Perfect match

David Salter enjoys all the action of Hardy Cup on Sydney Harbour and meets some of the match racing stars of tomorrow

"GREAT START! Bang on the gun, and he's got the other fellow pinned." With a nicely chilled Riesling in hand, Sir James Hardy is perched in the cockpit of the family yacht *Nerida* watching the first day of racing in the event he founded more than 20 years ago.

"Oh no! Don't tack! Stay this side and wait for the knock!" Jim is really getting into it now, and for those of us who love the cut-and-thrust aspects of sailing, this is splendid entertainment. Two boats, inches apart, racing each other with unbridled aggression.

The Hardy Cup was established in 1983 to encourage the development of elite youth sailing in Australia. Sir James had long admired the Mallory Cup regatta in the USA, an event that brings together champions from various classes to compete in a 'best of the best' one-design format. That initiative helped give America such superstars as Bus Mosbacher and Buddy Melges and underpinned a generation of dominance at the pinnacle of world match-racing, the America's Cup. Australia had no equivalent.

Originally organised by the Navy and sailed in Tasars, the Hardy Cup drifted into neglect until the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron approached Sir James a few years ago with the idea of rejuvenating the event as an Under-25 match racing competition. The Squadron generously took on the entire cost and immense organizational workload of the regatta (they don't 'do' sponsorship at the RSYS), and have swiftly established it as an international ISAF Grade Three event.

This year the Cup attracted teams from New Zealand, Great Britain, Sweden, Italy, USA and Japan to test their match-racing skills against the best young sailors from the Squadron, CYCA and RPAYC.

The regatta is now raced in a fleet of identical Elliott 6 sloops. These are 3-person, open-cockpit trainer keelboats specifically designed for elite youth racing. These mini-yachts are our sport's equivalent to go-karts, the class in which so many of today's F1 drivers began their motor racing. Greg Elliott's clever design is 20.3ft LOA with a 7.8ft beam and displaces just 560kg. Hiking straps and flared topsides help sit the boat down. Its high-aspect fin and small bulb keep the little yachts stable but still 'tweaky' enough to reward athletic crew-work and confident trimming.

"In our day it took us half a lifetime to acquire the skills and experience to go serious match racing."

Runaways: Downhill legs were fast and furious.

Everything reasonable is done to ensure fair, even racing. Before each round of 'matches' skippers draw from a hat for one of the six boats. They even toss for which end of the line they will enter the manoeuvring area to begin the mandatory 'start-minus-four minutes' sparring period. The sails are all made at the same loft (MacDiarmid) from the same cloth. The symmetrical spinnakers, in particular, took a frightful hammering but appeared to survive the series unscathed.

Shadows the racing

A maintenance boat with a duty shipwright shadows the racing at all times. During the final set of matches he hopped aboard to stitch a quick repair to a broken hiking strap as the Elliott reached back and forth across Athol Bight in an 18-knot Southerly. Earlier, a badly bent tiller extension was replaced within minutes. In case of major damage or collision an identical pair of Elliotts was held on standby back at the CYCA dock.

So, why match racing rather than conventional around-the-buoys contests? In an era where everyone seems to want instant gratification – fast food, frenetic video clips and Twenty20 cricket – this rapid, all-action format is sailing's response. The course is a highly-compressed windward/leeward layout (see diagram). In standard 10-20 knot breezes each race takes around 15 minutes, allowing crews to tackle between 6 to 10 races in each day of high-rotation sailing.

With six yachts dashing about on the same small stretch of water, plus up to 12 official and support craft all fussing about the track, race management is complex. Veteran regatta boss Tony Denham was master of ceremonies for the Hardy Cup and held everyone to the detailed sequence of starting evolutions specially devised for the event.

At the same time, he kept adjusting the course with quiet fastidiousness, directing small movements of the top mark and finishing line orientation via VHF to ensure a fair course.

Each pair of boats was sent off to do battle at 5 minute intervals so there was always plenty for spectators to watch. You could take your pick from a hammer-and-tongs pre-start battle, perilously close crossed tacks and slam dunks up the windward leg, or a burst of gunnel-to-gunnel, fast-gybing downhill brinkmanship.

This is about as close to full-body-contact sport as yachting gets. Action is fast, colourful and never boring. The teams competing for this year's Hardy Cup threw everything at each other with all the fearless enthusiasm of youth. There were plenty of full-pelt close shaves and the level of boat-handling skill on display was often breathtaking.

Crossing tacks required plenty of courage.

