

Mainly on the plane

AN UNLIKELY OLYMPIC EVENT –
BUT A GRIPPING CONTEST, AT A
SEMINAL PERIOD IN BOAT DESIGN
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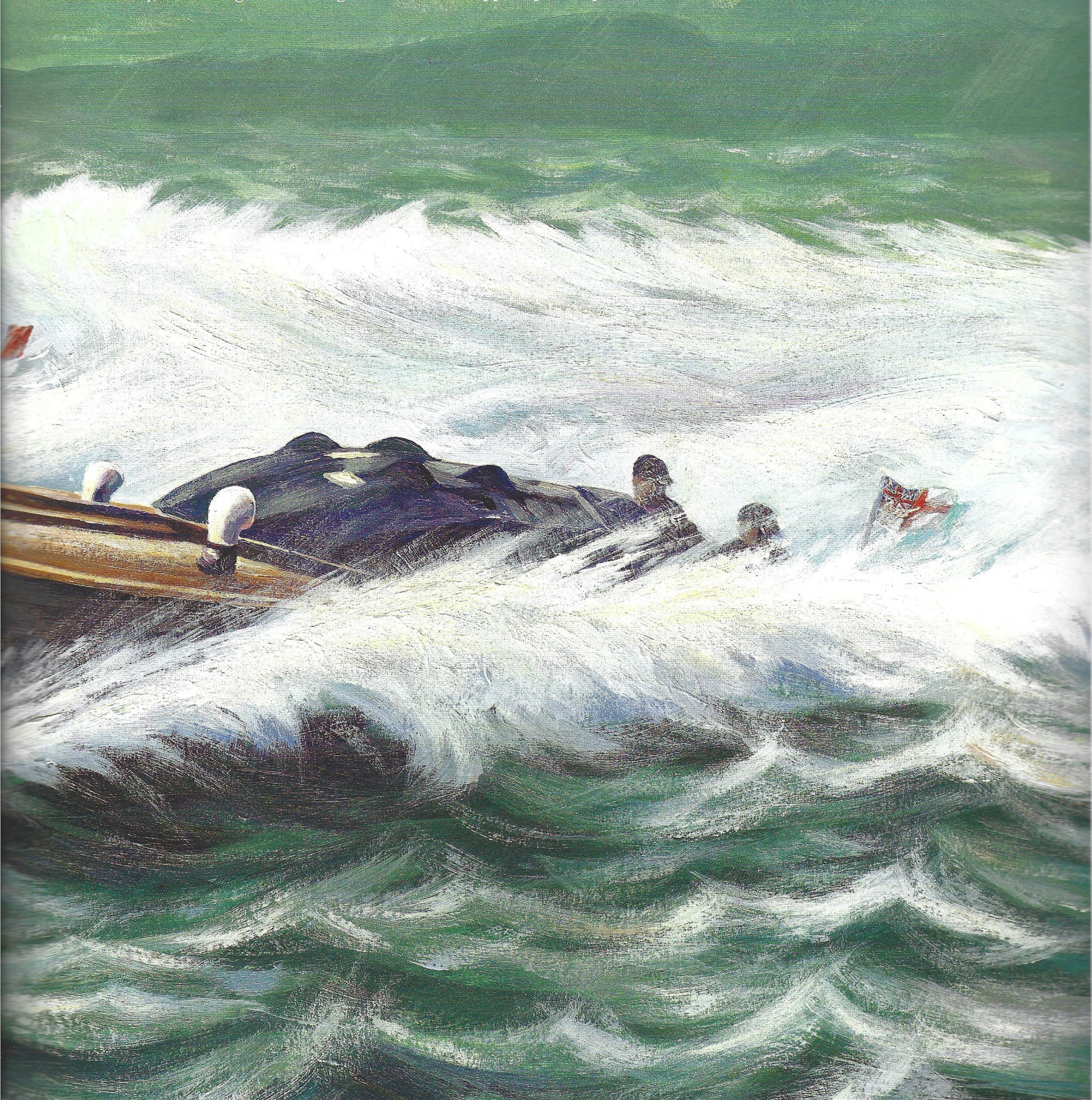


*a*s more than 10,000 athletes and three million spectators converge on Beijing for the 2008 Olympic Games, the pressure is already on London's organisers, feverishly preparing for 2012.

But the British capital has hosted the Games successfully twice before. There were the 'austerity games' of 1948, which were centred on Wembley Stadium and used other existing venues around the bomb-cratered city, with yachting events contested in Torbay, and rowing and canoeing on the

regatta course at Henley. Blessed with perfect summer weather, the opening ceremony, according to the official report, was a profoundly moving occasion. To a war-weary world, the Olympic ideal seemed to offer genuine hope for the future.

