

World solo-sailing line honours beckon Petersen

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TOMORROW South African solo-sailor Neal Petersen begins the final leg of his 27 000 mile adventure in the Around Alone yacht race in his quest to become the first black sailor in history to circumnavigate the world single-handed through the treacherous Southern Ocean. **DALE GRANGER** reports.

WHEN the starting gun fires in Punta del Este, Uruguay, Petersen, on his 42-foot No Barriers, will only have 6 000 miles left to the finish line in Charleston, US, to fulfil a dream he nurtured as a teenager while experiencing the stopover of the then BOC Challenge in the Mother City.

Already Petersen and No Barriers have survived 14 000 miles of sailing through the Southern Ocean, the cruellest, coldest and scariest of seas known to man, and rounded Cape Horn, "the Everest of the Seas" at the tip of South America, to accomplish the most respected feat in ocean sailing.

"Yes, I have arrived at the Horn, named after the Dutch Town of Hoorn by Isaac le Maire, who sailed from England in 1615. In February Josh Slocum rounded this desolate land to become the first known person to sail past here single-handed and the attraction of the Horn has been great on many. Great adventurers like Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, Niomi James, Clare Francis, Alec Rose,

Bernard Montesiure, Mark Schrader and others have been the story-tellers of great feats to round this piece of land," said Petersen.

"Now the dream is a reality. I am the fourth South African to race solo past this piece of land, but the first South African to do it in a class 2 boat, built on a shoestring budget, hope and hard work. I will celebrate by eating biltong and drinking Appletiser and pay tribute to my friends who lost their lives just trying to get here."

Now, as Petersen starts the last leg, he knows the final hurdle will take him through the tropics and gentle trade winds on a leg where being becalmed is his biggest foe.

When it's all over, Petersen will reflect back on his youth, the surgery to correct a hip defect he was born with, how he met English solo-

sailor Richard Broadhead, who inspired him, and days spent diving for diamonds up the West Coast to finance No Barriers.

He'll remember the sceptics who dubbed his boat a "floating coffin". How the Irish navy towed him into Galway where he became a folk hero, the 10 transatlantic crossings he made and how his first attempt at the BOC Challenge ended with a broken mast south of Port Elizabeth.

He will also remember working with kids and inmates in Ireland and how he stared into the eyes of the Irish Republican Army's, Thomas McMahon, the man who killed Lord Mountbatten, prescribing that books, and not guns, were the only solution to lasting peace in Ireland.

"I never swayed their revolutionary ideals," said Petersen of his debates in Portlaoise Prison with men who had been incarcerated with no release date.

At the invitation of the Irish government, Petersen had been dispatched to jails to speak to inmates. His only brief was to "see them as human beings, not criminals".

"I've always been a pacifist and believed in non-violence and education as a catalyst for change. It's just that human life is precious and I don't believe violence would solve the conflict."

The IRA agreed to disagree but forged a "mutual understanding based on knowledge and respect", said Petersen. "We searched for common ground and worked from there."

His visits, though, were valued. In a final session he was presented with a "very abstract" 16,35-metre charcoal drawing as a token of appreciation. Later he was given another gift. A leather wallet smuggled out of prison with the words "Portlaoise" and "IRA" inscribed on it. To date that wallet has sailed 63 000 miles on his solo adventures.

There are memories of how the Irish warned



SOLO TENACITY: Neal Petersen, on his 42-ft No Barriers, has conquered the Southern Ocean and Cape Horn — "the Everest of the Seas" — in the Around Alone yacht race. He is 6 000 miles away from circumnavigating the globe single-handed.

to the effervescent Petersen almost from the moment he tied up in Galway and within a short space of time was almost a household name.

Among the curious Gaelic hosts flocking to the quayside to meet him were a group of 13 intoxicated boys who were refused access to his boat until they sobered up.

"They wanted to work on the boat but I told them they must first clean up their act. Later they returned all sober except one, David Heaney, who was 14 at the time. A while later, however, David also came right and we became friends. Today he owns a sailing dinghy," said Petersen.

Petersen was also able to cut across the social

divide by welcoming a band of gypsies onboard, despite being warned that they would "rob me blind and burn the boat".

"My attitude, though, has always been one of finding common ground. People may be different but my experience is that if you treat them with respect they will return the compliment."