



By Jim Knowles

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The catamarans racing on the bay over the weekend leave tracks like the neighborhood cats when a dog gets loose.

The 45-foot boats tacked upwind, rounded a buoy, and on the downwind leg they cut through the bay chop like a scalpel through Jell-O in the America's Cup World Series, a lead-up to next year's real thing when 72-foot catamarans will race on the bay.

Long gone are the days of the graceful 12-meter boats with a regal figure in a captain's hat and wool sweater at the helm. Today's America's Cup sailor hangs onto a narrow pontoon wearing a skateboarder's helmet and flotation device beneath an outer layer of Gortex. You can't tell if they're sailors or volunteers in a bungee jumping experiment.

The boats are plastered with corporate logos like NASCAR racing machines. Even the sails are covered with advertising. If your boat doesn't win on the water you could enter it in the Firecracker 400 at Daytona.

One of the two Oracle boats, skippered by Jimmy Spithill, won the series of races in the regatta as thousands of spectators lined the shore along the Marina Green. The boats tacked right along the shore as they raced, a Frisbee's throw from the crowd.

At the end of the race, the crews tied up their boats to mooring buoys and waved to the fans. A band played after the race on the Marina Green where the race organizers set up a festival to accommodate the crowd in an effort to make the sport more popular, not just a yacht club thing.

Next July, boats from countries around the world will compete for the Louis Vuitton Cup. The winner of that series will meet the Oracle boat in September for the America's Cup.

If the crowd, the weather and the racing are any indication, the big race next year will be fun to watch, as long as you don't mind corporate logos plastered on everything.

CAPTION: The Energy Team leads the Oracle Team's catamaran after rounding the mark and heading back down the course on Saturday in the America's Cup World Series.

PHOTO BY JIM KNOWLES

Cats Prowl the Bay in Lead-up to Next Year's America's Cup

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