The games of 1908 took place in a different world. When Rome begged to be excused its commitments as host, after the 1906 eruption of Vesuvius, it was London – capital city of an empire at the peak of its power – which stepped up to the plate. ➤



The organisers set about their task with brisk, Edwardian efficiency. A new, 68,000-seat stadium was constructed in ten months at White City, west London, at a cost of £60,000. A 100-metre swimming pool was specially built. Twelve-metre yachts raced on the Clyde, while lesser vessels competed off the Isle of Wight. The United States took gold in real tennis at Queen's Club in Kensington, while the Swedes cleaned up in the single-shot running-deer shooting.

Great Britain beat Denmark in the football final, but the French team, having lost by 17 goals to one in the semis, were too embarrassed to contest the bronze medal. Police teams from London and Liverpool made a clean sweep in the tug of war, as Henry Taylor of Oldham won three swimming golds in the pool.

The US team dominated the athletics and won gold in the marathon, when the games' most famous loser, Dorando Pietri, was disqualified after being helped to the finish by sympathetic officials. Queen Alexandra later presented the Italian runner with a gilded silver cup.

The Americans refused to dip their flag to the king during the opening ceremony. The Finns chose to march under no flag at all rather than do so under the Russian banner. Many Irish athletes boycotted the games altogether, in protest at British rule. Out of 2,023 competitors, 44 were women. These were the first Olympics to declare: 'It is not the winning, but the taking part that counts'.

New events were added in 1908, and others were abandoned. Out went the standing triple jump, while in came Greek discus. The 56-lb weight throw was a further casualty, but innovations included the ten-mile walk and 3,200-metre steeplechase. And one new discipline made its sole Olympic appearance – powerboat racing.

Planing ahead

Unlike the modern sport, whose participants gripe about media coverage and sponsorship, powerboats in 1908 were as novel, newsworthy and exciting to the general public as motor racing or flying.

They were the preserve of aristocrats, plutocrats and madmen. The cocktail of high-speed machinery and fanatical human endeavour excited great interest. The cross-Channel race of 1904 was covered by *The Times*, at respectful length, and the new sport was demonstrated – along with ballooning, cannon-shooting and boules – at the 1900 Olympics in Paris.

The new internal combustion engines were heavy and underpowered, but still key to a three-pronged transport revolution – in the air, on the roads and on the water. Steam engines had reached a pinnacle of efficiency, but they were still too big and heavy to allow an aeroplane to fly, or a powerboat to plane.

The principle of hydroplaning had been grasped years before, but then virtually forgotten, as suitable engines were not available. In 1908 it was still only embraced by a few pioneers. Selwyn Edge's 75hp *Napier* looked, above the waterline,



The Thornycroft-built *Gyrinus* on her way to gold. Below: the 1908 Games's most famous loser, marathon runner Dorando Pietri.



like a classic Edwardian launch, but below the boot-topping her 40ft (12.2m) Linton Hope hull had a tight turn of bilge and a completely flat bottom aft of midships. "I thought that greater speed would result if it were merely to skim along the surface of the water rather than cut through it," wrote Edge presciently. She didn't plane properly because of her narrow stern, but she won the first Harmsworth Trophy for Britain in 1903 at 19.5mph.



Experiments in France with a skimming craft called *Glisseur* had achieved speeds of 14 knots with an engine of just 14hp. A famous series of small, flat-bottomed racers all called *Ricochet* showed how hull shape was at least as important as horsepower in high-speed boats.

The naval shipbuilder Yarrow built Edge's *Napier II*, whose broad, squared-off transom was almost certainly influenced by French thinking. The shipyard's designers built their own experimental hull in 1905, 60ft (18.3m) long and powered by five 70hp engines. She managed 26 knots, and the *Motor Boat & Yachting* man on board noted: "She rises bodily in the water... the wake leaves the floor of the boat in a straight line at the stern, without any curling eddies from the side." She was planing.

In 1908 the big money was still on powerful displacement boats – but the Olympic racing would pitch these dinosaurs against the new breed.

Gale force

Three Olympic races, for three raceboat classes, were run on Friday 28 and Saturday 29 August as part of Netley Regatta, near Southampton. It was organised by the (now Royal) Motor Yacht Club aboard their floating clubhouse, the 1,000-ton steam yacht *Enchantress*.

The weather was appalling: the worst since the winter gales, according to *Motor Boat & Yachting*. "It would be hard to imagine any conditions less favourable for motor boat racing, even on the usually sheltered Southampton Water," complained *Yachting World*. As a result, entries were few, and a sheltered, eight-mile lap was laid for the three 40-mile events.

