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From The Sunday Times

September 21, 2008

## America's Cup heads for calm waters

### A legal compromise could put the America's Cup back on track in time for a full race series to be held in Summer 2011

Andrew Longmore

AS ALINGHI, the America's Cup defenders, and Team Origin, the British challenger, battled it out in the final of the iShares Cup on the windless waters of an Amsterdam dock yesterday, new hope emerged of a peaceful solution to the legal war that has dogged the America's Cup for the past year.

Ernesto Bertarelli, the founder of Alinghi, has held a series of private meetings with the major challenging syndicates, including Larry Ellison of BMW-Oracle and Sir Keith Mills, owner of the British-based Team Origin, to establish a binding format for future editions of the America's Cup.

Until recently, after a series of legal rulings in the US Supreme Court, it seemed certain that the next Cup would be a match between Alinghi and Oracle alone, but the latest edict from the courts, which found in favour of Alinghi, and a belated outbreak of common sense, has produced a marked softening of attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic.

"We've wasted time and money and we're back at square one," said Bertarelli. "Larry and I might be a lot closer than the media and some people think. Our strategy has failed, everyone has realised that this is not constructive and we now have an opportunity to build something really successful for the future of the America's Cup."

If this is not just brave talk, the new schedule would involve a series of Acts between the challengers and possibly Alinghi in the old America's Cup boat next season and a newly designed AC boat for 2010, followed by a full America's Cup series in the early summer of 2011. The role of Keith Mills and Britain's Team Origin has been critical to the potential compromise. If successful, the new initiative would be timed perfectly for Ben Ainslie and Iain Percy, Britain's triple and double Olympic gold medallists, who were both on the dockside in Amsterdam yesterday outlining their plans for the next four years.

Ainslie only recently revealed that he was battling ill-health as well as the rest of the fleet in winning his third successive gold medal in Beijing. Three days before the start of the Olympics, Ainslie contracted mumps. "I looked like Elephant Man," he said. "But I tried to keep it quiet. It was a story I didn't need."

Since being hit by glandular fever in 2004, Ainslie has had to manage his health carefully, but he is committed to winning a fourth Olympic gold in home waters in 2012. "I have to make sure that I take time away from it all sometimes, which is hard," he explained. "I'm certainly aiming to be at the Olympics again in 2012, but it won't be easy. The biggest thing is fitness. I'll be 35 by then and you've got to be superfit when you get back into the boat."

The GB sailing team will hold a planning meeting this week to set out the agenda for the next Olympiad, after which Percy and Ainslie fly to Bermuda to rehone the match-racing skills that will be needed for the next America's Cup, whatever the date.

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If logic prevails – and reason is not an obvious feature of America's Cup history – Ainslie will be back at the helm of an AC boat next summer, with Percy as his tactician, and Team Origin, who were ready to go a year ago under the leadership of Mike Sanderson, will be back in business. An America's Cup in 2011 will leave Percy and Ainslie with 14 months to prepare for the Olympics.

"I'm a big believer in being able to go away and do other things," says Percy, who helmed the Italian +39 syndicate in Valencia at the last America's Cup. "You can get stale if you have to commit to staying in small boats for four more years. Ben and I have done that and we've proved that we can do the America's Cup and win a gold, though, in my case, it was close, I admit.

"Touch wood, we can get back on track with the America's Cup now. The great thing with Team Origin is that we've stuck together over the past year, though nothing much has been going on. We've got a lot of work to do to beat Alinghi at match-racing, we know that, but we've got brilliant, talented people in the team and, almost more important, we're all good mates."

In the absence of the America's Cup, Alinghi and Team Origin have been engaged in a season-long duel for the iShares Cup, a pan-European series raced in Extreme 40s, high-powered catamarans capable of speeds of up to 40 knots. Races are short and sharp, even in the limited breeze of a beautiful Dutch autumn afternoon, but in only its second full season, the iShares Cup has attracted enough interest from sponsors, sailors and spectators to encourage realistic thoughts of further expansion into the Middle East and Asia in the next two years.

"We're trying to find the balance between sporting credibility, which is important for the sailors, and putting on a show," says Mark Turner, CEO of OC Events, the organisers of the series. "We're trying to be different and radical, but we need to keep this tight and compact, maybe 10 boats and 10 strong brands, and we need the best guys to be racing these boats."

The presence of Alinghi, Team Origin and, in Cowes, a guest appearance from two Oracle boats has brought the iShares Cup real credibility, a sort of mini-America's Cup, within the world of sailing and with potential sponsors. By the end of the second day of racing yesterday, Alinghi had increased their lead in the overall series, with TO, skippered by Rob Greenhalgh, slipping away in the light winds. At least, for once, the competition was on the water, not in the courts.

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