

Voortrekker II tying with Thursday's Child

Mercury Correspondent

PLYMOUTH—South African yachtsmen John Martin and Murray Webber were locked in a neck-and-neck struggle with their main American rivals in the gruelling Round Britain and Ireland sailing race yesterday.

Although Martin and Webber in their 20 m Voortrekker II do not have the speed to beat the big multihulls in the race, they are joint favourites with the American boat Thursday's Child to be the first monohull to complete the 2 000-mile course.

At Saturday's start in Plymouth, Voortrekker II got off to a flyer in the brisk force-four wind. But after two hours Warren Luhrs and Ola Wettergren had taken a slight lead in Thursday's Child.

'The two boats are very close and it is anyone's guess which will be the first to reach the first stop at Crosshaven in Ireland,' said race Press officer Shirley Smith yesterday.

Of the multihulls, the 20 m trimaran B C A Paragon, skippered by Britain's Mike Whipp, was the early leader from another British entry, Tony Bullimore's trimaran Apricot.

Before leaving Plymouth, South African Navy officer Martin, 30, said he and Webber were confident of winning the battle of the monohulls.

'Thursday's Child is very fast and beat me in last year's single-handed transatlantic race. But my boat has had some modifications, including new sails, which I believe will give me the edge,' he said.

'Murray and I are going to give it everything we've got plus an extra 10 per cent.'

Webber, who turned 21

just before the race, said: 'For me the best birthday present will be victory over the other monohulls.'

After stopping at Crosshaven, the 70 boats in the race sail north to the remote Outer Hebrides off Scotland and then east to the fierce waters surrounding the inhospitable Shetland Isles.

From there they make the longest part of the race, the 470 miles south to Lowestoft in Suffolk, before returning to Plymouth.

The record for monohulls in the race is 10 days, and Martin said he and Webber hoped the South African flag flying on the stern of Voortrekker II would be back in Plymouth in a new record time.