

Skipppers recall glamour of Cape to Rio

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Weekend Argus Reporter
DURBAN. — No other race has the glamour of the Cape to Rio. Although only raced three times, this epic yachting challenge has captured the imagination of people around the world like none other.

It was banned after 1976 when Brazil deemed South African links were undesirable. Not to mention the French team that hurled tuxedoed Brazilian officials into the Rio de Janeiro yacht club pool, which caused some concern in up-market circles, because the majority of those who belong to this, probably the most elite yacht club in the world, neither own boats nor understand the occasional wild antics of those who do.

Now the race is on again, and in January 1993, the saga will be rewritten.

But all has been forgiven, if not forgotten. The "wild" South Africans who cross heaving oceans for fun, are being welcomed back into the fun city of South America, and even into the hallowed halls of the Rio club.

There have been many arguments about this race, but few will deny that the Cape to Rio has the glamour that no other ocean crossing has. It has also attracted more international skipppers than any other southern ocean crossing.

Many skipppers who contested the 3 600 nautical mile epic are

now dead. Others are scraping off the cobwebs from their windbreakers to once again relive the romance of yachting history.

Veteran skipper Dave Cox, who won his class in 1976, and could be the Natal hope in the 1993 race, said there was no race in the world to compete with the Cape to Rio.

"It's the most exhilarating route there is. You basically are flying a spinnaker in warm weather all the way. To us who love the ocean and racing on her, this is the best news possible. I'm already making plans to be there, and this time I'm going for an overall win."

Another veteran skipper, Neil Bailey, who won the Meridian trophy in 1976 for being the first to cross the Greenwich Meridian, said he too was preparing for a 1993 comeback.

"I don't think I have the financial resources to prepare a challenge myself, but I certainly would like to take part, perhaps even with Dave Cox. We are the only two skipppers who have raced to Rio and then sailed back.

"That means a loop into the Southern Ocean and after a hard race, you have to beat into cold, huge seas to Cape Town and Durban. It was a tough voyage but I loved it."

Most old timers agree that the "hottest" newcomer to the race would be Iain Park-Ross who is fast establishing himself as the best long distance racer around.

He won the **Crystic Beach-comber** Mauritius to Durban race in 1989, as well as the Wilbur Ellis Da Gama race from

Durban to East London. And he did it by flying more sail in fast winds than anyone else has ever dared.

Park Ross sails other people's boats, and his one proviso is that the owner has nerves of steel.

"In the last Mauritius race I had a bag (spinnaker) up in 40 knots in a night gale with a crewman on deck shining a torch so I could see that the sails were pulling. That won us the race.

"In the Cape to Rio, which is the truest downwind race in the world, I don't think we'll ever take the bag down. I will keep as much canvas up as I dare."

The first race saw much drama. As Gordon Webb, former chairman of the Cruising Association of South Africa which organises the race found out in 1971. He hit a whale some 1 000 nautical miles off Cape Town and way off the trade wind shipping routes, and they sank.

"We loaded everything we could into the life raft before the boat went down, and I then went to sleep, exhausted which spooked my wife and the other three crew members," he recalls.

"I had been a merchant seaman for years and was prepared for such a mishap. I knew we were off the shipping routes and feared the worst.

"Then we heard a ship's engine. We signalled frantically, but I didn't have much hope — we were just a dot in the ocean. But ironically a man who was due to be retired because he had bad eyesight saw us, and we were rescued."