

The sailor who fell from grace with a case of liquid gold

JON SWIFT with the tale of an old sea-dog

THE news of the resuscitation of the Cape-to-Rio yacht race will doubtless be greeted with double gins all round in the inner sanctums of boating in this country.

The epic sail across the south Atlantic is no pleasure cruise...at least not for most. There survives, however, the true tale from the 1973 crossing which did much in my own mind to capsize the romantic notion of salt-encrusted, hard-bitten seadogs fighting the calendar, the elements and their competitors.

In defence to a long-standing friend the sailor in question, like the boat he skippered way back then, shall perforce remain nameless.

It all began with the build-up. The merits of the skipper were discussed; praise for his daring in attempting the voyage gradually making way to a style of — often unkind and invariably libelous — comments engendered by a continued close proximity to the golden liquid products of this country's big-

gest sports sponsor.

There was, on many evenings, a distinct list to port and a failure to find anything like sea legs from the assembled company.

In the man's defence, he took it all in good stead. Well, perhaps he did have to force the grin that accompanied the gifts of a kiddie's sailor hat and a plastic lucky packet compass.

Like a barnacle, he clung to the important things associated with the endeavour.

There followed long and detailed explanations of the craft he was to command; many diagrams drawn and erased in the puddles on the broad mahogany of the local which had started taking on all the airs of a stranded ship's chandler.

Again, he took the boringly repetitive

"yo ho hoing" and "avasting" with a calm the doldrums would have been proud of.

It was as the race itself grew nearer that his demeanour changed quite dramatically.

He was seen to snub his far from alcoholically dry landlubber acquaintances, esconcing himself in the corner of the bar after long phone calls to the Cape and making repeated annotations and crossings out on the back of his pack of 30.

His bemused friends were heard to surmise that it all had to do with pre-match nerves and the continuous scribbles to do with wind velocity and suchlike incomprehensibles.

We all shrugged at his behaviour. Wished him well on the day he left to fly to Cape Town and join the crew who would place their trust in him ... and kept our fingers collectively crossed.

Throughout the race there was a raging debate about where our nautical connection was actually placed. News

reports, sketchy as they were on the highveld, did not seem to recognise the fact that he and his yacht were in the race at all. Eventually, what seemed like eons adrift of the winner, came a late despatch to say that all was well and the mooring lines were taut at the quay-side in Rio.

It was only later, much later, that the true story of this skipper's particular crossing came to light.

He had, it seems, discovered that Scotland's famed tippie, available at reasonable rates in South Africa, was a commodity more precious than gold in Brazil. And that the cases of this liquid gold that had been stacked to the gunwales and caused one particular yacht to waddle its way across the vast stretch of ocean rather than fly with the wind, constituted a not insubstantial slice of the purchase price of the new craft he now proudly sails.

I watch with interest the names — and positions — of the finishers in the 1993 version.