Americas cup, now you see it, now you don't

Aside: The mouth of the South, meets the establishment.

An excerpt from the new upcoming book, "Now you see it, Now you don't." by Eric Smith

"If you want to win, you've got to risk losing." Ted Turner

Interlude: My Brush with World-Class Racing and the America's cup story

My introduction to big-league sailing wasn't exactly uneventful.

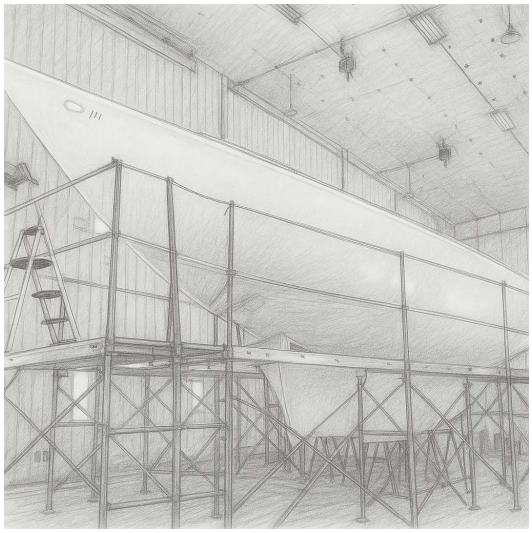
It was early spring of '77. After working with Gary Jobson, America's sailing guru, on the "boat shoe caper" and pushing S2s (a sailboat line I introduced to America), Gary invited me up to Newport to check on Courageous refitting progress at the boat yard — Courageous the boat that would go on to win the 37th edition of the America's Cup race. On the way, he suggested we stop and race with some friends on their 80' maxi (Over 70' sailboat) out of Rye, New York. "You can join the winch grinders," he said.

So off we drove, straight into a storm hammering the East Coast. By the time we reached the American Yacht Club on Long Island Sound, in Ct., the Nor'easter storms rain was lashing sideways and the wind was blowing near gale strength. When we got there, half the fleet decided not to race. We weren't a part of that half of the fleet. (Gary would go on to prove his stoicism in the stormy 79 Fastnet race where there were, unfortunately, a loss of 15 lives. He and Ted Turner kept the pedal to the metal to go on to win big with the remaining, bedraggled fleet trailing behind.)

On board I was introduced to about 18 crew, including a linebacker-sized grinder named Bruce, who would be my "coach." The grinder is the least-talented crew--beginner's job: two of you on opposite handles facing each other, cranking bicycle style winch handles like lunatics, trying to keep the sails trimmed. Once those handles started spinning, they became a blur. Bruce warned me: "If your hand slips off, don't re-engage unless you want your wrist broken." In the heat of battle, I remembered his advice and saved myself from a trip to the ER.

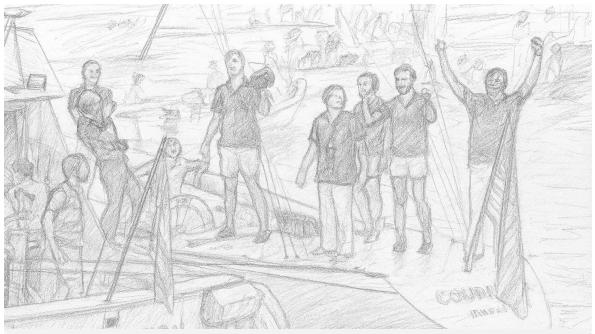
We tucked a reef in the main, tried a #2 headsail, nearly rounded up twice, and finally settled on our smallest sail (outside of a storm jib) our #3. By the ten-minute gun, we were prowling below the line, Gary calmly calculating time and distance like he was doing multiplication tables in his head. At the start, the navigator counted us down, "Three… two… one…" — and we exploded across the line within a heartbeat of the gun. From that moment, no one caught us.

We won, made it back first to the dock, peeled off our soaked foul-weather gear, spread it out in the trunk as best we could hoping it would dry some and not be too odorific, and, that done, Gary and I with our wet gear piled into Gary's car bound for Newport.



That night, we found ourselves at the Candy Store restaurant—the epicenter of America's Cup gossip. Sailors, wannabes, and tourists packed the upstairs bar ideally perched with an overview of the harbor and goings on, while Gary held court. Before long, a table of martini-sipping New York PR girls gravitated closer, led by a tall, glamorous blonde named Elenor Ramsey. She peppered Gary with questions, laughing a little too easily. Gary, ever the celebrity in his element, invited her and a handful of others for a private, secret tour of Courageous, Ted Turners re imagined America's Cup contender, in the guarded shed two blocks away.

