

THE AMERICAS CUP IN CHAOS

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The Americas Cup has survived many trials and tribulations over its history, but the latest may threaten its very existence writes Martin Dinham of [nare.co.uk](#).

The Americas Cup (or Auld Mug as it is colloquially known) is the oldest sporting trophy in known existence, the first contest in 1851 pre dating the modern Olympics by almost 50 years. First won by the schooner America, the cup attained almost holy grail like status to the millionaires of the early 20th century with names such as Lipton , Sopwith and Vanderbilt all featuring in early contests. Despite the efforts of Britains finest however, the Americas Cup was retained by the Americans from 1851 through until 1983, the longest winning streak in sporting history, until finally being captured by Australian Alan Bond and his radical, winged keel Australia 2.

Since Australia 2's victory, its fair to say that the cups history has been fairly turbulent. The trophy was won back almost immediately by the USA in 1987, but this was the year that saw a dramatic extension in the competitiveness of the traditionally 2 team challenge with the American boat Stars and Stripes having to beat an unprecedented 13 challenger syndicates and Alan Bonds Australians failing even to reach the defenders final. Its arguable that the difficulties and legal wranglings that have plagued the event since then can be directly traced back to the expansion of the event in 1987. Following this, the Auld Mug has suffered from changes in classes of boats (reaching a pinnacle in 1988 when an American catamaran defeated a New Zealand monohull on the water and the decision was reversed twice subsequently in the courts) and arguably the egos of the modern multi millionaire businessmen who are determined to win the cup at all costs and don't seem to mind whether this is done by the sailors or by the lawyers.

The latest threat to the cup comes from the current holders, Alinghi and their legal dispute with the American team BMW Oracle. Incredibly, the Alingi syndicate hails from landlocked Switzerland, but their team, who have held the cup since 2003, is packed with global sailing stars with a strong contingent of New Zealanders. Adding spice to the the proceedings is the fact that Kiwi Russell Coutts, considered by many the greatest sailor in the world, led Alinghis cup winning challenge in 2003 but has since jumped ship to head up the rival BMW Oracle team.

At the heart of the dispute is the fact that, after their successful defence of the cup in 2007, Alinghi nominated the Spanish Yacht Club Club Nautico Espana de Velo as Challenger of Record. BMW Oracle, headed up by software billionaire Larry Ellison, successfully challenged this in the courts on the grounds that Club Nautico Espana de Velo was not a functioning yacht club, merely a shell that had been set up to manage a cup challenge. Certainly there was widespread concern in cup circles about the relationship between Alinghi and the Spanish and as things stand the American BMW Oracle syndicate is the nominated challenger for the next cup. Unfortunately for the worlds oldest sporting contest, the legal challenges have not stopped and at the moment it is still uncertain when the next cup will be held, what country it will be in and even which type of boats it will be contested in. The fall out from this has been considerable. The cup has lost Louis Vuitton as a sponsor and other challenging syndicates (which include the British Team Origin, skippered by Olympic star Ben Ainslie), are significantly stymied in their ability to attract funding and to plan every level of their campaigns from boats to personnel to chandlery given the current level of uncertainty that surrounds the event.

It remains to be seen what happens to the Americas Cup, whether we get a contest in 2008 or 2009 and if so, what the outcome will be. The biggest fear though is that Alinghi, BMW Oracle and their lawyers will achieve what 150 years of history couldn't and end the Americas Cup.

This article was written by Martin Dinham, sailor and head of marine company [www.nare.co.uk](#)

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