Can the U.S. Win the World Series of Sailing?

For 111 years, we have been masters of yachting, but next week Australia challenges our best—and the Russians are waiting their turn

By CHARLES R. MEYER

NEXT WEEK, the entire continent of Australia will focus its attention on the waters off Newport, R.I.

There an Australian crew will try to do something that hasn't been done in 111 years—beat American yachtsmen in the World Series of sailing.

Several months ago, I flew "down under" to see how serious the Australians were about winning the famed America's Cup. I clung to the mast of the *Vim*, pace setter for Australia's challenger, *Gretel*, and studied the impressive 12-meter sloop as it sliced gracefully through the choppy waters off Sydney.

Half a million cheering Aussies lined the shore, and behind me a crewman was saying in cockney tones: "She'll trim you Yanks in September. Trim you good."

And watching the sleek *Gretel*, I thought she had a fine chance of doing just that. Of course, we won't really know the winner until the end of the best-of-seven races, which begin Sept. 15. But if the *Gretel* doesn't beat the U.S. entry, it won't be because the Australians haven't tried.

The *Gretel* is a truly national entry. Australian industrialists underwrote her, Australian miners contributed the lead for her 23 tons, and Australian shipbuilders constructed her at cost—$700,000. Almost every Australian youth who had handled sail hoped to make her crack crew.

But sentiment, money, and skill don't guarantee winning the America's Cup. The "ould mug" was put up for competition in 1850 by the Royal Yacht Squadron of Great Britain as a symbol of the best in world-wide sailing. The first race was held the next year—and the single U.S. entry beat a pack of British boats.

In 16 subsequent competitions, British and Canadian interests spent $20 million trying to get the cup back, but the Victorian silver monstrosity still rests in a glass case in the New York Yacht Club. The last challenge to our racing supremacy came in 1958, when our *Columbia* trounced the British *Sceptre*.

Australians know that the U.S. hasn't been resting on past laurels. All summer the best Yank sailors and sailing craft have been undergoing trials, and our defender next week will be an improved sloop with a fine-hone crew.

While in Australia, I talked with *Gretel's* designer Alan Payne, who told me: "We have the best crew in the world. There remains the question, a rather large question, of whether I designed a boat worthy of their talents."

The British already are getting set to challenge this year's winner—and the Russians hope to get their first crack at the Cup in 1964. The race is held whenever a challenger is ready, rather than at specific intervals.

ALEXI PROMISLOV, president of the Soviet Yachting Federation, says: "We are working on (an entry) and hope to have a fabric suitable for sails in two years."

Yachtsmen wonder, though, whether the Soviets are interested in sport or propaganda. Right now, it's strictly sportsmanship between those old friends, Aussie and Yank.

Who's going to win? After watching both sides in trial performances, I would say much depends on the wind.

The Australians are accustomed to heavy-weather sailing, taking rough combers while near-gale winds howl through the rigging. If we have a nor'easter off Newport next week, the Australians will have a definite advantage. But if Indian summer lays down a bluebird calm—which is often the case this time of year—the Aussies very well may fall behind our sloop.

So years of working and planning on both sides of the equator will go the way Lady Luck and the storm gods will. These are the unpredictable elements that make sailing races so very exciting.

After secret building, "Gretel" sailed tough tests in Sydney before Australia challenged the U. S. for the America's Cup.

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