

THE HISTORY OF BOAT-RACING IN ANGUILLA

By David Carty

If the sport of Kings ever existed in Anguilla this generation is certainly ignorant of what it must have been like. Perhaps Carter Rey, now long dead, was the first man to race a horse somewhere around Wallblake. But every Anguillian in the past and today has seen a boat race and indeed this indigenous sport is not too much unlike the sport of Kings in many ways.

It has never ceased to impress me how unique boat racing is in Anguilla; how each boat at once exudes a quality of both grace and wildness; how the racers and the fans endow each boat with a definitely personality; and of course how the spectators ashore win and lose, at times substantially, on bets made on every race.

So, perhaps boat racing in Anguilla is our own style of the sport of Kings and each year more than ever before the wooden steeds will be groomed to near perfection. The arguments of superiority will intensify until they become unintelligible and the gamblers will Marshall their savings and dream, however precariously, of August Monday jackpots.

There are very definite reasons why Anguilla is the only Commonwealth Caribbean island where cricket takes second place to another sport and these reasons are rooted deeply but simply in history. We are all well aware by now that the climate and especially the low rainfall in Anguilla brought about a speedy collapse of the sugar plantations in the early 19th century and indeed boded ill for all commercial agriculture.

The social repercussions of this were far reaching, in the Anguillians were forced either to emigrate or seek a livelihood on the sea. Both alternatives brought Anguillians menfolk directly to the sea although quite obviously those who chose the former alternative of emigration had a less intimate relationship than those who chose the latter of

working on the sea. The latter group were divided roughly into two: those who fished and those who traded throughout the islands on the schooners.

Ancestors

The fishing boats of yore were direct ancestors of today's racing boats. They were usually between seventeen to twenty feet in length often with no deck and carrying one mast around twenty five feet in height on which hung a jib and mainsail. In these boats the fishermen used to set their pots and fish on the line as far north as Old England bank where fishing is still done today. It is significant that a tradition was built up around these fishing boats, whereby those boats that were finished hauling or setting pots first would wait on the rest so that there could be a race for home and although the more wiser reasons of safety and companionship were undoubtedly part of this tradition the spirit of racing certainly profited by it and gradually grew.

The seamen on the schooners were in many ways exciting than the fishermen and it is they also who forged our heritage of boat racing much more than any other single group. Apparently they seemed to have seized every possible opportunity to race and their schooners were far more commonly known as household names and definite personalities than the racing boats of today. The reasons for this are again quite obvious, but exciting nonetheless and it would help if we looked at this facet of our culture a bit more closely.

After the collapse of commercial agriculture on a large scale and the beginning of mass emigration there arose a very definite need for transportation and the only mode of transportation was in those days, travel by schooner or large sloop. Most of the other Leeward Islands were still by the early 19th century involved in sugar and none had developed a local trading fleet, preferring instead to rely on the merchant marines of their respective metropolitan countries. Anguilla, which had very little direct relationship with any metropolitan country, including Britain, was forced to fend for itself and this as far back as the early 18th century there were schooners and sloops which in time of drought and famine (a very frequent experience in the past) became the

lifeline of the inhabitants. From this time then the art of seamanship and especially of ship weighting was cultivated, gradually growing stronger through the years.

Golden Age

With the movement to the Dominican Republic, Aruba and Curaçao in the early part of this century the schooners and sloops reaches their golden age. The trips to and from San Pedro de Macoris were times of sorrow, danger and excitement. Like the fishing boats, the schooners used to travel together, especially on the downward trip to Macoris. They would all leave Marigot St. Martin, which had the embassy for the Dominican Republic, on the first of the second of each year with their decks chock full of men and baggage. An average schooner would carry up to two hundred men on every trip and Anguilla was left for the first part of the year, a society of women and children. The voyages back from Macoris to Anguilla we're always the most exciting time for racing. It was a constant beat to win wars lasting anything from four to twenty days and perhaps one of the reasons for the keen racing spirit that developed here was that it was something that could help to ease the extremes discomfort of the passage.

It was on these voyages that the Warspite and the Esmile became legendary antagonists and the name Captain Joe Romney an example of racing hero. It this was not all. It is important to understand the hundreds of Anguillan women who flooded to Sandy Ground or The Forest every June or July to welcome their menfolk, were spectators to the finish of that race. This there was a mass involvement in the races, especially at the end which, cultivated through the years, made boat racing a national sport.

Until the collapse of the Santo Domingo trade and the advent of the diesel engine the opportunity for racing schooners gradually diminished and the sport began to be concentrated on the fishing boats. August Monday became a natural day on which to race the boat because it was the biggest holiday apart from Christmas. A lot of Anguillans returned home at that time and the weather was almost always very good. Owners and captains of the tall schooners were usually the ones behind

these races, painting up the fishing boats and getting them slick and span for August Monday.

