



BMW Oracle's 90-foot trimaran in sea trials
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Alinghi agrees to 90-foot yacht for America's Cup

by Malcolm Curtis

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After losing a court case, the Geneva yacht club that is home to two-time America's Cup defender Alinghi agrees to field a 90-foot multi-hull vessel for the 33rd running of the illustrious sailboat race. But the Swiss team, headed by billionaire Ernesto Bertarelli, continues to joust with American challenger Oracle over who can participate in the regatta, plus where and when it will be held.

Alinghi, two-time defender of the America's Cup yacht race, is seeking further meetings with US challenger Oracle to hammer out details of a planned 2010 race, a spokesperson for the Swiss team told Swisster on Friday.

Société Nautique de Genève (SNG), Alinghi's yacht club, announced that it has accepted the challenge of Oracle's Golden Gate Yacht Club to race a multi-hull 90 feet long and 90 feet wide following a meeting with the Americans in Geneva on Thursday.

But unanswered questions remain about the 33rd America's Cup race, following up on the past two competitions that Alinghi has won off the coasts of Spain and New Zealand. The SNG agreement came after a series of court decisions in New York that ended in an appeal judgment officially declaring Oracle as challenger of record, thus allowing it to dictate the terms of the next America's Cup race.

That appears to have left the American team, owned by the software tycoon Larry Ellison and supported by sponsor BMW, in the driver's seat with regard to determining what kind of vessel can be used, who can compete and where the race will be held.

Alinghi, headed by Swiss billionaire Ernesto Bertarelli, has long been opposed to a one-on-one duel with Oracle, although that remains a prospect. SNG released a statement after Thursday's meeting expressing "its willingness for the challenger selection to be open to other teams." The Geneva yacht club also encouraged its San Francisco counterpart to "offer more time for teams to prepare if necessary."

SNG said it would be "flexible and ready to discuss other terms of the 33rd America's Cup such as race format, venue or calendar." Oracle has not publicly responded. The Alinghi statement was issued after the team's skipper Brad Butterworth, SNG vice-commodore Fred Meyer and Lucien Masméjan, legal advisor for the Geneva yacht club met for two hours with Oracle representatives.

"We have been forced to build a big multi-hull," said Butterworth, a New Zealander who skippered the Alinghi to victory in 2007. "It was the choice of the Americans and now we must yield to it," he said in comments reported by the *Tribune de Genève*.

Alinghi has started to build its 90-foot yacht at a boatyard in Villeneuve, at the eastern end of Lake Geneva, under plans that remain top secret. Lausanne's Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL) has been collaborating with the Swiss team. EPFL's scientists and engineers are also lending their expertise in such areas as composite materials and computer simulation to another project to develop the world's fastest sailboat.

Oracle, meanwhile, has been sailing its giant trimaran for several months. French yachting interests are among those said to be interested in competing in the America's Cup. "We would like another meeting with Oracle to discuss a multihull mutual-consent event," a spokesperson from Alinghi told Swisster. Whether the American group will agree to this remains very much in doubt.

Earlier this week, Oracle proposed a conventional single-hull yacht race with multiple challengers, but this was rejected by Alinghi. Under the arcane rules governing the America's Cup, unless the defender and challenger agree otherwise, the next race must involve 90-foot multihull vessels because that is what Oracle proposed as challenger last spring.

The America's Cup is widely regarded as the most prestigious sailing competition in the world, with roots going back to the mid-19th century. In 1851, *America*, a 31-metre schooner owned by a syndicate from the New York Yacht Club, outraced 15 boats from the Royal Yacht Squadron around the Isle of Wight, off the south coast of England.

Thus began a competition held periodically in differing formats for more than a century and a half. Oracle became official "challenger of record" for the 33rd race after a legal ruling rejected Alinghi's bid to accept a challenge from a Spanish yacht club, essentially created for the race.

The club had only four members, no boats, no facilities and had never run a regatta before. Oracle's Californian yacht club submitted its own challenge and succeeded in being officially recognized after a court rejected the Spanish challenge because it failed to comply with the rules for the America's Cup, dating back to a 19th century "Deed of Gift."

Subsequent efforts to craft a clear future for the 33rd competition have become every much as challenging as piloting a sailboat in a race on the high seas.