

## Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part XXXV: Thomas Lipton, Pioneer of Sports Advertising



A crewman lends a hand to Captain Charlie Barr (left) at the wheel of the ninety-foot sloop *Columbia* during the 1899 *America's Cup* races.

Photograph by Hope Iselin, from *Yachting's Golden Age, 1880-1905*

“A helmsman’s skill had always made a yacht sail faster, but as the designs became more extreme, steering a ninety-footer in a blow or in close quarters could be downright frightening. Like slalom skiing, one needed perfect control and an eye for what lay ahead. With one lapse in concentration — a misstep or a caught edge — the skier runs amok. Likewise, even the slightest miscalculation of the oncoming breeze could cause the boat to heel excessively and round up out of control. So touchy were the ninety-footers that only a handful of helmsmen could steer them safely; Barr, though often accused of being impetuous could steer them like no one else.”

— Christopher Pastore, *Temple to the Wind*

*Please turn to page 48.*

## *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XXXV*

Upon failing to wrest *America's Cup* from the *New York Yacht Club* in 1899, Sir Thomas Lipton returned to London with renewed enthusiasm for his pursuit. Not accustomed to failure, Lipton was determined to succeed on a retry and he pulled no punches. With tea sales booming, expense was no object. Win or lose, a credible second challenge for *America's Cup* would likely generate the same press coverage as his first, further promoting, free of charge, the Lipton brand.

Disappointed with the poor results of *Shamrock I*, Lipton refused to give William Fife, Jr. the design contract for *Shamrock II*. Lipton was known as a demanding businessman and a second chance was seldom granted to someone who disappointed him. According to Christopher Pastore:

... Although Lipton played up his new role as Britain's amiable sportsman, behind closed doors he could be downright callous, a fixated businessman who instilled fear in his employees. He was known to visit his American offices, methodically interviewing his managers and combing through their accounts. After he left, they waited apprehensively. Once in London, he simply cabled back a list of people to be fired.

Lipton was used to having things his way. And with his last yacht's disappointing finish, he sacked Fife and commissioned the designer's longtime rival, George Lennox Watson.

By this time, Watson was approaching hull design with a highly scientific method, utilizing formulae and concepts developed by the brilliant British hydrodynamicist and naval architect, Dr. William Froude (1810-1879). Large 365,000-gallon testing tanks were constructed at William Denny & Brothers, Dumbarton, to facilitate the testing of Watson's hull models based on the Froude formulae.

In theory, Watson could design a hull that would approach perfection in terms of hydrodynamic efficiencies. His design could then be tank-tested and compared with alternate

designs, using scale models at the Denny shipyard.

Although they were now specializing in the construction of steamships, the Denny shipyard had a long history during the "great days of sail." Recall that they completed the construction of *Cutty Sark* for John Willis after the liquidation of Scott & Linton in 1869 (c.f. Part XX of *The Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry*). The team of George Lennox Watson and William Denny were clearly capable of producing a worthy challenger for Thomas Lipton, and members of the *NYYC* were feeling some heat.

For the fourth consecutive time, the contract for the design and construction of the *NYYC* defender, to be named *Constitution*, was awarded to the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company of Bristol, Rhode Island. A graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Nathaniel Green 'Nat' Herreshoff was considered the preeminent American yacht designer of the era.

Nat's first two *Cup* defenders were pitted against Lord Dunraven's two challengers and they handily safeguarded the *Cup* for the *NYYC*. His third defender, *Columbia*, easily outpaced Lipton's *Shamrock I*, which was designed by William Fife, Jr.

With each successive challenge, however, Nat Herreshoff knew that he had to improve on his previous design. A simplistic view of the challenge he faced was to maximize sail area (or power) while limiting displacement (to minimize the time handicap) with a hull that cuts through the water with minimum drag, while maintaining stability at all times.

*Constitution* was not a drastic departure from *Columbia* in basic design. The principal difference was in weight distribution, which allowed greater sail area. By minimizing the weight of the hull, additional ballast could be added without increasing displacement. This would allow additional sail to be added without sacrificing stability.

Christopher Pastore explains it in more detail:

The new yacht was a marvel of design, a further refinement of *Columbia*. Whereas ... his first *Cup* defender *Vigilant* had heralded a paradigm shift in form, *Constitution* marked a shift in construction. "The contest is no longer one of fundamental principles of design," wrote the *New York Times*, "It is now a battle of skill in building." Using a new longitudinal framing system—a skeleton of thin frames or "stringers" running from bow to stern over widely spaced web frames—Herreshoff used thinner bronze plating ... cutting the weight of *Constitution's* hull by seven tons. A lighter hull not only cut the construction cost, it also allowed him to shift weight to the keel without changing the displacement. By adding tons, literally, of stability, he increased the sail area and the yacht's overall speed.

Fully rigged, *Constitution* carried 14,400 square feet of sail, an increase of nearly 10% over *Columbia's* 13,100. Optimism among members of the *NYYC* was palpable as they anticipated the trial races between the two Herreshoff defenders, *Constitution* vs. *Columbia*.

Charlie Barr was at the helm of *Columbia* throughout the 1899 *Cup* defense against Lipton's *Shamrock I*. By 1901, he had logged hundreds of additional hours aboard *Columbia* and could drive her to the limit. Scotsman Charlie Barr and his hand-selected Danish crew had stumbled a few times during the 1899 races, but two years of practice had honed their skills.

There would be no better way for the *NYYC* to test their new defender, with their carefully selected all-American crew, than to have her spar with *Columbia*.

