

## **The Hardest Working Crew on the Race Course**

By Bill Koch

Skipper of America<sup>3</sup> and

Winner of the 1992 America's Cup.

When I was racing, what the race committee did was always mysterious to me. Sometimes, I had the impression that it was a bunch of weekend sailors who had read just enough navigational books to take a victory away from my crew. At least I felt that way on more than one occasion off the coast of San Diego, where my boat, America<sup>3</sup>, was competing against Dennis Conner's Stars and Stripes in the defender series of the 1992 America's Cup. Conner was a former commodore of the San Diego Yacht Club. It was only natural for us to feel the race committee was less than objective.

As the races progressed, our feelings towards the committee soured. Stars and Stripes performed better in smooth water and light air; we excelled in heavy air and choppy seas. Every morning, the race committee motored out of San Diego harbor to set up a diamond-shaped course. Wind shifts, velocity, currents and weather are just a few of the elements that can affect the course. If one factor changes during the course of a race, the racing area will rotate. The race committee then moves the next mark so that the diamond course overlaps the racing area. But in San Diego, the committee selected a course that with the current favored the port side, causing the boats to spend 60 percent of their time on port and 40 percent on starboard. It also happened to be the side where the water was smoother, giving an advantage to Stars and Stripes. In one race, the committee moved the pin end of the line after the start to help Stars and Stripes when she had to dip after an early start.

Although we eventually beat Conner's team and went on to win America's Cup, we believed the San Diego race committee was biased. So when Peter Reggio, a member of the Louis Vuitton Race Committee, invited me to watch the second race of the challenger finals aboard the Committee Boat, I accepted. Here was my chance to see, first hand, what the committee does and

how fair they are.

I transferred in rolling seas from my Protector to Cassiopeia, the committee boat. It was not easy. The wash from other spectator craft combined with the currents in the Hauraki Gulf had created five-foot swells. Reggio, the man who monitors the wind on the course, helped me aboard and introduced me to the other 12 members who were all wearing blue foul weather gear. It was a quick introduction. Vince Cooke, Regatta director, spoke in short quick bursts like a man with a lot on his mind. "Welcome aboard," Cooke said. "Have a seat. We have to get a race off. It is pandemonium here until we get a race going." He turned to Reggio and gave him a look as if he were begging for good news.

"Look at the wind direction change," Reggio said. "Welcome to the Gulf. 50 degree shifts." The wind is at 140 degrees and six knots.

Cooke turns to his wife Pat, the official starting timer, and gets his bearings. "Ten minutes to warning," she tells him. He frowns, picks up the phone and calls Laurent Esquier, the manager of Prada, and John Kostecki, the tactician aboard AmericaOne. "Maybe wait a bit 'til I feel good about the speed," he says. Cooke is worried that the wind is blowing between six and seven knots, not strongly enough for the crews aboard the two boats. Both have asked the committee to consider racing in breezes at least 2-3 knots stronger than the minimum in the Notice of Race. Esquier and Kostecki want to wait. "If I don't tell you otherwise, postpone it at the warning," Cooke tells his wife.

The boat rolls violently from side to side. "That's it, let's go in," says Reggio. "Be brave," replies Leo Dixon, the radio/recorder. I begin to feel queasy. I start to worry how embarrassing it would be if I became seasick. Reggio is unable to find a steady wind. One moment the breeze is 7.5 knots, a few minutes later it falls to 5 knots. Cooke picks up the phone, rolls his eyes skyward, and quietly speaks to his mysterious weatherman. It's as if he discovered the secret of life. A sea breeze is expected before the 3 p.m. cancellation time, the weatherman tells him. There will be a race.

"We should not have too long to wait," Cooke tells the crews aboard Prada and AmericaOne.

“The Italians are ready.”

“It’s a go,” says Dixon. But the announcement is short lived. Reggio jumps in with more bad news. The wind has shifted again, creating dead zones – patches where there is little air - on the racecourse. “We can always get them started and then see,” Reggio jokes.

