Oracle CEO Snubs Big Crowd to Watch America's Cup

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San Francisco (AP) — About 60,000 people have come from all over the world to attend Oracle's biggest customer conference of the year, but Oracle CEO Larry Ellison left no doubt Tuesday that his boating team's defense of the America's Cup is a higher priority.

Ellison, a billionaire renowned for his flamboyance and hubris, delivered that message by snubbing the crowd that had gathered at a San Francisco convention center to see him on stage. The speech is considered to be the marquee event at Oracle OpenWorld, an annual rite of autumn that has grown so large that some San Francisco streets close down to accommodate the masses on hand to learn the about the business software maker's latest products.

Oracle Corp. Chairman Jeff Henley waited until 45 minutes after the scheduled start of Ellison's keynote address to inform the packed audience that Ellison had decided to remain on a chase boat on the San Francisco Bay so he could watch the second of the day's two America's Cup races. The battle for the 162-year-old trophy pits Oracle Team USA — a group financed by Ellison's vast wealth — against Emirates Team New Zealand.

Almost as soon as Henley extended his apologies for Ellison's absence, people began to head for the exits. Thomas Kurian, an Oracle executive vice president of product development, gave an hour-long presentation in Ellison's place.

"I was disappointed," said Steve Katz, a Hewlett-Packard Co. employee who traveled from Hartford, Conn., to attend Oracle OpenWorld. "I guess Larry's boat is more important to him than all these people here."

Katz said Ellison could possibly make amends by showing up later in the conference to show the America's Cup to everyone.

Oracle Team USA won both of Tuesday's races to even a competition that it seemed

destined to lose just a week ago. It increased Team USA's improbable winning streak to seven straight races to knot the match at 8-8.

A winner-take-all showdown is scheduled Wednesday afternoon, weather permitting. If Team USA prevails, it would mark the second straight time that an Ellison-backed boat has won the America's Cup and would complete a stirring comeback. This year's America's Cup finishes at a pier about two miles away from Oracle OpenWorld because Ellison exercised his right as defending champion to stage the competition in San Francisco, where he owns of one his several homes located around the world.

Ellison's immersion in yachting has sometimes raised questions among analysts whether he is allowing his outside interests to distract him from running the software company that he co-founded 36 years ago. Ellison, 69, still owns a 25 percent stake in Oracle, accounting for most of a personal fortune currently estimated at $41 billion by Forbes magazine.

Although it remains one of the world's most profitable software makers, Oracle's growth has been slowing in the past years amid tougher competition from a cast of smaller rivals that are winning over customers by leasing applications that can be accessed on any device with an Internet connection. That method, known as "cloud computing," is a departure from Oracle's traditional approach of licensing software for a one-time fee and then installing the programs on machines typically kept on a customer's premises.

Oracle's disappointing performance in its fiscal year that ended in August prompted Ellison to turn down a cash bonus of $1.2 million awarded to him by the Redwood Shores, Calif., company's board. Ellison still received a compensation package valued at $78.4 million in Oracle's last fiscal year.

Ellison's speech Tuesday was supposed to be focused on Oracle's expansion into cloud computing.

The cost to attend the five-day Oracle OpenWorld conference ranges from $2,650 to $3,450 per person. The fee covers a wide range of seminars, keynotes, meals and a concert Wednesday night featuring the groups Maroon 5 and The Black Keys.

Although he skipped out on Tuesday's event, Ellison delivered a welcoming speech Sunday night to kick off Oracle OpenWorld. That appearance occurred after Oracle Team USA had already one both of Sunday's America Cup's races.

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