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The America's Cup

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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I have a confession to make. I enjoy the America's Cup. I watch it on television. It is neither exciting nor rollicking fun, but I find it interesting, and at times filled with tension. Apparently unlike most sports fans I am not bored by it.

I can't say I really understand the tactics, like tacking or blocking someone's wind, but I'm willing to take Jim Kelly's word for it that someone is out flanking or out maneuvering someone else.

I can't say I appreciate the technology of the sport. I don't understand aerodynamics and computer driven designs, and the various sails. I think I now know the difference between the spinnaker and the mainsail, although I am not sure why the spinnaker is used at some times and not at others. And I don't have a clue about a jibe, or is it jibe.

I must say I am put off by the incredible amounts of money being spent to win a boat race. America3 and Bill Koch will spend some \$65 million on his three ships, and Raul Gardini the Italian Billionaire is spending somewhere between \$45 and \$100 million on Il Moro, his five ships making the challenge for the Cup. To me this is much more excessive than baseball salaries.

And the people involved. Dennis Connor and Bill Koch make Bobby Knight look like sportsman of the year.

So what is it about the America's Cup that I find attractive? It really is difficult to say but I think it has something to do with these millionaires appearing in public as major league jerks, walking hemorrhoids, who insist that they are gentlemen sportsmen of the old order. The sheer audacity of such a claim has a certain charm about it.

It also has something to do with the fact that ESPN has managed to put together a camera technology that shows the race and puts you on board to see and hear the crew. The strain and precision necessary to get the sails up and down just in the right manner, which can cut or add seconds to and from the lead, lend an air of tension and even excitement at certain points of the race.

But finally what is perhaps most attractive is that this race carries historical baggage greater than any other sport in the United States. The America's Cup is the oldest trophy in

American Sport, its roots go back well into the 19th century. In addition the dominance of the United States over such a long period of time gives this sport a special appeal.

The history of the America's Cup is tied up with the career of John Cox Stevens, an upper-class sportsman of the early 19th century. His first love was horseracing. From horses he went on to amusement parks. In 1831 Stevens and his brother opened the Elysian Fields on their waterfront estate in Hoboken, which became the center of New York City's sports life.

Most significantly the Elysian Fields became the home of the New York Yacht Club, which Stevens founded in July of 1844. Membership quickly became the test of being a member of the New York social elite, and the club's regatta at Newport became the event of the summer season.

In 1851 Stevens organized a syndicate to build a yacht to challenge the Royal Yacht Club of Britain. George Steers designed the ship called America built at a cost of \$35,000, and on August 22 it easily defeated 18 British yachts in a race around the Isle of Wright to win the cup donated by the Royal Yacht Club. Six years later the America's Cup was presented to the New York Yacht Club with the stipulation that it be contested by challengers from outside the United States.

This was the birth of the America's Cup which has seen 27 international challenge competitions with the U.S. having won all but one. The first challenges did not come until after the Civil War. In 1866 a transatlantic yacht race won over the British by American James Gordon Bennett, Jr. led to another in 1870 won by the British. These competitions led to the first challenge for the America's Cup in 1870, won easily by the Americans.

Now 123 years later the America's Cup is being defended by Bill Koch of Kansas. As the skipper, owner, bank-roller of America3 Koch earned the right to defend the cup by defeating the always nasty and petulant Dennis Connor seven races to four. In his usual gracious, gentlemanly and sportsmanlike way Conner praised the speed of America3, and then added: "It's amazing they could ever lose a race in that boat."

Koch, who has been described as a Ted Turner without charisma, meanwhile was offending his neighbors in San Diego, complaining that San Diegans were rude, and describing his chief opponent Paul Cayard, a San Francisco native and skipper of Il Moro, as a

mercenary. "It is hard for me to imagine having an Italian green card," said Koch.

Cayard's response: "Bill Koch had no concept of sport and sport under pressure until a year ago."

This really is why I like the America's Cup. It proves two old sayings: "You don't need to be smart to get rich," and in the words of Captain Tony, "To succeed in life all you need is a tremendous sex drive and a big ego. Brains don't mean bleep."

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