

# Lonely call of the sea

## BLACK SOLO SAILOR NEAL SEEKS SPONSOR

By  
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THE operation was a painful one. A new joint had to be implanted into the hip of the pitifully thin six-year-old Neal Petersen — he was born without one.

Up to then young Neal had never walked without crutches and now after three operations he swore he would never use crutches again.

The healing process was slow and most of the therapy took place in water.

As the muscles around the grafted hip joint became stronger, Neal began to enjoy the water more and more, knowing it was releasing him from his childhood disability.

Water became the youngster's life; it was the medium

that sustained his father as a professional perlemoen diver; and it was also the life-giving force that supported and helped build up his aching hip.

While other youngsters enjoyed the hurly-burly of horseplay and conventional games Neal had to be content with reading about the sea, particularly books on diving and sailing.

His mother, a high school biology teacher nurtured his love for the sea, introduced him to the wonders of the marine environment and encouraged him to go sailing.

Neal became a harbour waif at Simonstown, and at the Royal Cape Yacht Club, willing yachtsmen to take him along for a sail. His perseverance and enthusiasm paid off and by the time he completed his matric at Livingstone High he was an experienced crewman, with dozens of regattas under his belt.

But always he was drawn to the singlehanders.

"I loved meeting these solo sailors at the Royal Cape Yacht Club. They accepted me because I think they realised I would one day be one of them," he said.

Neal invited the yachtsmen to his home and set up bonds with these loners that would continue in the form of letters and chance meetings when he later travelled in the United States and Britain.

"Yachtsmen like Richard Broadhead, Robin Knox Johnson, Bernard Moitissier and Mark Schrader became my heroes and I was determined that I too should sail for my country as a round-the-world solo racer."

But there was still a career to carve for himself. With his parents' assistance he went to Los Angeles for a commercial diving course.

Homesick and a little frightened, the 17-year-old found himself in the middle of a frenetic city the like of which he had never dreamed of.

"I knew if I could find a yacht club I would be cured of my homesickness," he said.

He discovered the Long Beach Marina and it did not take the "yachties" long to discover that, although young, the South African had sufficient heavy weather sailing experience to make him a sought-after crew member for the racing fraternity at Long Beach.

Apart from the highly competitive races, Neal was also asked to deliver yachts, and with a friend completed his first doublehanded delivery. Single handed deliveries followed from there.

The seven months passed quickly and, once qualified, Neal was employed as a diver

on projects in the Gulf of Mexico and the North Sea before he returned to South Africa bent on making money as a diamond diver along the West Coast so that he could enter a yacht in the 1992 singlehanded Transatlantic. He also started looking for a sponsor.

"Nobody takes a 19-year-old very seriously when he is asking for sponsorship to sail for his country as a singlehander", he said.

But racing the Transatlantic or around the world became an obsession, particularly when he started giving slide presentations at schools in Cape Town.

But if Neal Petersen, now 22, has the will to learn and the courage to achieve, the past two years have been a huge disappointment.

While massive conglomerates divest themselves of millions of rands for popular sports like soccer, cricket and rugby it seems strange that



□ Out at sea, Neal Petersen rides the crest of the wave — but it hasn't always been that way.

this young achiever has not been able to find a sponsor. More important, someone like Neal Petersen would be an inspiration to all South Africans.

Not one company would spare the R15 000 Neal needed to properly prepare his yacht for the Transatlantic race where he would make history as the first black person to

compete in the gruelling race. "It's quite simple, you see. They don't believe blacks can sail yachts," he said without any bitterness.

Neal Petersen is presently sailing Stella R for Walvis Bay en route to England.

He has no sponsors, no fancy equipment, no hi-tech sails; only a yacht built with his own

funds which he is determined to get to Plymouth in time for next year's Transatlantic to Newport.

But he does have one powerful aid: a burning ambition to prove to his community, and his nation that he has what it takes to represent South Africa as a solo sailor — even if he has to do it all by himself.