

R 2

CONGRESSIONAL CUP, 1977

The Royal Lymington Yacht Club's Congressional Cup, Britain's unique match-racing event held this year for the third time, was won again by 470 Olympic helmsman Philip Crebbin.

The two-day series, in which ten top helmsmen duelled in Contessa 32s, showed conclusively that Crebbin, who won in 1976 on points after lack of wind stopped play, is unmistakably a master of this little-known sport. It also became clear that match-racing is as different from other forms of yacht-racing as chess is from rugby football, and that it is here to stay.

The helmsmen who were invited by the Congressional Cup committee to pit their skill and their wits against one another in turn included the world half-ton champion, the Royal Ocean Racing Club's Yacht of the Year skipper, and three Olympic helmsmen. None of them was allowed to go aboard the Contessa he had "drawn" until 90 minutes before the starting gun. Each was allowed three crew in addition to the owner of the Contessa.

continued.....

The boats then fought a series of duels round a short course comprising three legs - to windward, downwind to just leeward of the start, and quickly back to windward to finish. Because each race lasted only about half-an-hour, tension was maintained at a high level. Because there were normally several pairs of boats on the short course at any one time, spectators could see all they wanted. And because the organisers took care to ensure the Contessas were as nearly as possible identical, every helmsman was fighting for his reputation.

The Contessa 32s had, of course, to comply with their Class Rules, but in addition each had a new tri-radial spinnaker by Butler Verner and a No.1 reefing genoa by Hood.

At the end of the first day's racing, a certain amount of tweaking was carried out by those skippers who considered their performance was marred by poor boatspeed, but observers could discern little difference between the Contessas, and most people felt the races were being won by tactics and quick thinking.

Ordinary tactical considerations were overridden by match-racing requirements in two immediately obvious ways:

1. It was not important to cross the starting line on the gun. But it was vital to cross it in a superior position to the other boat.
2. Tides played a far less dominant role than usual in the Solent. What counted was keeping between the next mark and the other boat.

continued.....

The starts called to mind both jousting tournaments and a Battle of Britain dogfight. Each pair of boats set off at five minute intervals. Before the starts, competitors were instructed to wait on one side of the line or the other. Then, as the gun released one pair, the next two boats would charge to meet one another, gybing and tacking in tight circles when they came together, each trying to gain the advantage. Boats tried to push one another over the line or outside the marker buoys. In retaliation, some stopped or even sailed backwards.

These pre-start manoeuvres usually decided the outcome of the races, although places did change on the course. For runner-up Peter Bruce, the leeward mark was a turning point in more ways than one. Three times he experienced sail tangles there, twice with the spinnaker and once when his genoa sheet came adrift. The delay on this last occasion was enough to lose him the race which otherwise he would almost certainly have won, and therefore it may have cost him the Cup itself.

But Bruce, despite his tangles, was the only helmsman to beat Crebbin who said afterwards that it had been a close thing all the way. Crebbin had the advantage at the start, but lost his lead after Bruce initiated a series of quick tacks during which the leach line of Crebbin's genoa caught on the mast. Bruce slipped through to win by 16 seconds.

continued....

According to Crebbin, standards were far higher throughout the fleet than they were in 1976 when he said competitors were clearly divided into those who knew the rules and the special characteristics of match-racing, and those who acted as though they were participating in an ordinary, but not so crowded, race.

In spite of the hot competition, there were no protests on the first day, and only four on the second, out of a total of 45 races. Two of the protests involved Crebbin, and three involved the Irishman Harold Cudmore, world half-ton champion.

Fuzzy-haired Cudmore, whose spirit of amiable aggression made him such a dangerous opponent, lost two protests (one to Crebbin, whom he touched at the windward mark, and the other to Peter Nicholson whom he luffed over the starting line), but successfully protested Iain Macdonald Smith over a 'barging' case.

One man who is quietly pleased about the outcome of this year's event is Jeremy Rogers who before the start had already recruited both the winner and the runner-up to help campaign his new Contessa 43 Admiral's Cup contender "Moonshine". 25-year-old Crebbin has been signed as back-up helmsman, and Royal Navy officer Bruce will navigate.

continued....

Bill Green, the instigator of match-racing in Britain (in his native California it has been an institution for 15 years) says the Congressional Cup will be staged again in 1978, again in Contessa 32s. Crebbin and Bruce will automatically be invited. Others will be selected according to achievements in different types of competitive sailing throughout the rest of this year.

As the event acquires increasing significance in the yachting calendar, its organisation inevitably becomes more arduous. But one person who will be under great pressure to stay in the driver's seat is Eileen Caulcutt who, as Chairman of the Steering Committee, was unquestionably the genius behind the success of the 1977 Congressional Cup.
