew work were common to all entrants, irrespective of size.

The defenders of the 'speed is king/anything goes' approach like to employ an analogy with Formula 1. Everyone benefits, they say, when technology is allowed to develop competitively, and with minimal restrictions. Advances, they claim, will eventually trickle down to the benefit of the average motorist.

But that analogy is false. The technical rules in F1 are extremely strict, and designed to bring the cars *closer* together in performance so that the racing is as fair as possible. This puts a premium on driving skill and tactics over raw engine power.



In offshore yachting it's now the exact opposite. As they stand, our rules actually encourage and support the widening performance gap between an elite group of yachts and the remainder of the fleet.

What's the solution? Well, it seems we'll never be able to stop the well-off owners employing the latest technology in their quest for trophy glory. But not *all* new technology is necessarily good for the sport as a whole. They don't allow motorbikes in the Tour de France.

When the Royal Ocean Racing Club was founded in 1924 *Yachting Monthly* magazine greeted the news by describing the sport as an ideal test of "skill, courage and endurance". The man was more important than the machine.

OK, let's now turn to the Olympics. As an Olympic sport, sailing has always seemed to me rather problematic. It doesn't fit very comfortably within the *citius, altius, fortius* notion of the Olympic ideal – 'faster, higher, stronger' – although we could argue that the *citius* principle – speed – might at least cover 'best elapsed time'.

To my mind the core problem with sailing as an Olympic discipline is its reliance on complex equipment with moving parts, i.e. *boats*. That immediately detracts from its credibility as a pure athletic contest and allows scope for endless politicking over which classes should be included in the Games and which should be discarded.

Sailing competitions are also subject to significant external factors beyond the control of competitors, most notably variations in wind strength and direction. By contrast, finalists in the 100-metre sprint all race over the same course at the same time, and under the same conditions. Luck should never be a factor in deciding medals, but in sailing there is no way to avoid the element of chance.

These inherent difficulties with sailing in the Olympics were apparent right from the beginning. "Yachting" (as it was still called right up until Sydney 2000), was part of the program for the first Games in 1896, but the whole regatta had to be cancelled because of bad weather.

Indeed, the 'old' Olympics – that is, before World War II – were something of a shemuzzle when it came to sailing. For example, entry was invited for 16 classes at the Antwerp Games of 1920, then plunged to just three for 1924.

Displacement classes came and went. Initially, the divisions were based on tonnage, but a short list of the boats that raced in pre-war Olympic competition borders on the bizarre: we had the 15 metre, 8 metre, 7 metre, 6.5 metre, 30sqm and 40sqm. There was the French National Monotype, Snowbird, and the quaintly-named O-Jolle, a 16-foot dinghy created specifically for the 1936 Olympics in Germany.

As late as the 1956 Games in Melbourne there was still not much sense to the choices of yacht classes. Both the Dragon and 5.5 metre were sailed. Both are three-man keelboats of similar dimensions and performance yet the first is a strict one design, the second a development class. The logic of that was difficult to follow.



Indeed, inherent in this multiplicity is an underlying sporting *il*logicality: if the Olympics are intended as a pure, competitive test of athletic strength and skill, why do we have so many different classes at all?

The justification usually given is that the sport needs to cater for different skills and physical attributes. So we had Finns for the big boys and Lasers for the lightweights. Yet there is no special high jump event for short people at the Olympics, or a marathon race for the overweight.

While Olympic yachting dithers and changes tack every few years, the sports with which the public now associates the Olympics have settled into fairly standard patterns. Anyone with even a passing interest in the Games recognises the established athletic and swimming events – which is why the media concentrate their attention on the pool and the stadium.

But very few Australians would understand the difference between a Laser Radial and a 49erFX, nor do they care. Likewise, the confected tensions of the “Medal Race” format seem incomprehensible to the average sports fan – and unfair.

Mind you, sailing is not alone in this nonsense. Consider these comparisons. There are just two Olympic medals for football, the world’s most popular sport, but 12 for fencing. Eighteen gold medals can be won in wrestling, 15 in judo and shooting, 14 in weightlifting and rowing, 13 in boxing, and 12 in canoe/kayak. Sailing has 10 medal events.

