

DRAMA ON A LONELY SEA

THE TOUGHEST THING about a long-distance ocean yacht race is the lack of knowledge about the positions of other competitors.

Morale is apt to take a nose dive when you are trapped in a trough of calm weather.

You sit despondently whistling for wind and praying that the rest of the fleet is similarly becalmed.

Hour after hour, day after day, tension mounts . . . until nerve fibres are stretched like steel cables.

As navigator on board the 35 ft. sloop Leonotis in the Lourenco Marques to Durban Blue Waters Cup Race this week, I was in the hot seat when nerves began to tense.

For four days and four nights, we had watched a lonely sea slip by, not knowing whether we were at the head or the rear of the field.

A cannon shot fired from a motor launch moored off Lourenco Marques' exclusive Clube Naval at noon last Sunday signalled the start of the race.

First across the line was the Durban yacht, Columbine. We in Leonotis were right on their heels.

Behind us were nine other crack South African racing yachts. Ahead of us, the long 20-mile-leg out of Delagoa Bay and 300 miles of sea to Durban.

TOUGHEST

We were off to the longest and toughest yacht race ever attempted in African waters. The prize: the coveted Blue Waters Cup.

With a 25 knot wind behind us, it was a dramatic start to a most dramatic race.

The South African-designed Royal Cape One yachts—flimsy but incredibly fast boats—were the first to set the tone of the killer instinct which marked the entire event.

Abandoning caution, they altered course and cut across coral shoals to clip five miles from the distance.

To stay with them, we were forced to do the same, knowing that a fractional error in navigation could see our boat lacerated on the razor-edged coral.

Across the shoals, we began a long beat out to sea, crashing through heavy seas.

Within an hour of entering deep water, the pace had begun to tell.

Leonotis, plunging and rearing like a demon possessed, had sprung a leak in the bow and was making an estimated 250 gallons an hour.

Green water breaking over our decks, seeped in through hatches and crevices, saturating everything.

At midnight, there was not one article of dry clothing or bedding on board the yacht.

The Cape One, Foxhound, had already put back to Lourenco Marques to land a seriously ill crewman. David Abromowitz of Cape Town, and Alastair Jack of the schooner Anuanua was also being rushed back to be treated for battery acid burns.

In the cabin of Leonotis I was

thrown about like a medicine ball as I struggled with dividers and parallel rulers to plot our course on water-sodden charts.

But my problems were small compared with those of the helmsmen fighting wind and weather in the exposed cockpit.

When I came on watch the following morning, after a brief sleep, I received the heartening news that we had just passed the Punta da Oro light, almost 100 miles south of Lourenco Marques.

I plotted our course accordingly — a decision which was later to lead to near catastrophe.

In fact, after a wild night, of beating back and forth, we had made less than 10 miles southwards. What the crew had seen was the lighthouse at Cabo da Inhaca.

Two nights later, because of this error, we were to race towards Cape St. Lucia believing that it was Durban's Cooper Lighthouse.

It was the realisation, during the early hours of Wednesday, that we still had over 100 miles to go when we thought we were home, that reduced crew morale to almost collapse.

And in its train it brought a painful roasting for Leonotis' journalist navigator.

Daylight brought a flat calm and extreme despondency.

Only once after the first night, had we sighted another yacht. Were we ahead of the fleet, or behind it? We had no way of

Tribune man Richard Cluver sums up his 400-mile ordeal

knowing.

The heavy weather of the previous days had taken their toll.

The main halyard had broken at the top of the mast, and the Genoa jib had torn out at its foot. A section of safety railing had been broken away and both barometer and radio were out of action.

Jury rigging could repair the boat, but nothing could tell us where the other boats were. And with this was the agonising knowledge that other boats might have found wind and could be racing for home while we lay helpless.

It was during Wednesday afternoon, when we were lying well out to sea off Richard's Bay, that the first hint of wind came through.

I was at the helm when soon after 2 o'clock we sighted the ketch, Wilhemina Marla, lying south-east of us. Within an hour, we had sighted Ingwe astern of us on the horizon, and Ilanda ahead.

And so at two miles an hour,

began the tense final phase of the race.

On handicap, we could finish behind all three yachts and still win the race, and at sunset all three boats were ahead of us, and going away rapidly.

Throughout the last night there was no sleep on board as we struggled to take advantage of every tiny puff of wind.