“Once we get them going it’s out of our hands,” Cooke responds. “Can you imagine all the flack we would get if we got into a starting sequence, one of them draws a penalty and we blow it off because of diminishing breeze?”

“Chicken,” Reggio says.

The guns go off and Cooke hoists the red striped postponement flag. Cooke finds himself in a box. Now, the television crews are calling. Producers are asking questions. Air time has been blocked off. Advertising revenue could be lost. Gary Jobson, ESPN’s commentator, is the first to call seeking news. Peter Montgomery, the New Zealand announcer from Channel One, follows with his own query. Suddenly, the race committee phones ring louder than a stockbroker’s office on the evening before a federal reserve meeting. Prada calls. AmericaOne. Television crews. It’s chaos.

“Take these phones and throw them over the side,” Cooke yells, before taking a call from Prada’s manager. “I am just not ready, especially since you gentlemen said you didn’t want to race below 7.5 knots. It’s not going to get any better. You are racing at the wrong time of the month.”

Around 1:30 p.m., the skies appear to clear and the weatherman’s prediction appears to be coming to pass. The wind is 120 degrees at the weather mark and 110 degrees at the boat. Reggio plugs the wind direction into a special computer program. Fitzhugh Miller of Pensacola, Fla., created the program for Cooke. Whenever Reggio plugs in the direction of the wind, the computer spits out the proper setting for the pin end and the lat/long of the windward mark. By taking into account local currents, and other weather factors, the program will automatically set up the diamond course.

Now that a course has been laid, the committee calls the boats. Down comes the postponement

flag. A 10-minute gun sounds. Prada and AmericaOne raise their jibs and get ready to enter the starting box. Reggio continues to monitor the wind on the course. "Damn it!" shouts Cooke. "The boards are not in. Blow it off. Blow it off," he yells. Cooke calmly orders the postponement flag to be hoisted. He reminds me of a skipper aboard a racing boat. He is constantly cajoling his crew, telling them to shrug off the mistakes and get ready for the next maneuver. "We're okay," he says. "We caught it...The breeze has totally collapsed. Leave up the AP flag and notify the yachts."

Paul Cayard sails by and shouts the wind readings off his boat. Prada follows with their wind readings. The breeze is 120 degrees at the top mark and 110 at the boat. Reggio shouts that the wind has dropped to five knots. But Cooke doesn't want to hear any of it. "Set the line for 115 degrees. Notify the yachts," he says. "Let's keep going, if we have to blow it off, we can do it at the end of 10 minutes." The one minute gun sounds just as the wind builds to 6.7 knots.

"Everyone wants to go. Let's go," Reggio said.

"Kostecki does not," Cooke said. "He wants 11 knots. With only a one degree variation, I am now feeling marginally comfortable."

In a matter of seconds, the gun sounds. The boats cross the line. Prada nearly scrapes the committee boat and grabs an early lead. Cooke lets out a sigh and then turns his attention to setting the bottom mark. He orders the crew to contact the stake boat. The wind has shifted to 90 degrees at the top mark and 140 at the bottom. For the next 10 minutes, the crew agonizes over the wind conditions. They will have to change the course direction again. Cooke orders a change in the leeward mark and notifies the yachts. We pick up and anchor 0.8 miles to the new location.

"How are the yachts at the top mark," Cooke asked. The wind shifts yet again. Cooke calls for the bottom mark to be moved again. A mad scramble unfolds. The committee is battling to make the course square to the wind. Everyone is so busy, we almost forget about the race. I glance up and notice Prada has an hourglass in her spinnaker when she hoists her jib before the mark. The wind shifts again.

“Move the mark 70 degrees and clear everybody west, now,” Cooke shouts. “Call spectator control. Let’s peel out of here and drag the other out. Tell them to get back. When the yachts make this turn they will get into the fleet,” Cooke says.