How can such a distorted emphasis on minority sports be reconciled with their modest popularity? Well, the answer lies in the International Olympic Committee’s criteria for inclusion. “Prevalence” is judged by the number of *continents and countries* that regularly compete in a given sport. Numbers of participants, or the size of the fan base, don’t count.

Further, when it comes to sharing the huge revenues from TV rights and merchandising, the IOC uses a system of dividing the sports into five categories of descending “popularity”. These are assessed on the basis of television viewing figures, Internet popularity, public surveys, ticket requests, press coverage, and the number of national federations.

Sailing, which tends to rate rather poorly on most of those metrics, is way down in Category D, along with equestrian, handball and taekwondo. Athletics, swimming and gymnastics dominate Category A.

World Sailing hoped that the new discipline of mixed gender two-handed offshore racing might elevate them into Category C, particularly in relation to more TV coverage and internet popularity. Instead, a protracted standoff with the IOC over details saw this proposed event scuttled even before its first outing.

In that context, the ideal of introducing offshore racing also did little to counter the popular assumption that sailing is an elite sport that excludes the disadvantaged.

Even if the boat chosen for the competition had been a trailerable 30-footer – the most practical option – the cost would still have been prohibitive for most sailors in second or third world countries (let alone the cost of maintaining a decent national fleet and then campaigning in the qualifying international regattas).



The IOC, in turn, has its own agendas. At the moment their main priorities are gender equity, appeal to youth and ensuring that each sport is as accessible, and affordable, as possible. Tested against those standards, sailing struggles to achieve a pass mark.

But in my view, sailing has largely brought these problems on itself. By changing the types of racing and the classes so frequently the sport has robbed itself of the stability and transparency it needs to secure genuine public support.

Sadly, we can now look forward to yet more bickering and allegations of Olympic skulduggery and corruption (many of which will be true). There's an overwhelming unease about the increasing commercial influence and control over a sport that has always been so proud of its history and Corinthian traditions.

Which brings us to the America's Cup.

It was, until now, utterly unthinkable that any Australian sailing enthusiast could barrack for the New York Yacht Club to regain the America's Cup. Yet that is where I found myself last year during the elimination rounds of AC36 in Auckland.

Why? Because a spokesman for the NYYC syndicate had stated, on the record, that if they won the Cup then they would return the competition to some form of yacht that keeps its hull in the water. In other words, a boat. Regrettably, they were the first to be eliminated.

We now know that the Challenger of Record for AC37, the *next* series, will be an entity calling itself Royal Yacht Squadron Racing. That's not a club. It's a corporate vehicle created by the Royal Yacht Squadron to protect the club's members from legal liability if any financial disasters flow from their challenge. Surely that's an indicator, right there, that the Cup has grown too large, too complex and too expensive. It has become a corrupted expression of its original sporting intent.

And what we still don't know is how many races there will be, or even where the event will be held. As the stockbrokers like to say, it's all still 'in play'. After the last Cup the New Zealand government contributed \$5m just to keep the ETNZ team together, yet there was no guarantee the next Cup would even be sailed in Auckland.

Now that the Cup is a free-standing commercial property it's location can be sold to the highest bidder – usually a city that falls for the shopworn old sales pitch that hosting the event will attract world attention and billions of tourist dollars.

In truth, the new "Challenger of Record" is the giant INEOS chemicals conglomerate. But by using the RYS as their proxy, Monaco-based squillionaire Sir James Ratcliffe's corporation complies with the Deed of Gift provisions. You'll remember that Deed of Gift challenges have, in recent times, given us some bizarre best-of-three-race series, notably San Diego 1988 and Valencia in 2010.

Meanwhile, the defenders, Emirates Team New Zealand (sponsored by that well-known Kiwi company Emirates Airlines of Dubai), issued a media release distinguished by its surprisingly defensive tone. It was as if the winners were keen to demonstrate that they had listened to the persistent critics of what the America's Cup has become.



