



LITTLE BROTHER: The present Oracle yachts could be overshadowed by a 90-foot by 90-foot trimaran. PHOTOSPORT

## Spectre of a huge catamaran hangs over Louis Vuitton series

by Paul Lewis

THE RACING might be all thrills and spills in the Louis Vuitton Pacific Series with the America's Cup class monohull yachts zipping round the short course — but the shadow of the America's Cup and, specifically, that of a huge catamaran is still hanging over the regatta.

Alinghi are understood to be preparing a giant catamaran for the Deed of Gift challenge, should it occur, after BMW Oracle's much-publicised court case. The yacht is not thought to be complete but is being prepared to counter the massive 90-foot by 90-foot trimaran that BMW Oracle have already built at an estimated cost of \$15 million.

But according to the shady world of gossip, rumour and intelligence-gathering which characterises the America's Cup, Oracle are thought to have left a few crew members

behind to do further work on the giant trimaran.

Oracle yesterday set sail for the final part of the Louis Vuitton regatta by beating Damiani Italia in a clash that was closer than expected before the US syndicate cleared away to win comfortably — but it is the make-up of their afterguard that has drawn some comment this week.

Along with skipper Russell Coutts, fellow New Zealanders Hamish Pepper and Hamish Willcox have been key members of the afterguard. Both are well-known and well-performed (Pepper has a long Cup association and Willcox was a coach in Britain's triumphant Olympic regatta in Beijing last year). However, neither played a prominent role in the Cup regatta in Valencia 2007.

The likes of Kiwi trimmer Ross Halcrow and highly regarded US tactician John Kosteckel have not been in Auckland at the Louis Vuitton —

with word filtering through that Oracle are "tweaking" their giant trimaran and have detailed the testing crew to ensure that it is more competitive in light airs.

The reason: even if BMW Oracle win the court case — and legal and anecdotal sentiment increasingly

Valencia again or another light airs venue according to seasonal conditions. That would help to negate — depending on the weather — the colossal speed of the BMW Oracle trimaran which is capable, according to observers, of doing 40 knots in a 20-knot wind and which

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seems to point to that verdict — Alinghi get to choose the venue for the challenge.

"They will choose a light-airs venue," said one source close to the action. "A catamaran will potentially be much more manoeuvrable and quicker in light weather."

That means Alinghi could choose

is much better suited to stiffer breezes.

"They have left people behind to have a look at the performance of the trimaran in light weather and to see if they can lift it," said the source.

The need will seem more urgent with the America's Cup court case

about to resume on Wednesday, New Zealand time, with both Alinghi and Oracle lawyers set to resume arguments in the court case which challenges Alinghi's selection of the Challenger of Record for the next America's Cup.

Oracle essentially are claiming, under the Cup's Deed of Gift, that the yacht club designated by Alinghi is a sham and has allowed Alinghi to stack the deck to an unprecedented degree for the next Cup defence.

If Oracle win, they win the right to stage a Deed of Gift match between the two 90-foot multi-hulls, with no other challengers involved. The winner of that head-to-head clash would then become the America's Cup holder and would subsequently hold a multi-challenger event.

However, Oracle say they would hold a multi-challenger event if they win the court case — a verdict is

expected late next month or early April. Alinghi boss Ernesto Bertarelli has disputed that, accusing Ellison and Coutts of trying to snatch the Cup through backdoor means instead of going through a true America's Cup series.

Whatever the result, the future of the Cup seems cloudy still with TeamOrigin skipper Ben Ainslie plumping for Alinghi to win the court case as he felt that an Oracle win would simply open the way for more legal challenges and delays.

Both sides are clearly preparing for either a head-to-head clash or a multi-challenger regatta. Alinghi have forged ahead with arrangements for the 33rd America's Cup regatta — in 2010 in Valencia. However, if Alinghi win, that will almost certainly see Oracle out of the America's Cup, which could see Oracle boss Larry Ellison walking away from the Cup altogether.



AT THE HELM: Larry Ellison and Russell Coutts. GETTY IMAGES