The crew jumps to the starboard side of the boat. “Get back, get back,” they yell at the boats, bobbing in the water. Cooke leans over the side and yells “You’re in the way. Get back.” I can hear complaining on board many of the spectator boats. Quinto Allen, the captain and owner of Cassiopeia, the committee boat, lifts his anchor and starts pushing the spectator fleet off the racecourse.

Prada rounded the mark about 500 meters behind us and followed us up the course on starboard. AmericaOne rounded 1 minute 6 seconds later. She did not tack, but stayed on the starboard side. Eventhough she has a clear path, Prada tacks two and a half minutes after rounding the mark. Cayard continues on starboard. Two minutes later, Prada tacks onto starboard towards the buoy line. The stake boat reports that the wind has shifted again to 51 degrees but it is 20 degrees at our location.

“We will have to move the marks again,” Cooke says.

At the top mark, Prada performed a jibe set and AmericaOne did a bear away. Cayard went into the spectator fleet. Prada again does not cover. From the start, the wind has shifted from 120 degrees to 20. On the run down, the wind shifts to 45 degrees, putting AmericaOne significantly ahead of Prada. Cooke and Reggio now scramble to set the mark. After setting the top mark, they look as if they will fall over from exhaustion. “You wanted to move every leg. You had to do it this race,” Reggio says to his skipper.

As the boats tack up to the weather leg, Cooke asks Reggio where he wants to set the finish line. Wind reports show another shift to 20 degrees. “Let’s move the finish,” Reggio says. The crew goes through a painstaking and careful procedure to set the finish line. Meanwhile, the wind at the top swings back to 045 degrees from 020. They have to move the finish line again.

“I want readings every 30 seconds,” Cooke says. “Okay, get anchor up and go to 030 degrees. It is clearly going right. Compromise at 025 degrees.”

“You got good bites out of me today, don’t get piggy,” says Reggio.

During the last windward leg, the wind has shifted 10 degrees and the yachts are now reaching to the finish line. Bang. AmericanOne finishes 2 hours, 30 minutes and 12 seconds after starting, Prada finishes 1m 34s later.

The crew on Cassiopeia congratulate one another. Joyful in their exhaustion, they eat what is left of their lunch. “I don’t want to go to the press conference and only say the wind shifted all day,” says Cooke. Dixon mentions that he has taken 4,737 wind readings and put in 774 marks in 129 races during the challenger series with few problems. Cooke’s wife wants “hazard pay next week.”

Cooke comments that Prada has been very easy to work with. “They could have protested us in one race when we put up the wrong direction on the boards in a fog. It cost them the race. They did not protest, but came to us and explained. We said they were right and would fix it and did.” As I got off the boat to race into my office, the committee sang me a song written by Lynn Coplestone, the backup timer aboard the boat. It went something like this:

Auckland is our sailing place  
Where the challengers are happy  
Cause their boats match race.

We’re the team of the race control  
Setting time courses is our goal

Captain Cooke has us all set up  
Racing for the Louie Vuitton Cup

I got off exhausted, feeling as if I had been on either Prada or AmericaOne. I realized that the race committee faces the toughest challenge of all: trying to be square and fair to

all with no glory in extremely variable conditions. The committee had to move every mark during the race, sometimes twice. They work just as hard as the sailors on the yachts as they try to anticipate and adapt to fickle wind conditions. I learned later that all the TV commentators blamed the spectator fleet for Prada's loss. From overhead it may have appeared that Prada had to tack away to avoid the fleet. But I was on the boat, clear to leeward and ahead of Prada. She had a clear path and chose to tack because, as a crew member would later say, she was anticipating a tack from AmericaOne. Cayard chose to sail into the spectator fleet at the top mark. He knew the risks and went ahead anyway, without complaining. Eight years after my experiences in San Diego, I now realize the race committee deserves as much praise as the sailors.

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