



ILLUSTRATION: GUY VENABLES

## Media mayhem

Nigel Sharp discusses why sailing is often ignored by the press

Our national broadcasting authority's coverage of the 2012 Diamond Jubilee Thames Pageant was rightly criticised by many people. Perhaps the "highlight" for me was when our screens were briefly filled with the image of a boat with the words "London Nautical College" clearly visible on its coaming, and the commentator interrupted a long period of silence to intone the words: "London Nautical College."

However, the problem is by no means a new one. "You'd think, wouldn't you, that with this plethora of paper-spoilers in the sailing world," Gilbert Hackforth-Jones wrote in the Autumn 1955 issue of *The Yachtsman*, on the subject of the large number of nautical books available, "the BBC would have no difficulty in selecting as commentators people who can combine some knowledge of the sport with a capacity for lucid description? Rarely is that the case. It seems that the boys of Broadcasting House have decided that seafaring in general is something beyond the intelligence of the listener, or viewer, and therefore the best commentator in any aquatic event is one who is wholly ignorant of nautical usages. By reason of this, it is argued, the public will not think they are being talked down to."

Since the Thames Pageant, the BBC has gone some way towards redeeming itself on a couple of occasions;



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some people, the word 'yacht' conjures up a vision of social superiority to which they can never aspire... Ask the average man to spend the weekend on a small yacht, and he will simply laugh at you, though he sees nothing ridiculous in hitting a ball about over miles of dreary common... Yachting is regarded as a rather dangerous and uncomfortable pursuit, involving a good deal of unnecessary zigzagging. Another reason why yachting will never become popular is because as a spectacle it is a failure. In order to appreciate the finer points of the racing a certain amount of technical knowledge is essential. Anybody can pay a shilling and grasp the essential points of a cricket match in five minutes."

In November 1921 the same magazine published another letter, from TW MacAlpine. "Why do the newspapers give so little space to yachting matters?" he asked. "If we could provide someone, quite ignorant of British sport, with all the newspapers published in this country during the year, and then ask him to decide, from this evidence alone, the position occupied by yachting in our national sports, his verdict could hardly be anything other than the following: the English people take a casual interest in yachting and it occupies a position in the public esteem very far below horse-racing, football, cricket, golf and tennis." Indeed.

firstly with its coverage of the Olympic regatta at Weymouth, and more recently with its lunchtime America's Cup highlights programme, both of which showed us that it has the capability to broadcast sailing extremely well. Yet, although the national press briefly made a big thing about Ben Ainslie's contribution to "the biggest comeback in sporting history", it is clear that these are just isolated occurrences, and the status quo position continues to provide the minimal amount of sailing coverage throughout the media.

But there is nothing new about that either, as demonstrated by a letter from JB Buckle asking "Why Yachting is not more popular?" in the November 1906 issue of *Yachting Monthly*: "But can yachting be called popular?" he wrote. "In the writer's opinion, no. What interest do the public take in yacht racing? None. The daily press devotes whole columns to cricket matches. The most important yacht race is represented by a solitary paragraph, tucked away in some dark corner, or, as likely as not, ignored altogether... In the minds of