So off we went, ducklings behind Mother Goose Jobson, rain pelting down as we shuffled toward the guarded doors. Gary whispered to the miserable-looking cop on duty, and the pedestrian door opened like a portal into Oz.



Later, in summer, Courageous was appointed the American contender and went on to win the America's cup. Keeping the grand tradition alive—for now!

Inside stood Courageous. A raw aluminum beast, balanced high on scaffolding, still unpainted but already magnificent. We climbed the stairs, hair brushing the rafters, staring down at the skeleton of a legend being built. The silence was reverent. As Gary explained the salient changes being made to the old war horse, which I absorbed with great interest, but the explanations were pretty much over the heads of everyone else. No one spoke until we stumbled back into the rain, and back to the Candy Store where the bar chatter picked up like nothing had happened except for a bunch of forlorn water logged celebrators had re-entered the noisy din already in progress.

Back to our freshly minted starting line, Elenor was glued to Gary's side. As we left, she slipped him her card and whispered, *"Next time you're in New York, call me."*

Minutes later, we were back in the car, wet gear stuffed in the trunk, windshield wipers slapping. Gary pulled out the card, looked at me, and asked, "Want it?"

I shook my head. Without another word, he rolled down the window and flicked it into the stormy night.

What I took away from my brush with America's cup

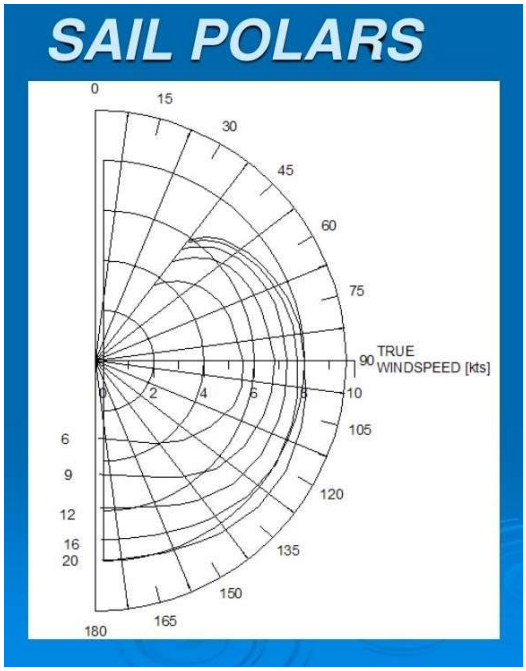
America's Cup technology comes home: For racing and business. Ocham instrument technogy became the next Blitz advantage. (Blitz was the common name of my racing boats used to promote my business and the boats I sold.)

Gary eventually introduced me to the geniuses at Ockam instruments the leaders in innovative racing electronics.

With Ockam's expert help setting everything up — and my growing comfort with computers — it was a short step to connect our new Epson laptop to the Ockam system. Suddenly, we had a smaller, slightly simpler version the kind of onboard technology that the 12-Meter teams like *Courageous* were using in America's Cup racing. Only, instead of millions, it cost us a few thousand dollars — plus a promise to help promote Ockam to the consumer market.

We had displays on the mast for the trimmers and another over the companionway for the helmsman and afterguard. The real secret, though, was learning how to use the data — understanding "target speeds" and how each boat's performance changed with wind speed and angle. Every sail had to be tested and logged.

Most crews didn't have the patience for that kind of work, but we stuck with it — sailing farther, testing longer, learning more.



It took hours of practice. Motoring and sailing up and down the calibrated one mile marked legs on the Chesapeake, and out in the Bay. We calibrated our speedometers on the measured mile, gathering hundreds of data points. We anchored in place to measure the current (measured speed, when the boat was still.) Before computers, this kind of analysis just wasn't possible. Now we could crunch numbers onboard, save the data to tape or floppy disk, and refine it back at the office. This all translated into having on the fly data from polars we created internally. For each sail, and every condition we simply knew what speed we should be attaining.

At the bar, they said we were lucky. Maybe so — but we were the most consistently lucky sailors they'd ever seen. Years later, Scott Allen — a top sailmaker and computer expert — told us he admired that we'd been the first on the Bay to bring computers into our sailing routine.

