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The champagne was on ice. Blue blazers were at the ready. But Oracle Team USA's Australian skipper James Spithill ignored everything around him except winning the start of Race 12 of the America's Cup. He steered USA 17 into the starting box at 35 knots from the favored port side. Emirates Team New Zealand was late entering from the starboard side. Kiwi skipper Dean Barker maneuvered toward the starting line early. The ebb current was beginning to flow out of San Francisco Bay. The leeward end of the line looked to be favored. Barker wanted that position but he had to kill a lot of time. Spithill stalked his prey from behind as the two boats approached the line. Barker was at risk of jumping the gun. As the clock ticked down, Spithill made his move and swept down to leeward of ETNZ to gain an overlap, or what we call a hook. Barker was to windward and had to stay clear. New Zealand tacked away while Spithill accelerated toward the first mark to win the start by four lengths. The chase was on.

Downwind on Leg Two the boats sprinted at over 40 knots for the turning gate. The speeds seemed identical. They turned back on the wind on opposite gates for the start of Leg Three. At

times the Kiwis drew even, but just could not pass. OTUSA's British tactician, Ben Ainslie, made all the correct tactical calls to keep his boat ahead. In 19 knots of wind, OTUSA attained speeds of 30 knots. The catamaran was on its foils going to windward! The USA sailed extra distance by sailing a low course to get the foils working, but the net gain was impressive. On Leg Four, the USA stretched out and easily won the race.

The victory had to rattle Dean Barker and his crew. The score stands 8-2 at this point. If the Kiwis win one more race, they will claim the Cup. It is hard to imagine that they could lose seven in a row, at least it did a few days ago. But OTUSA is getting faster, sailing better and showing that they could achieve the unthinkable. The 34th Defense could be over after a 25-minute race, or could continue for another week. On my scorecard, both Spithill and Barker have each won six starts. At start of Race 13, Spithill gets to enter from the Port Side again.



During the intermission between races, the wind started to build. The ebb current was increasing, which reduced the wind limit. The Race Committee has a 23-knot wind limit that was set earlier this summer in the interest of safety. In an ebb current, the apparent wind the boats sail in increases. For example, in a two-knot ebb, the wind limit drops to 21 knots. In a flood current the wind limit would increase by two knots because the water rushing into the bay theoretically pushes the boat backward at two knots reducing the apparent wind. Regrettably, the ebb current will increase over the next few days.

When the race committee signaled that the wind was over the limit, Ken Read and I bantered on the NBC Sports Network that we had spent many hours over the years waiting for a suitable wind to fill in so a race could get started. Now we wait for the wind to drop. There are no more scheduled lay days for the rest of the regatta. The boats will be out every day until one of them

wins nine races. At the post race press conference this afternoon, Spithill said his team had written a letter to the race committee saying that raising the wind limit to 25 knots would be acceptable. Dean Barker countered that the rules had been set before the match, and his boat was set up for winds of 23 knots or less. Therefore, Barker did not think changing the rules in the middle of the regatta was fair. Hmm...the middle of the regatta? One could argue that we are potentially at the end of the regatta. Spithill would like to think we are in the middle.

The pressure on both teams will build. New Zealand certainly has a comfortable cushion now, but watch out if the USA wins two more races. The Kiwi design team and shore crew will feel compelled to make changes. Sometimes changes work, and sometimes they fail. OTUSA has made many small but important changes. They too have to be careful not to take a step back. Any changes always have to be coordinated with the sailing team. I bet there are some long nights going on for both teams.

Dean Barker seems calm on the boat, and around the waterfront. Jimmy Spithill looks to be on fire every time I see him. Both will be well prepared for Race 13. If Oracle Team USA wins the first race, it sure would be nice to see a second race on the same day. Our television audience is growing daily. The drama is building too. We have never seen boats this fast in such a high stakes regatta.

Tune in to the NBC Sports Network at 4 pm Eastern time, (1 pm Pacific time) and we will take you aboard for the on going battle for the oldest trophy in international sports.

Photos courtesy of photographer Steven Tsuchiya.