Then came dawn and a good wind Durban was 15 miles away and it was neck-and-neck racing.

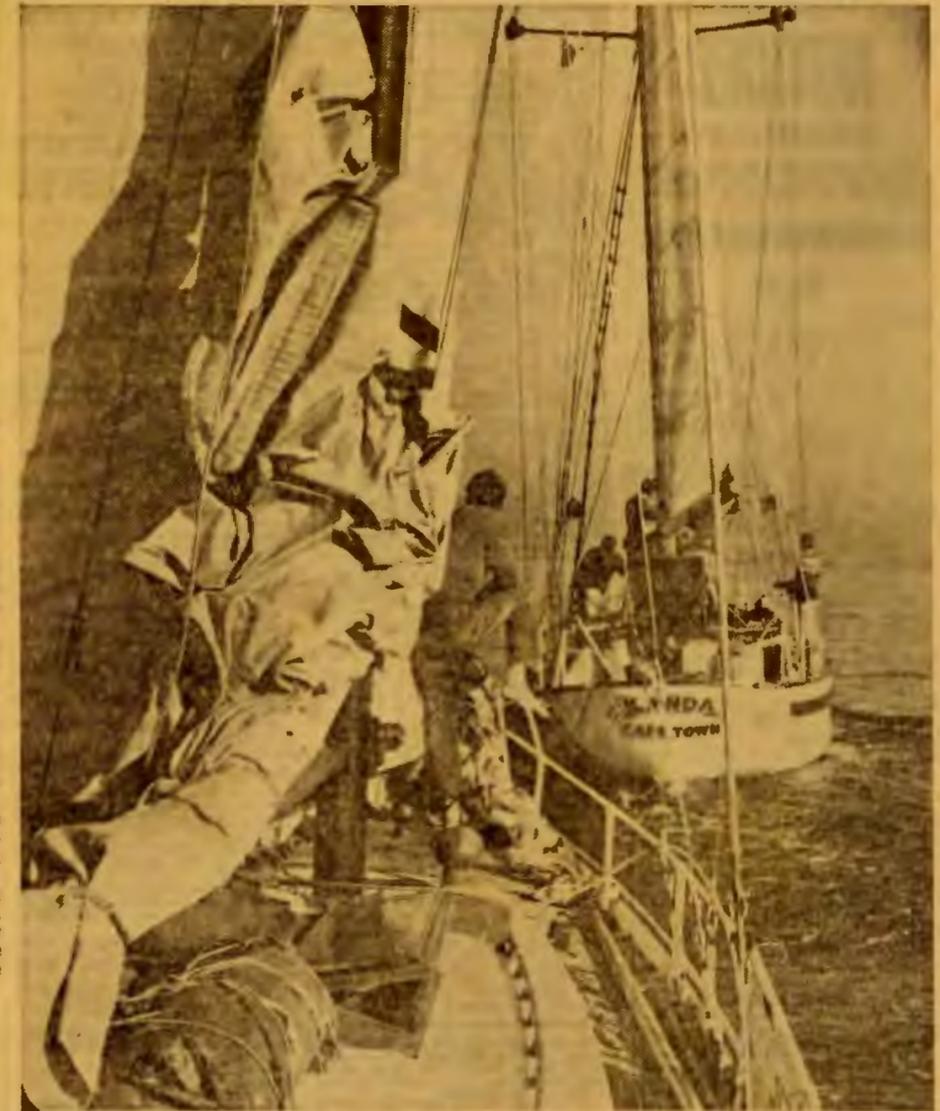
First of the heavy displacement boats across the finish line was the ketch Ingwe, at 8.15 a.m. Hot on their heels, we crossed the line at 8.30 and Ilanda was right behind us.

Final corrections placed us third, with the Cape Ones, Columbine and Aeriell, in first and second places.

To do it, we had averaged a little over three miles an hour. Our log showed we had actually covered almost 400 miles, the extra 100 miles due to adverse winds and currents.



THIS IS IT. The Lourenco Marques-to-Durban race is on. Richard Cluver writes: "The ketch Ilanda just astern of us as we cross the starting line and head for Durban. Lourenco Marques' Clube Naval is in the background."



HOME! It's the Ilanda again, this time towing the Leonotis into Durban Harbour.



THE SCHOONER ANUANUA reaching before a gale force wind at the start of the race. She was soon to retire after a member of her crew was seriously injured.