That same drive for incremental improvement carried into business. We used what we'd learned from racing to build smarter boat ownership programs, showing people, with the help of my computer programming skills, how to own a yacht for less than they thought possible. Success came from the same place — working harder than the competition and always learning how to use new technology better.

Even when we later upgraded from self-programming on our old TRS80 Radio Shack computer, to professional Microsoft systems with professional CRM software, the programmers said our homemade CRM programs — the ones handling over 40,000 prospects — couldn't possibly work. But they did. And because we already understood what was possible, we ended up doing more with those systems than anyone expected and became a leading boat dealer in the country. The secret to success was truly a better understanding of and making full use of the new technology, and the idea of recruiting a network of enthusiastic owners to help market what was, an exceptional program.

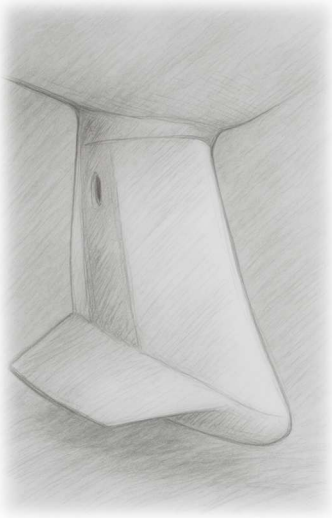
We knew then what most successful people know today—it's always better to work smarter than just harder, and if you do both, you will end up #1.

3. Interlude: The Australian Connection

Just to close the loop on America's Cup influences — and Gary Jobson's ongoing ripple effect in my life — here's what happened when fame, television, and one determined Aussie keel collided.

After his America's Cup success, Gary became the golden boy of sailing. He parlayed his new celebrity into a whirlwind of speaking gigs, books, and top-tier race programs around the world. But the next big race would change everything — not just for Gary, but for sailing itself.

The brash, outspoken Southerner who helped spearhead *Courageous* — the man whose flamboyant style earned him the nickname "The Mouth of the South" — turned his attention to another bold experiment: building a first-of-its-kind cable news network called CNN. At the same time, the Cup itself took a dramatic turn.



When Australia won the Cup with their "legal-but-sneaky" winged keel, the trophy — and the bragging rights — shifted south—way south, half way around the world to the land down under. The next defense would be held in Perth, on the far western edge of Australia. Perth is known for its brutal winds and short, steep seas — what sailors politely call "lumpy." They sailed in this stuff for breakfast.

Every team had to redesign their boats for the conditions. Advantage: Australia—they were well acquainted with sailing conditions there.

CNN tagged Gary to help deliver the **first-ever live televised coverage of the America's Cup**. Dennis Conner — previous Cup winner and America's best hope — was selected to lead the challenge, while Australia exercised its right to choose the venue.

The Australian sneaky winged keel.

After Courageous, The Australians went on to have their own secret weapon in the 83 America's cup and broke the American victory record (The longest unbroken string in any American sport) for having 132 successful American defenses.

With much controversy, and a gnashing of teeth, the NY. Yacht club had to turn over the trophy to the innovative Ben Lexcen's wing keeled boat Australia II at the end of that years racing. The Australian teams totally new, innovative design went on to become a popular option on production cruisers with its increased performance and shallower draft.

The Austalians simply exploited a flaw in the rule, and then camouflaged the results well!

They kept the keel draped in a canvas bag when the boat returned to land at the end of the day, to eliminate photos. The back half and wing were painted blue so that from a helicopter view, the keel looked like a conventional trapezoidal shape. The ruse worked, and the design wasn't revealed until after the racing was over.

All legal, all demoralizing, the later, defender Dennis Conner and the Americans had to go back to the drawing boards.

Gary headed to Perth early and rented a small condo for his wife, who was expecting twins. There was a spare room for a guest or two. I was lucky enough to be one of them, so Wife #2 and I packed our bags and made the long, literal halfway-around-the-world journey.

We turned it into a proper adventure — stops in Hawaii, Tahiti, and Bora Bora. Spectacular places, wonderful people. After America lost the challenger trials to New Zealand, we visited there as tourists. The Kiwis treated us like wounded veterans. Once they discovered we were Americans at the local bar, they refused to let us buy a beer, competing instead to console the "poor defeated sailors."