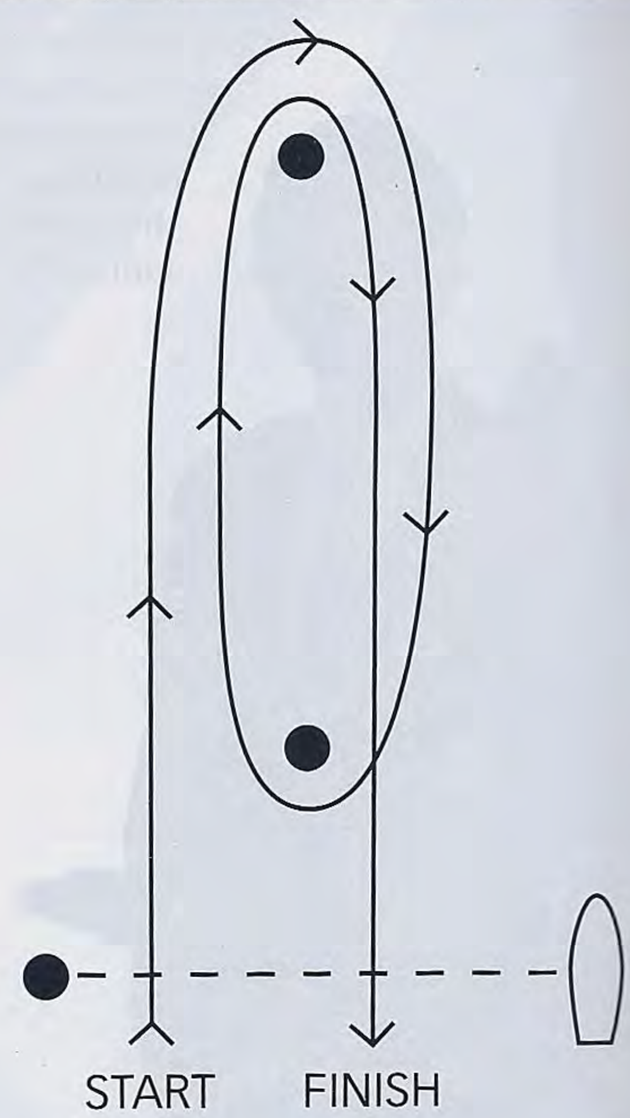
Mind game

And then there's the 'mind game' dimension. The regatta was sailed in a fine sporting spirit, but that didn't mean skippers refrained from attempting to out-psych or bluff their opponents. Elaborate tactical feints, double false tacks, sneaky rule-bending, outrageous protests and a healthy amount of old-fashioned bellowing were the order of the day. (What splendid preparation for the prolonged wars of attrition that await the best of these sailors when they graduate to the America's Cup ranks.)

The appeal of this hyperactive, just-add-water style of racing is greatly enhanced by the on-course umpiring. An umpire's RIB buzzes about between each pair of competing boats – often at alarmingly close quarters – dispensing instant justice from the first preparatory signal to the final gun.

Protests are adjudicated instantly, penalties imposed and taken within seconds, overlaps verbally confirmed or denied in real time as the two boats hurtle downwind together. If you don't know your ISAF and Appendix C (Match Racing) rules inside

Match Racing Course – Hardy Cup



out, then prepare for a demeaningly quick exit via the back door.

