

Interview



For my next trick - the America's Cup



Donald McRae

Having won the Olympics for London Sir Keith Mills now wants to land the oldest trophy in world sport

"I hate losing," Sir Keith Mills says with such force that it suddenly becomes plain why this amiable and rotund 56-year-old is a fiercely competitive and hardened winner. As chief executive of London's successful bid to stage the Olympic Games in 2012, Mills proved that "winning against significant odds on a world stage requires searing focus and remarkable organisation". His next mighty escapade, however, will stretch him to the very limit - for Mills is now chasing a seemingly impossible dream.

A romantic gambling streak might colour his sporting adventures but the fantasy of a first British yachting victory in the America's Cup has burned inside Mills for years. In 2002, when Barbara Cassani, the American businesswoman who initially led London's Olympic bid, asked him to take control of a derided campaign, Mills protested that he was planning his assault on the oldest trophy in world sport.

"Barbara said if London won the Olympic vote, then my chances of winning the America's Cup would rise exponentially. She also said you can have a crack at the America's Cup any time but

an Olympic Games comes along once in your life. That was very poignant. I also knew if I allowed someone else to do it I'd feel dreadful whether they won or lost."

Now Mills is finally set to pursue a deeply personal ambition. The America's Cup started here in 1851 - predating the FA Cup by two decades - but that very race set a template for British mediocrity. Fifteen Royal Squadron yachts were beaten around the Isle of Wight by a lone American schooner which crossed the line 20 minutes ahead of its closest rival.

America repelled all challenges until Australia broke the longest winning streak in sporting history in 1983. A first European winner emerged in 2003 - from land-locked Switzerland. Mills was stung, and then inspired, by the irony. "Before I committed myself I needed to be confident we could win it. I don't want to just compete. Sailing has been one of our most successful Olympic sports (with Britain winning more medals, five in total, than any other country at both the 2000 and 2004 Games) and we've got great talent among yachtsmen and designers. The fact we've got 60 Brits working in America's Cup teams in this year's competition in Valencia is a huge advantage. I'm very confident the bulk of them will join our entry for the next race."

Ben Ainslie, winner of two Olympic golds for Britain, is currently part of the New Zealand team. "It's an outstanding match racer and Ben's always had two main goals - to win the Olympics and the

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America's Cup in a British boat. He's done the first and he can do the second. Other Olympic medal-winning British sailors, like Iain Percy and Ian Walker, are also getting good experience in Valencia. We'll go for the best in the world when picking our team but I'd be surprised if the majority were not British.

"We need methodical planning and a belief that this is a challenge for the whole country. The image of a billionaire - and incidentally I'm not one - using the America's Cup as his toy doesn't work. We're intent on building a professional operation, backed by British business and the public. It will cost £20m a year to mount a serious challenge and in a worst-case scenario commercial sponsorship will fund half and we'll cough up the rest."

Would Mills need to invest £10m of his own loose change each year? He grins. "At the moment 'we' means 'me'. But I expect to have two or three other 'mes' pretty soon."

As the marketing guru who invented the concept of Air Miles in 1988 Mills has long been a multi-millionaire. However, with his ruddy face and lack of pomp, the self-proclaimed "Essex boy" who left school at 15 has a populist touch. He smoothly distils the vast economic benefits should Britain win the America's Cup - especially for any town on the south coast which would be called upon to host a defence of the trophy.

Mills brought that same visionary zeal to London's Olympic bid. He had been so exact in his lobbying of IOC delegates that, when voting started in Singapore, he was "incredibly confident. The moment I knew we'd won, before the final vote had been cast, was vivid. Eight of us went up to the prime minister's suite - me and

Photograph by Graeme Robertson

three of my team with Denise Lewis, Steve Redgrave, Matthew Pinsent and Jonathan Edwards - and watched television as other cities were knocked out. When Madrid got knocked out I burst into tears. No one believed me but I'd done the numbers. I knew London had won."

And if Madrid had knocked out Paris before the final round? "We'd have lost," says Mills, grimacing with certainty.

Now, with less than 2,000 days left, Mills continues his work as deputy chairman of the 2012 London Olympic Organising Committee which "focuses on the huge infrastructure that still needs to be built as well as how we will find the £2 billion to fund it commercially". As speculation rises that costs are spiralling far in excess of that mark, Mills insists "the issue is how much regeneration London wants to undertake after the Games - and that's as long as a piece of string. The actual costs of the stadium and running the Games hasn't changed at all."

In pure sporting terms Mills is emphatic: "We can run the best Olympic Games in history but [British] sporting success is critical. If we haven't done well in the medal table the country will consider London 2012 a failure. Athletics, for example, needs to get its act together. But we seem to do well in sports where we're sitting down - on bikes, boats and horses. It's when we start running and jumping that we have problems."

His vast Olympic remit, running alongside the America's Cup, does not leave him much free time. Yet Tottenham Hotspur recently persuaded him to join their board as a non-executive director. "It could be good fun," Mills says lightly. "One of my tasks is a fiduciary role to make sure it is properly run as a plc. I'll also

help Spurs build a better database of their fans and improving access to tickets."

The need for Spurs to expand is urgent - either through major refurbishment of White Hart Lane or by emulating Arsenal's new stadium with a capacity approaching 60,000. Mills will not be drawn on the likelier option or even whether Wembley might be a temporary rented home but he is bullish about "Spurs' great potential both nationally and internationally".

But, as the club scrambles to stay within sight of Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool and Arsenal, Mills balks at the Premiership's distortion of the traditional competitiveness of English football. "I've always felt the Premiership is an unhealthy structure - it's unbalanced if we have the same few teams vying for the top. Unless the financial structure changes the rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer. But the revenue is now driven from the Far East, there is an insatiable international desire for the Premiership."

Mills' global acumen will benefit Spurs, the London Olympics and the America's Cup. His work on all three fronts will also be more thoroughly prepared than his first attempt to conquer the world. "When I was 19 I tried to circumnavigate the world on a tandem with a guy called Pete Wells. We left in a blaze of glory - the Daily Express put us on the front page. But we miscalculated the amount of weight we put on the tandem and by the time we got to northern France we were breaking nine spokes a day. We were soon flat broke and our challenge ended in Marseille."

"I've learnt one or two things since then but I've promised my wife that the America's Cup will be my last big challenge. That will take me until at least 2011 - or 2013 if we win. Don't tell her but, if I get my way, we'll just keep on winning and I'll go on until I'm well past 80."

Mills sinks back in his chair and laughs, as if he has just let slip his latest secret ambition.