Arriving in Australia…

Who knew; after arriving at the East Coast of Australia, Perth and the West coast is further than the trek from New York to Los Angeles. A 6 hour plane trip, after over 24 hours spent on planes already (albeit broken up by a few choice stops). You've really got to want to do this, and I did!

We arrived in Perth just in time for the first trials. No computer graphics back then. No satellite feeds, no digital anything. Just rain, wind, and a whole lot of improvisation

CNN — still in its early days — had chartered a massive 100-foot, 100 passenger Plus, steel catamaran as the press boat. It sounded glamorous. It wasn't. The plan was for one guy to hold a five-foot satellite dish on deck, trying to aim it at a receiving dish on shore to transmit Gary's commentary and live video being taken from the boat. Within minutes, everyone except Gary and me was seasick. The guy holding the dish was convinced his arms were going to fall off. Eventually, the seasick reporters took turns holding the dish up, wobbly aiming it towards the shore target— which didn't exactly help the coverage.

Gary, ever the pro, stood at the rail, spray flying into his face every few seconds, keeping his microphone dry with one hand while the cameraman fought to keep his lens clear. Between commentary and takes, he ducked behind the rail, swapped mics, and repeated his commentary for radio. It was madness — and it was groundbreaking. For the first time, sailing had live TV coverage.

It was madness.

It was also historic.

For the first time, sailing had live television coverage — and I had a front-row seat.

I couldn't have been more delighted than to be there with a Birdseye view for the excitement.

The CNN Shore Setup

CNN's "studio" looked like a pile of double-wide temporary building site, office trailers dropped from a crane and left where they landed. Some had an upper level reached via outside hastily rigged steel staircases. Ours served as the interview room. The guest that day? Dennis Conner — the brash, brilliant, controversial face of American sailing racing again for the America's cup.

Gary sat in the hot seat, makeup hastily dabbed on, lights glaring, technicians crammed shoulder to shoulder with cameras and cables. We were patched into *Good Morning America* with Joan Lunden on a twelve-hour time delay hook up. Gary was ready, notes in hand. The countdown began:

Three minutes.
Two forty-five.
Two thirty.

No Dennis.

We chatted nervously with Joan during the commercial break. Then — commotion outside the door.

Then — commotion at the door.

Laughter, voices, a bit of chaos

— and suddenly, Dennis Conner himself burst through the doorway like a conquering hero. Disheveled, sunburned, grinning, with traces of white zinc oxide still on his lips and flanked by two very attractive yacht groupies. He clapped Gary on the shoulder. “Gary! How the hell are ya!” A boisterous explanative, more than a question.

He dropped into the designated chair, still laughing, while the makeup artist attacked him with a sponge. The clock hit ten seconds. The trailer went dead silent. The red light blinked on.

And just like that, Dennis transformed.

“Good morning, Joan,” he said smoothly, in that calm, professional voice America knew so well. “It’s seven p.m. here in Perth. Lovely to be with you.”

The interview was flawless — thoughtful, modest, downright polished. Then the camera light clicked off, and the trailer instantly erupted in laughter, chatter, and the sound of champagne corks somewhere in the hall.

Dennis was back to form, slapping backs, flirting with his entourage (now mysteriously grown to three), and sweeping out into the night.

Gary and I packed up and headed back to the condo, drenched again, exhausted, and laughing at the sheer absurdity of it all.

The Grand Finale: High-Tech, Low-Budget

Our day wasn’t over yet.

CNN needed an animated graphic to show a close-call tacking duel from that afternoon’s race — and “the tools at hand” turned out to be a child’s wading pool, two model sailboats, and a ladder.

Gary and I climbed into the pool, knee-deep in cold water, each of us pushing a toy sailboat in rough sync with his narration. Our cameraman balanced on the ladder above us, trying to get the “aerial shot.” Every few seconds he’d bark directions —

“Slower!

Turn to port!

Less splash!” —

as Gary calmly described the action like we were covering the moon landing.

In the final cut, you could just make out our bathing suits and pale feet under the water, valiantly steering history in miniature.

Primitive? Absolutely.

Effective? Completely.

But that little wading-pool masterpiece was the start of the slick computer race graphics you see today — proof that genius and absurdity often share the same deck.

The next morning, CNN aired the segment with our brand-new graphics — a crude animated sailboat sliding across the screen like a kindergarten art project. But no one cared. It was the dawn of televised sailing, and Gary had somehow pulled it off — microphone, rain, seasickness, and all.

“*We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.”* Popular Sailing quote

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