During the summer of 1901, a total of eighteen match races between *Constitution* and *Columbia* proved inconclusive. With the challenge races just weeks away, the score was an even 9-9. *Constitution* was demonstrably faster, but technical problems and bungling by a crew that was seemingly inept at times caused *Constitution* to lose nine of eighteen races.

The *NYYC* was faced with three options. Herreshoff recommended sticking with *Constitution*, but replacing the American crew with Barr and his team. This was rejected on

the basis that Barr was inexperienced with *Constitution* and had insufficient time to "learn the ropes."

The second option, sticking with *Constitution* and her American crew, was considered by many to be the best option, but J. Pierpont Morgan didn't like the odds. Barr's team had performed flawlessly during all 18 trial matches, and their spirits were high. Morale among *Constitution's* crew dropped with each loss to *Columbia*. Moreover, some of the technical problems that surfaced during the trial races were unnerving.

Option three, reverting to Barr and his crew aboard *Columbia*, seemed like the right choice to Pierpont. Any technical problems that surfaced during *Columbia's* 1899 races against *Shamrock I* had long since been resolved. Crew and ship were as ready as they could possibly be.

Lipton's confidence mounted when he heard the news. His second *Shamrock* had been sparring with *Shamrock I* at the same time that *Constitution* was racing against *Columbia*. *Shamrock II* consistently outpaced the older boat, even though refinements to rigging and other adjustments to *Shamrock I* had improved her performance to that of *Columbia* during the 1899 races. Sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic was similar. This would be a very close match.

*Shamrock II* was truly a masterpiece. The marine editor of *Scientific American* deemed her "the most refined form ever seen in a *Cup* challenger." Lipton was getting favorable press everywhere, in spite of the fact that the *Cup* was becoming more of a patriotic icon than a sporting trophy. America did not want to lose the *Cup* to the British, but more than a few Americans were actually rooting for Lipton. Win or lose, his increased tea sales would more than pay for the ride.

Lipton hired Captain Edward Sycamore, regarded by many to be the world's greatest yachting skipper, to command *Shamrock II*. The 1901 *Cup* challenge would be more of a dual between Captain Barr and Captain Sycamore.

more than between *Columbia* and *Shamrock II*. As the two captains jockeyed for position before the start of the first race, Barr demonstrated his brassiness. According to the *New York Times*:

It was one of the hardest fought battles for the advantage at the start ever seen in American racing waters, and from the beginning of it to the end Capt. Barr had the redoubtable Capt. Sycamore, reputed to be the smartest starting skipper in Great Britain, entirely at his mercy.

Unfortunately, however, Barr had been so aggressive in his positioning that he had violated basic yachting rules of right-of-way. This infraction was of minimal consequence since the first race had to be called off due to lack of adequate wind to allow completion of the course in the allotted time.

By the next race, Captain Sycamore displayed his own level of aggressiveness:

On September 28, with a shot of the warning gun, the two captains attacked each other. Vying for advantage behind the starting line, Barr and Sycamore, eyes locked, spun through each other's wakes. Sailing with aggression, Sycamore took the advantage, holding Barr to leeward. With the blast of the starting gun, the two yachts bolted upwind, Sycamore comfortably two seconds ahead and to windward, sailing fast and in clean air. Tacking upwind, Barr tried desperately to break away and pass Sycamore to no avail.

*Shamrock II* lead the way for much of the race, but it was a very close race. In fact, it was one of the closest races in *America's Cup* history. In the end, *Columbia* crossed the finish line just 35 seconds ahead of *Shamrock II*.

The next race was a clear win for Barr, but it was still relatively close at the finish line. *Shamrock II* crossed just one minute and eighteen seconds behind *Columbia*. In a "best of five" competition, Captain Sycamore had to win the next race or it was all over.

The third race was dominated by Captain Sycamore from the start. By most accounts, he would have won that race, had he not made a fatal tactical error near the end, which Barr was able to exploit to his advantage. Whether *Shamrock II* could have won with a

different captain is open to speculation, but Lipton was quick to credit *Columbia* as simply being a superior ship.

Having lost his second challenge, Lipton did what no other challenger had ever done before. He promptly set out for a third challenge. His recent defeat seemed to have overshadowed the more decisive trouncing of his first. For his third attempt, he returned to Fife, designer of *Shamrock I*, for something "bigger, faster, and more extreme than any yacht ever built."

By now, the *NYYC* was beginning to weary of Lipton's tenacity. *Shamrock II* came closer to claiming the *Cup* for England than had *Shamrock I*. Knowing that Lipton's "endless pool of money" would likely fund an even more credible challenger, the *NYYC* believed there was only one way to stop Lipton. They would have to build a defender that would beat Lipton's challenger so resolutely that he would be totally humiliated, and finally stop this madness once and for all.

From Lipton's perspective, however, his challenges were anything but madness. Not only had his challenges opened new doors for him at rarified levels of American society and politics, they had also done wonders for the Lipton Tea enterprise. The almost limitless exposure given to him by the press was priceless. In a very real sense, Lipton had become a pioneer in what was later to be called "sports advertising."

Considering that a 30-second advertisement during the Super Bowl is now priced at over \$4 million, not including production costs, it can easily be argued that Lipton's *Cup* challenges were an absolute bargain. Lipton, himself, recognized them as such. Win or lose, for about the price of an inflation-adjusted half-minute Super Bowl ad, the Lipton name was heralded in major newspapers worldwide.

Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue this topic in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.