The current AC75 class will remain for the next two series (although that could change if NZ loses in 2024), but each syndicate will now be restricted to one new boat. This is explained as a gesture aimed at reducing costs. That's an admirable goal, yet it has never been achieved since the Cup downsized from J-boats to 12 metres after World War II. The costs have kept rising for every new challenge and defence.

In the face of that reality, the Team New Zealand media release included this pious promise:

"The Defender and the Challenger of Record, will be investigating and agreeing a meaningful package of campaign cost reduction measures including measures to attract a higher number of Challengers and to assist with the establishment of new teams."

Don't, for a moment, believe them. Whatever that "meaningful package" may be, the total real cost of any serious campaign is now well North of \$150m and rising.

There was a similar attempt to mollify those who regret that the America's Cup has lost its original 'nation v. nation' spirit. Let me quote the proposed restriction:

"A new Crew Nationality Rule will require 100% of the race crew for each competitor to either be a passport holder of the country the team's yacht club as at 19 March 2021 or to have been physically present in that country (or, acting on behalf of such yacht club in Auckland, the venue of the AC36 Events) for two of the previous three years prior to 18 March 2021."

Got that? The rule essentially allows anyone to crew who is a national of the challenging or defending club, or has done two years of residency, or was part of the last series in Auckland. In other words, it protects the same few 'hired guns' of the elite professional sailing community who've made the Cup their exclusive little honey pot for the past decade.

And there is apparently to be no restriction on the nationality of the people who actually contribute far more than the crews to the success or failure of any campaign: that's the designers, computer programmers, builders, engineers, coaches, trainers and sail-makers.

In any case, we know from experience that the syndicates will bend or re-write the rules between now and AC37 to suit their interests or diminish any perceived advantage for their rivals. It's the America's Cup, after all.

What interests ordinary sailors more is how the actual racing could be improved. Here are a few observations prompted by watching the ten races last year:

First, kudos are due to New Zealand for staging the Cup so successfully under such difficult, COVID circumstances. The race management (with one unfortunate exception, which I'll come to later) was flawless and, by all accounts, the on-shore experience for the fans met expectations, despite the virus.

Now, the downside.

The expense and complexity of the boats and their support technology has grown beyond reasonable limits. Technology has overwhelmed the sport.



One example to prove my point: Grant Dalton recently admitted that without massive funding to build new simulators and Artificial Intelligence programs, the next defence would not be viable.

He wasn't exaggerating. Immediately following AC36 the McKinsey Company boasted that their Artificial Intelligence input for ETNZ had, in effect, won the Kiwis the Cup.

They claimed that their AI simulation program had quickly taught itself to sail the AC boats *better* than the actual human skipper and crew, who then had to improve *their* skills by imitating the computer's performance on a simulator. Apparently there is no longer any place for talent, skill or flair out on the water.

What about the racing itself? Well, to my mind the made-for-TV courses are too narrow and short, so the opportunities for truly tactical racing are severely limited. A fractional advantage in boat speed should not, on its own, be enough to secure a win in the America's Cup.

The pre-start period of two minutes is also much too short. This forced the boats to limit their risks. It usually resulted in just one engagement before they both dashed away on a timed run to the line, on the same tack. There should be more pre-start time – up to 10 minutes – for the kind of tactical battles that test sailing skill and thrill the spectators.

Restricting the boats to a jib-and-main sail plan also robs the event of significant interest. Trim is minimal. Upwind and downwind look the same. In reality, the boats could be operated by remote control. Sailors – and the general audience – want to see real people pulling ropes, hoisting and dropping spinnakers, trimming, tacking and gybing.

Instead, they have to watch an incredibly complex machine crammed with electronics and hydraulics that can't sail properly – if at all – without the assistance of huge amounts of stored power, sophisticated telemetry and a myriad of instant computer calculations. None of this is visible to the spectators or TV viewers.

