

SKIP NOVAK

HAVING WATCHED A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT THE AUSTRALIAN VICTORY IN THE 1983 AMERICA'S CUP, COULD THE LATEST CHAPTER POSSIBLY RIVAL IT?

I recently came across *Untold: The Race of the Century*, the story of the Australian victory in the 1983 America's Cup, on Netflix. For me this was a must-watch, not just because it was about sailing, but rather it was a film about the boats and the era I could immediately relate to, yachting back in the day on the east coast of America.

I never participated in the America's Cup. In those days American sailors racing at top level international competitions fell into one of three disciplines; America's Cup, Olympic classes, or the Whitbread Round the World Race – and in 1983 there were only a handful of Americans that had ever done the latter. Today, the professional sailors move seamlessly between all three. They step off a circumnavigation and start another Olympic campaign while negotiating their contracts for the next America's Cup.

Historically that 1983 win by *Australia II*, skippered by John Bertrand, against Dennis Conner on *Liberty* racing for the incumbent New York Yacht Club, was a game changer. It broke the 132-year deadlock of what was considered unassailable due to the financial might and influence of the New York Yacht Club.

In the film, I immediately recognised the faces of the Australian crew. I'd met most before or after that event. In fact, Skip Lissiman, the port trimmer on *Australia II* who is interviewed in the film, crewed for me on the 1979 Parmelia Race from Plymouth, with a stop in Cape Town and down to his home town of Fremantle. He was 22 at the time.

Lissiman, John Longley, Grant Simmer, John Bertrand and others recounted how the Aussies were winging things with Alan Bond's chequebook. Of course Ben Lexcen's winged keel was the key, which when revealed upset the NYYC's men in straw hats to no end. They contested it legally – and luckily for the sport, lost. This was a classic underdog story.

The sailing footage is fascinating and the story is a nail biter right up to the final deciding race. In the film, the manoeuvres were riveting with tacking duels and all kinds of activity on deck – sheets flailing around, gybing spinnakers, then massive wind shifts and gear failures – all sorts

of variables that kept me on the edge of my couch.

A large part of this documentary dipped into the archive coverage of previous Cups and I recognised faces in the melee along the docks and marching up and down Newport's Thames Street.

There was the mouthpiece of American sailing, Gary Jobson, tactician for Ted Turner on *Courageous* in the 1977 Cup, who'd sail with me twice on *Pelagic* in the 1990s filming ESPN specials. I knew Ted Turner. In fact, after an Annapolis Newport Race during a food fight in a restaurant between the *Aura* crew and Ted's rogues on *Tenacious* I managed to plant a bread roll in his face. He answered with more fire, as he was that kind of guy. We were a bunch of amateur sailors back then, and so was Ted.

When yacht racing began to cater for a non-sailing audience this signalled the end of the era with its complications, intricacies, subtleties and challenges understood only by a few. Attenuated attention spans in general mean the current

iteration of the Cup is now essentially a 'drag race' which can even be appreciated by petrolheads in America.

On these incredibly exciting foiling monohulls we're now down to 20-minute heats with only two key celebrity players on board: the grunt that goes in to power these flying machines of today is provided by a bank of faceless athletes, slaves to their emperors in the cockpit. Indeed, everyone is unrecognisable with helmets, body armour and headset microphones in the way.

I hear big money is going in to produce a documentary series on the next America's Cup in Barcelona 2024. A collaboration between the directors of the

Oscar-winning *Free Solo* and David Ellison's production company (credits include *Top Gun: Maverick*) promises to be an 'all access, behind-the-scenes' extravaganza of both on and off the water action and, no doubt, intrigue. I wonder though, knowing how tight lipped the teams now are, just what exactly will be revealed? Will we get to know the human side of these teams, or only their pre-programmed avatars?

And in this proposed documentary for 2024 I suspect we won't see any food fights in Barcelona restaurants. ■

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