

Brazilian breezes to Laser world title

YOUNG Brazilian Robert Scheidt stayed on top of the sailing world after retaining his Laser world title in Simon's Town this week — and has now turned his attention to winning the gold medal in his first appearance at the Atlanta Olympics.

But shouldering the burden of being world champion with the tag of hot favourite for Olympic gold is not something he relishes following his victory this week — the second sailing triumph in as many months for Brazil after Claudio Cardoso's lifting of the world Hobie 16 crown in Dubai.

It was the best birthday present Scheidt could have wished for after turning 23 on Monday, postponing celebrations to Tuesday night's prize-giving. While possessing all the youthful qualities of confidence in his own ability, he would rather not be in the spotlight as No 1.

"It's good and bad. Good because I have the ability to win the gold medal and bad because everyone regards me as the favourite and this brings with it a lot of pressure.

"I have to take the games as just another competition and not too seriously otherwise there will be too much pressure and I could make mistakes."

In his home town of Sao Paulo, where Scheidt studies business when not sailing on a lake, he says his countryman have a significant climatic advantage in the sport as the hot conditions ensure sailing is an all-year-round affair.

Even beyond soccer, Brazil's proud record in glamorous hi-tech sports remains an enigma for a country where 97 percent of the population is impoverished.

Yet they continue to produce motor racing stars in the wake of the great Ayrton Senna and Nelson Piquet, with the likes of Roberto Marano, Rubens Barichello and Alex Barros, current co-leader of the world 500cc motorcycle championship.

In surfing, Brazil is regarded as the world's rising power and have inherited a fast improving reputation as the third best surfing nation in the world behind the United States and Australia. Last year they boasted three surfers in the ASP top 20 ratings.

Scheidt's success epitomises the extension of his country's sporting triumph to sailing, made all the more puzzling by his admission that while a "lot of attention (back home) is paid to soccer and volleyball, not so much is paid to yachting, which is not so popular. Only a few know about it and the country only really takes note at the Olympics".

He unhesitatingly ascribes Brazil's sporting success to his compatriots having "a lot of talent for sport. We don't have much in

Simon's Town, Cape Town's venue for sailing if they win the 2004 Olympics, he described as "beautiful, a perfect venue for the Olympic Games. I have sailed in strong winds before but not for so many days in a row. It was physically very demanding sailing for five to six hours a day, but I am very happy I could win in strong winds.

His immediate schedule takes him to a Spa in Holland for a regatta before flying to Savannah — the venue for sailing at the Olympics — to begin acclimatisation for the Games.

And the world champion says of South African sailors: "In the Laser class you have some good sailors. But they have to go abroad and sail, have more experience on the Euro circuit and after that the results will come."

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A STAGGERING R1,2-million in

prize-money is up for grabs in South Africa in July when the travelling ASP World Championship Tour arrives for major surfing contests at Jeffrey's Bay and Durban.

"It's going to be the best ever South African leg of the world tour," said ASP Africa director Paul Botha. "With a new WCT event at Jeffrey's Bay and three WQS events, every serious contender on the tour will be here in June and July."

The contests are the R540 000 Billabong Pro at Jeffrey's Bay from July 3 to 13, followed by the R83 000 Billabong Country Feeling Classic from July 27 to 30.

In Durban, the R83 000 Glodina Beach Pro Night Surf Classic will be held from from July 12 to 14, followed by the R336 000 Gunston 500 from July 16 to 21.

