

SPORTS

THURSDAY, APRIL 27 1995

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LONG SLOW RACE PREDICTED FOR DA GAMA ENTRANTS

Weather a major factor for fleet

27/4/1995 Mercury

SPORTS REPORTER

WITH the weather so unstable at present, it appears inevitable that the 29 strong fleet of yachts competing in the tough 240 nautical mile Wilbur Ellis da Gama ocean race from Durban to East London, starting today (11am) will face headwinds for a large portion of the race.

Very few people would be bold enough to predict a winner in this coastal classic, as there are just too many variables to consider.

If the south wester blows, it will be a case of the "survival of the fittest" as it hits the fleet quite literally on the nose.

Those crew not prone to seasickness and with the stamina to sit on the weather rail of the yacht for a minimum of two days in cold and wet conditions without hot food and drinks, will be the ones who will come out tired and deserving winners in East London.

There is no established right or wrong way to go on this race, with the wily skippers assessing all the information on the day and then making their choice of course.

But with the headwinds predicted, the fleet will probably stay close inshore and out of the current where conditions should generally be much calmer. Further out to sea one often gets big seas which are caused by the Agulhas current pushing against the wind.

Keen tussle

With the overall race winner being the handicap winner, there should be a very keen tussle between the Stadt 34 and L 34 classes, both of which will have exciting races-within-a-race between themselves.

Triple winners in four years are Barcom Seaboard who cannot be written off. However, their chances may have been dashed somewhat as their kingpin, skipper Geoff Williams, has had to withdraw at the last minute for unknown reasons. This will probably leave a two-way tussle in the Stadt 34 class between Augerge, skippered by Greg de Beyer, and Woodcraft Jenabee skippered by Martin Payne. Both have excellent crews, and both are determined to win this race come what may.

Challenging them will be the boats in the L 34 class which have always done exceptionally well in this race.

This group is likely to be headed by Solar Wind skippered by Dave Cox.

He is a wily skipper, who knows this coast well, and has won twice before. His closest rivals will in all likelihood be Ernie Shaw's AFI Warrior and Eddie Broadbent's Point Blank.

Determined

One very determined skipper is Rob Bowman sailing the Navy vessel Southern Floe on which he pulled a surprise victory in the Mauritius to Durban race late last year. He has completely overhauled and re-equipped this boat, and with his dogged determination, he could well be a threat.

At the front of the fleet Meditech Computers (formerly Marchioness) should easily take line honours barring any misfortunes.

Her crew have their sights firmly set on breaking the seven year-old race record which stands at 30 hours, 9 minutes and 18 seconds. But with the long range weather forecast predicting gale force headwinds, the chances of this seem pretty slim indeed.

"Obviously it would be fantastic to put a big dent in the record, although we will be satisfied just to set a new one" said Neil Bailey, skipper of Meditech Computers.

But, for this mean machine to have a fair crack at the record, the weather needs to play ball.

"We need steady winds, nothing too strong or too light. A steady 15 knots from the south east, or 20 knots from the north east would suit us perfectly" said Bailey. "In these conditions we'll set a cracking pace, but should we get becalmed, or hit by gale force headwinds at any stage, we can kiss the record goodbye."

And in the cruising class, blind sailor Geoff Hilton-Barber is determined to win in his own right and without the assistance of John Martin who skippered his boat to victory last year.

If conditions are going to be as tough as predicted, it will be a long slow race, with all finishers deserving the title "winner".

□ The fleet for the race is down to 29 - 14 sailing IMS, 14 Cruising Class and a lone Multihull cruiser - following the withdrawal of Golden Sovereign and Orca.



PICTURE: SHELLEY KJONSTAD
SORTING OUT THEIR SAILS: Chris Church (left), Mac Vosloo (centre) and Chris Knott get prepared for the Wilbur Ellis da Gama ocean race starting today.