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Yachts battle for lead in tough ocean race

EAST LONDON — The giant Durban-based sloop Sensation and much smaller Lavranos one-tonner Assegai were battling it out for the lead in the Wilbur Ellis Da Gama sea race as they headed towards the Transkei coast last night.

Running along in third place — about 10 miles behind the leaders and just ahead of the rest of the race fleet — was the East London sloop Rubicon.

Radio reports from several yachts last night indicated that veteran skipper Neil Bailey was hanging onto a narrow lead from Terry Clarence while East London's Siggie Eichholz

was having his time cut out staying ahead of a bunch which included Transformer, Black Magic, Resolve, and Magic Carpet.

The boats were said to be about 25 miles offshore and belting along with a 15 to 20 knot north-easterly wind.

The race started from Durban at 10 am and presented onlookers with a spectacular sight as the yachts headed away with billowing spinnakers.

The East London Lavranos 36 Rubicon was fourth across the line, which was directly opposite Durban's famous South Beach, but Sensation started showing its class right from the start.

Bailey, who won the classic in his 10 m sloop Sound Wave in 1978 and

the day that he had at times picked up a 10 knot current.

By sundown he was well down the South Coast and had managed to build up a 10 mile lead over the rest of the field — with the exception of Assegai which was hanging on like a leech.

By early nightfall the fleet had settled down to a steady running pattern with most of the excitement set to take place among the bunch headed by Rubicon.

Organisers of the race, which covers some of the most difficult yachting waters in the world and is regarded as the most gruelling event on the national ocean-racing calendar said last night that the competitors still had a long way to go "and anything can happen."

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