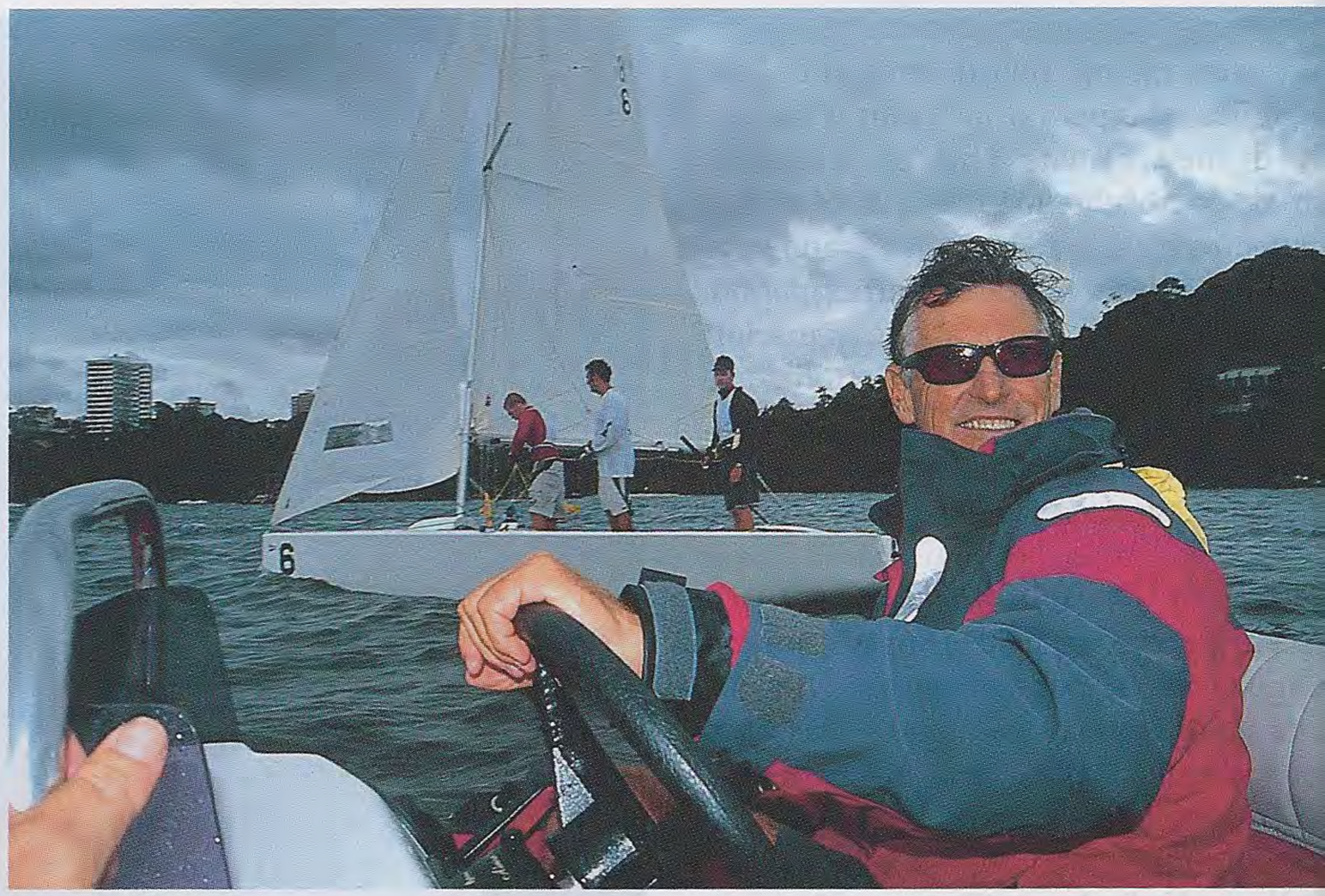
Those of us looking on who tend to enjoy a more laid-back approach to racing took a while to fall into the rhythm of the umpire's regular whistle-blowing and the code flags constantly popping up and down ("Hey, what was that for? He looked clear ahead to me!") but the system of immediate adjudication certainly adds excitement to the sport.