Growth of Boat Racing

The sport seems to have grown steadily for in the late thirties Mr Mac Owen of North Hill launch the 'Violet' which he meant firstly to be a racing boat and secondly a fishing boat. The fact that he did this points to a growth in competition and indeed he was followed quite rapidly by other who bought boats quite cheaply from St. Kitts when they were seized by Customs for smuggling. These boats were brought here and remodelled with the object being speed and not room for other pots or fish. These racing boats continued however to be fishing boats throughout the years until the rebellion in 1967 and the element of outboard engine mirror she. They gave way for a faster and more efficient type of fishing boat. Now they are left primed and groomed on the beaches, the objects of intense argument and speculation, waiting for a chance to prove themselves and as the saying goes to 'knock out the completion'.

Apart from the development of boat racing down through the years, the way in which the modern boats are fitted and handled is so unique that perhaps no other country on Earth races boats quite like the way we do. Again this style is purely traditional and has only been modified slightly. One of the basic rules in fitting is that no boat can carry external ballast; that is, no iron or lead can be attached to the hull permanently. This means that for every race the crew must place the ballast consisting of large 'bottom rocks' small 'shingle rocks' and sometimes pieces of leaf or iron, roughly amidship and directly over the keel. Minute changes changes in this ballast or 'trim' can oftentimes mean victory or defeat and this the art of ballad ring plays no small part in this sport. There is the total absence of decking. This is not only unique for boats that race a fair distance out to sea with indeed of pounds of ballast but is positively frightening at times.

A visitor to the island who was quite knowledgeable about boats once remarked that Anguillan racing boats defy the principle of buoyancy and he was no far wrong, for decking allows any boat to plunge safely over

steep waves without being swamped and sunk. As it is, year after year, races are held without any sinkings far out to sea that could

mean the loss of a hull and only occasionally is there a sinking close to shore. But as a result of this lack of decking a crewman hailing like a steam pump in heavy weather is not an uncommon sight.

'Bare-back'

Then there is what may be termed the 'bare-back' way in which the boats race. Racing an Anguillan boat is perhaps the most uncomfortable experience short of taking a night's sleep somewhere up in a pomseratt tree. The novice to boat racing will find that in one short race he will painfully discover muscles in his body which he never knew existed before.

Dice or sometimes six men make up a crew for each boat and each man has specific duties. First there is the forward man who sits closest the bow or just aft of where the mast is stepped. His duty is to observe closely the way in which the wind is blowing and advise the captain accordingly. He must be able to recognise a 'flow' or puff of wind which will either make the boat go more windward (a favouring flow) or a flow that will head the boat away from the finish (a baffling flow). Apart from this complex function which calls for a lot of experience, he must bear out the job when the boat is tacking, which serves the purpose of spinning the hull around more quickly in the water.

Behind the forward man sits the man who moves the iron. These irons are about two feet long with a rope attached to them and are very heavy. They are shifted from side to side, depending on the tack of the boat and help to keep the hull on a more even keel.

Next is the man who holds the job sheet. He has the job of holding the job in place after it has been trimmed and also to make sure it does not escape from the forward man when a tack is being made. He also makes sure that all slack sheets are free from becoming entangled as well as

taking a spell in the bailing room when needed. Behind him is the man who turns both sails. He secures the job and trims it when tacking and helps the captain to rain the sail also by bu standing on the lee rail and pulling in the boom so that the captain can take in as much slack as possible in the sheet.

Then lastly is the captain himself, who of course steers, keeps the main sheet secure by holding it under his foot against the planks (a most uncomfortable task) and giving the necessary commands.

Hard lee! Hard lee!

Unlike most other types of sail boat racing, here a race has two points instead of three. That is the moats are tested firstly by running before wind or usually westward away from the shore then around a stake boat some miles out and back ashore by beating to windward and to another stake set a few yards away from the shore, which is the finishing point. The second half of the race or the beating back to the finish is the most exciting and calls for the most skill. It is here that the very unique but hair tasing rule of the 'hard lee' can be seen. What happens in most other countries is if two boats are on convergent tacks, which means that if they continue without altering course they will collide, then the boat on the starboard tack has the right of way while the boat of the port tack must give way.

But in Anguilla it is inconceivable to give way to any other boat and this moments before collision and wreckage occur both crews cry 'hard lee', 'hard lee' and each boat tack away from each other. This rule is very hair raising and dangerous but deeply rooted in tradition even though huge arguments bordering of fights are the result of a disputed call for 'hard lee'.

Well, there it is, or some of it at least. It may be just another sport to some but to many, many people it is a festive event, and very, very Anguillan. It

is an offshoot of Anguillan culture that has remained very true to its roots and it is our own salt watered version of the sport of Kings.