

their inner anchorages

Martin has led the way — but his heart is with his children

JOHN MARTIN has a passion for winning, that's why he is one of the world's top solo, long distance yachtsmen.

But like South Africa's other favourite son, Bertie Reed, he also knows that you can refit and recaulk a leaking boat only so many times before it has to be sent to the scrappers.

At 36 John Martin admits he has three or four years left in the rarified, demanding, high-tech world of solo ocean racing.

"More and more it's becoming a young man's game," he says.

He should know because it has taken him ten years to gain international experience.

It took at least two years to see the fruits of what he calls the "package" he put together to ensure that the South African flag on Allied Bank never flutters in the wake of the international racing fleet.

"But the winning isn't just simply an ego trip — apart from my responsibilities to my country and my sponsor I know the best thing to stimulate interest among young South Africans is to win this BOC race," he said.

School boy

Martin spoke of the time when he was a schoolboy in Cape Town and how he decided to use one of ocean racing's greats, French naval officer Eric Taberly, as a role model.

"I was in hospital at the time Taberly was racing to Rio and I started a scrap book and said to myself I want to race single-handed."

Singleness of purpose has been his hallmark ever since.

Like Taberly he became an officer in the South African Navy and like his French hero, began slowly to break into and become a force in the competitive world of international racing.

He also had another ambition: to break the French stranglehold on long distance solo-racing.

"The French are the world champions, but we South African's are beginning to break that hold. I believe I have now more victories over them than they have over me."



Relaxed, confident and loving, long-distance solo racer John Martin relaxing with his daughters Tamara and Roxane.

There is no vanity when he says that, more the cold calculated determination of an achiever.

"Older guys like Bertie and me have had to open the doors for the youngsters," said the internationally respected yachtsman.

Proving a point

"If I can prove that South Africans can build boats and put projects together and then successfully execute these projects, then I think I have done a heap for the young guys.

"It will then be slightly easier for them than it was for me to break into solo sailing ten years ago."

Only once during the interview did John get mad.

I asked whether people like Bertie and himself had got where they were with assistance from the Navy and then shut the door to others when they left the service.

"This is a very strong and a very sore point with me," his eyes smouldered angrily.

"I trained a number of guys in the navy. I am responsible for three people

getting Springbok colours, two of them were in the Navy. I identified them and made them Springboks (Murray Webber, Robert Sharp) The other was brother Ian with whom I won the Trans-Atlantic double-handed race.

"The Navy is not a place where you can easily pick up potential ocean racers or ambassadors for the country."

He said it was difficult to find professional Navy officers who could also enter a situation where you are racing abroad, finding sponsorships, and where you still have your career and your family to look after.

Sacrificed a naval career

"I made a number of decisions in my life and sacrificed a number of things including a naval career."

Martin said there was one person (none of the three Springboks) who had the slightest possibility of taking over as a potential solo racer.

"I put a heap of effort into the kid but he was singularly the most disappointing thing that had happened to me as an instructor."

The youngster did not make the

grade and Martin left the navy feeling he had failed. He had not wanted to leave his place empty in the service that had helped him achieve many of his sailing ambitions.

He said he still had very close ties with the Navy and the door was never closed to potential racing yachtsmen.

'Very cross'

"Admiral Woodburne (Chief of the Navy Vice-Admiral Lambert "Woody" Woodburne) will certainly back any guy that has the potential to go and do it. But you have to work out; does the youngster really want to be a single handed sailor."

"You have to do the job. When you get out there you must have the gall to do the job. You can't just wave to the crowd. And you can't just sit and criticise. Everybody criticises the other guy: he's fat and he's thin; this guy can't sail, he can't trim. But there are the doers and the others, hey?"

"I am very very cross about that (people's saying he closed doors to others in the navy) because I worked my butt off in the navy for sponsorship ...

I sponsored myself, the navy only paid my salary.

"I kept Voortrekker I and II in the international spotlight for nine years and I produced for South Africa.

"There is scope for young guys and I am very sure that the Minister of Defence and the Admiral will back anybody who can find the gall to do the job."

Looking at this powerful, Viking-like man with the flowing golden locks and eyes of gun-metal blue, I feared asking the final question.

You don't have to answer this and can tell me to mind my own business but how will your divorce influence your sailing career?"

He peered into his glass, carefully swirling the ice around and said slowly.

"I have a son, William and two little girls, Tamara and Roxane. They are my motivation for living. How can one change? My children, Cape Town and South Africa are my anchors and my love — nothing changes."

His eyes clouded and my interview with a true South African hero had ended.