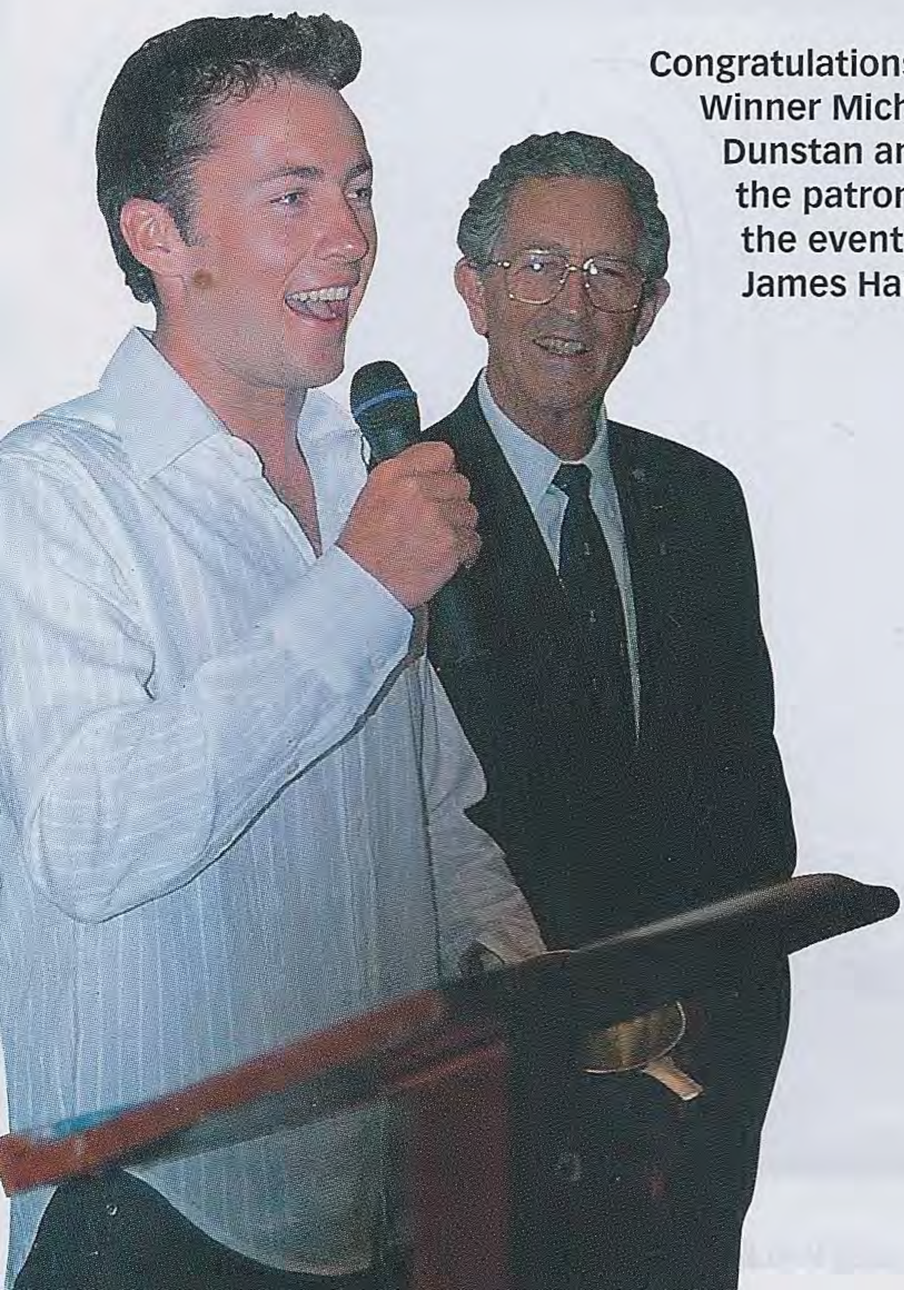
If both boats attract a red flag they cancel each other out and the penalties then need not be taken. There's a tremendous build-up of tension as the first skipper to be 'pinged' then tries desperately to force his opponent into a balancing infringement.

Highly-rated

The highly-rated Northern hemisphere visitors were all eliminated before the semi-finals, underlining the strength of Australian and New Zealand sailors in their own backyard. After four days of hard racing, the best-of-five match final to decide the 2004 winner of the Hardy Cup was between boats representing the RSYS (Michael Dunstan) and the CYCA (Seve Javin). Both clubs retain professional coaches for their elite youth programs and both were out in RIBs hovering at the edge of the course and then darting in to encourage their charges just seconds after each finish.

For the CYCA Jenni Bonnitcha was all motherly concern and supportiveness. Her semi-regular frown seemed to hint that she thought Seve and his crew might struggle to challenge the more experienced Dunstan-led team. Legendary around-the-world sailor David Adams coaches for the RSYS. "Patience. Breathe. Remember to breathe!" he told Dunstan, Wade Morgan and Andrew Hutchinson after they'd won the first match, "and don't over-trim the kite!"





Congratulations: Winner Michael Dunstan and the patron of the event, Sir James Hardy.

Adams kept a stopwatch on every leg of each race and his 'delta' breakdown told an interesting story. Upwind in the stiffening afternoon breeze the slightly heavier RSYS crew sailed their boat to an average seven second advantage at the top mark. Under spinnaker, the CYCA team would then usually claw back up to five seconds of that lead on the run. That's how closely matched these yachts and sailors had become.

Watching this wonderful racing at close quarters the most lasting impression is of the speed with which the young helmsmen grasped complex tactical situations and instantly applied the rules to their benefit. For most waterborne weekend warriors anything beyond a simple port/starboard or 'overtaking boat keeps clear' incident requires a fair bit of head scratching. These blokes know every trick in the Blue Book.

TOP: Winners are grinners: RSYS coach David Adams savours victory.

ABOVE: Hard driving: Racing put a premium on skill and quick thinking.

Crushing result

It was no surprise to learn that immediate after Dunstan had secured the trophy wi a crushing 3-1 result, Richard Perini co firmed that Michael would be joining h crew for the Farr 40 World Championshi the following month. A star is born.

At the presentation hosted by RS commodore Rex Harrison the even patron, Sir James Hardy, reflected on t contrast between his own Corinthian ge eration of competitive sailors and toda breed of intense young racers. "In our da took us half a lifetime to acquire the sk and experience to go serious match raci These fellows are getting to that level in j a few years. It's tremendous."