The lower wind-speed limit of 6.5 knots in Auckland was far too low. We needed no further proof of this than the unseemly sight of power-boats having to tow the AC75s until they eventually staggered up onto their foils. The world's most prestigious sailing event relied on two large RIBs each powered by four huge outboard motors.

When the Italians ran out of breeze in Race 8 – through no fault of their own – the race should have been abandoned. If the Race Management team can postpone a *start* because of too little breeze, then surely they should also abandon the race if the wind then drops below that minimum.

Are all these criticisms no more than a nostalgic plea for the Cup to return to the days when yachts sailed with their hulls in the water? Well, it was easy, a generation ago, to scoff at those straw-hatted grandees of the New York Yacht Club America's Cup Committee but at least they kept the event within reasonable, human dimensions.

True, they answered to no-one and twisted the rules, but the racing they controlled was straightforward, easy to understand and adhered to its fundamentals for decades. It connected directly with every keen sailor, and also attracted the interest of many non-sailing sports fans.



Progress can never be stopped or reversed, but the Cup in its present form has been incited into such rapid and extreme development paths that it risks losing all relevance.

I thought Iain Murray was on the right track when he created the America's Cup Class that raced between 1992 and 2007. They were 80-foot conventional sloops, with spinnakers, using human power only. As with the 12 metres, there was just enough flexibility in the rule to encourage original design ideas. But the racing was usually very close and put the emphasis on tactics and crew-work.

Best of all, we could relate to the contest. Any competent sailor could have hopped aboard an AC classer and known roughly what to do. Now, if we stepped onto one of those 75-foot foiling monomaras we'd probably kill ourselves.

To me, the America's Cup was at its best when it embodied the essence of a classic sailing contest.

The boats, sailors and the regatta itself all had a special quality that the sailing world honoured and respected. Not so now. It's as if we go to a concert expecting the orchestra to perform a Beethoven symphony but instead we get a heavy metal band trying to play the same music – and in a tenth of the time.

Meanwhile, could Australia ever again be a force in the America's Cup? Unlikely. It would be easy to assume that we've just been too embarrassed to participate after *oneAustralia* went down the gurgler off San Diego in 1995. But the truth is that as the costs of competing escalated, no one in this country – no individual, no club, no syndicate nor corporation – has been prepared to fund a challenge.

Our best sailors now sign on as professionals for teams that represent other countries. Local TV coverage of the Cup is confined to the outer reaches of Foxtel, and earns no more than a few occasional paragraphs in our newspapers.

From the unifying, nationwide euphoria of that wonderful come-from-behind victory in 1983 – our first and last triumph – the world's oldest sporting contest has become a matter of public indifference in Australia. We are no longer in the game.

Bottom line comparisons tell the story. The Australian federal government allocates a grand total of around \$400m annually to all sports funding across the country. Together, the New Zealand government and Auckland authorities contributed almost \$200m just to their last America's Cup defence.

No Australian politician wants to risk challenging the popular prejudice – so thoughtlessly abetted by our mainstream media – that yacht racing is an 'elite' sport, a pastime reserved for the idle rich. The harsh political reality is that there are no votes in sailing. Not one.

So, what's the wash-up to all this? Well, I've tried to outline some of the fundamental issues as I see them, but offered few solutions. Many of you will disagree. The truth, I suppose, is that in the grand scheme of life these things don't really matter to any great degree.

For most of us, sailing is as much a pastime as a sport. It's a lifestyle choice – a bit more than a hobby, a bit less than an obsession.



We each find our own ways to enjoy the unique pleasures of sailing. For me those pleasures are many, and inexhaustible.

They are that wonderful feeling of freedom and self-reliance that comes with a long offshore passage. It's the competitive fun and comradeship of a tough race on the Harbour. And I savour the special joys of a simple coastal cruise and quiet overnight anchorage.

They are all equally precious, and I'm sure they help give us a sensible, proper perspective on life. At least they do for me. No doubt my beloved wife might disagree, yet she's tolerated my sailing for almost 60 years. Who could ask for more?

Thanks for listening, and I'd be happy to field any questions.

David Salter
RSYS – February 2022