Favourite in the unrestricted Open class was the Duke of Westminster's *Wolsley-Siddeley*, a 40ft (12.2m) monster built of copper-sewn mahogany by Saunders in Cowes, and powered by two eight-cylinder, 200hp petrol engines. She had won races that season in Monaco, Nice and Palermo, and was known to be capable of 30 knots.

Lord Howard de Walden brought his 75hp, ➤

The principle of planing had been grasped years before, but suitable engines were not available. In 1908 it was only embraced by a few pioneers – the big money was still on powerful displacement boats

Bernard Redwood's gold medal certificate. Below: the Duke of Westminster's powerful, outdated Wolseley-Siddeley.



40ft *Daimler II*, along with another displacement boat, *Dylan*. There was one foreign entry in Open class: French driver Emile Thubron's 36ft (11m), 90hp *Camille* – a planing design.

Entries in the two smaller classes were even thinner on the ground. Class C was represented by Warwick Wright's 60hp *Sea Dog*, 26ft 4in (8.0m) long. Thomas Wynn-Weston, editor of *Motor Boat & Yachting*, had signed on as engineer. Class B consisted of the 30ft (9.1m) *Quicksilver*, also of 60hp, owned and crewed by John Gorham and his wife.

Eligible to race in both B and C class races was the diminutive *Gyrinus*, a 40hp Thornycroft 26-footer (7.9m) with an experimental hull design that featured concave stern sections, to aid planing. She was crewed by Bernard Redwood, and helmed by Thomas Thornycroft – who with admirable foresight had signed on a third crewman simply to bail.

The races got off to a faltering start. The first was postponed, at the "most sporting" suggestion of Mr Thornycroft, because *Sea Dog's* crew were still struggling to fit a new propeller. Then the Open race was abandoned. *Wolseley-Siddeley* and *Dylan* had headed gamely out into the gale, but *Dylan* quickly found the going too rough, accepting a tow from her owner's steam yacht, while the bigger boat struggled around one lap. The committee called it off, and rescheduled the race for the following day.

But the B-class contest went ahead. *Gyrinus*, denied the opportunity to race earlier in the afternoon, charged out into Southampton Water against *Quicksilver*, both boats completely hidden by spray. The husband and wife team aboard the more powerful craft soon found themselves overwhelmed, unable to keep pace with the water rising around the engine. *Gyrinus's* third crewman, however, earned his keep. The little planing boat

"covered her rounds with the regularity of a machine, and literally jumped over the waves, at times showing half her length out of the water."

Noting that she had managed to average over 16 knots "in conditions that had to be seen to be realised," Wynn-Weston pronounced the Thornycroft's performance "really wonderful". It earned her a gold medal.

The final act

Saturday began with the postponed C-class race. This time *Sea Dog* was ready, with Wynn-Weston aboard, and she got off to a flying start, ahead of *Gyrinus*, in conditions no better than the day before. The two boats lapped neck and neck. "It really looked as if *Gyrinus* had at last met an opponent worthy of her steel – or rather, steel and mahogany," wrote the editor. But melting spark plugs put paid to *Sea Dog's* challenge on the second lap, and again *Gyrinus* went on to finish alone, at an

average of nearly 18 knots, for a second gold medal.

Just the rescheduled Open race remained – "the race of the day". Lord Howard de Walden decided this time to try his luck with *Daimler II*, but suffered mechanical problems even before the start. The Duke of Westminster lined up once more in *Wolseley-Siddeley*, while Emile Thubron set off behind him, after a late start in *Camille*.

In the rough conditions, with four times the horsepower of the French boat, the round-bilged Saunders displacement racer charged around the course in a cloud of spray, averaging better than 26 knots on the first two laps. *Camille*, with her lightweight planing hull, struggled. "It seemed safe to conclude that the third gold medal would also go to an English-built boat," Wynn-Weston wrote. But the Duke made a fatal mistake. "The tide was past half ebb, and *Wolseley-Siddeley*, getting rather closer to Hamble Spit than was good for her, went high and dry on the soft mud and eliminated herself from the contest." Thubron coaxed *Camille* around the remaining laps, winning at an average of 16.33 knots.

Let *Motor Boat & Yachting's* editor have the last word. After a fruitless day's racing, he was roped in to help pull *Wolseley-Siddeley* off the mud – her owner having presumably repaired to *Enchantress* for dinner and dancing. "The writer missed most of the latter," Wynn-Weston recorded, "but on returning to the ship we found the Waltz Dream being danced in true nautical style – three whistles indicating that a couple intended to reverse.

"So ended a regatta that, in spite of the miserable weather, had proved a great success." Not only a success, but a portent. The 1908 Olympics represented almost the last hurrah of the displacement racers. Even in conditions that should have flattered the bigger boats, it was the planing craft that carried away the gold.



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