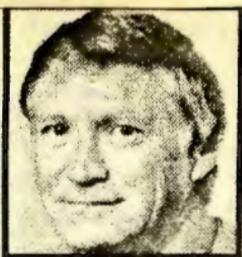


Dave's Beat

DAVE BEATTIE



Enough to take wind out of most sails

In three weeks time, the most expensive sailing fleet ever assembled, crewed by some of the world's finest yachtsmen, will set out from Newport, Rhode Island, on a 26 000-mile return trip — the Round the World Alone BOC Challenge.

Of the 30 entrants, 14 yachts are in the 60ft class; some represent the near-ultimate in monohull design, and electronic sophistication.

These yachts are, indeed, a long, long way from the yacht credited with the first circumnavigation, the 36ft "Spray" sailed by the legendary Joshua Slocum.

The American sea captain, then 51, set out in 1895, and finished in 1898. The favourites in this year's race will be looking for something in the region of 130 days!

Slocum sparked off a multitude of solo circumnavigations, but it wasn't until the 1960s that yachtsmen seriously contemplated a solo ocean race, and the first was the Golden Globe Challenge, a non-stop race. Only nine boats entered, and only one finished — "Suhaili", sailed by Briton Robin Knox-Johnston.

The "race" was a farce, and it wasn't until 1979 that the idea of a race taking in Newport, Cape Town, Sydney, Punte del Este and Newport again, was born. In 1982, a backer was found — BOC.

There were 17 starters, of whom 10 finished, in that race. Among them was South African Bertie Reed, who finished second to Frenchman Philippe Jeantot, whose winning time was just over 159 days.

Four years later, Jeantot took the honours again, in 134 days, five hours, and this time it was another South African, John Martin, who looked the most likely candidate to upset the Frenchman, winning two of the four legs.

But Martin had to be content with fifth place overall, and Reed came in ninth.

REMATCH

Now all three are set to do battle again — Jeantot on Credit Agricole IV, Martin on Allied Bank, and Reed on Grinaker.

Reed, who had an unhappy time of it in the last Globe Challenge, when he was forced to end his race in Cape Town, is not saying too much about his chances, and although Martin, winner of the two-handed TransAtlantic race a few weeks ago with brother Ian, believes he has a boat capable of preventing a French hat trick, he — and every other solo racer — is acutely aware of the fickleness of the wind, the fury of the sea, the frailties of the human mind and body.

Martin will remember the fatigue from steering 16-18 hours daily in covering the best part of 5 000 miles when his auto pilot failed; and the fear of being rolled over when running bare-poled some 2 000 miles from Sydney. Reed, too, has had his share of mishaps and nightmares, mainly through gear failure.

And if the memory of personal experience tends to fade with time, a brief glance at the records of the last two races would be enough to put anyone into a sober frame of mind as he or she — there is reportedly one lady in the race — prepares for this ocean Everest.

In that first BOC, of the non-finishers were hit by gear failure. "Gypsy Moth V" ran aground on Gabo Island near Australia when the skipper, Briton Desmond Hampton, was asleep, and two other yachtsmen had to be rescued when their boats pitch-poled and sank.

In the 1986/7 race, three of the 25 starters (including Martin) were involved in collisions on the start line. Five days out, American Dick Cross was rescued from his liferaft after "Air Force" hit a submerged object and sank. Two other boats were dismasted on the long haul, but the saddest incident — one that underlines the extreme risks in a game that is a gamble from start to finish — concerned Frenchman Jacques de Roux. De Roux, on "Skojern III" was rescued from his sinking boat in huge seas in the '82 race. Four years later, on "Skojern IV" his luck ran out. In winds of 65 knots, and in mountainous seas, De Roux's yacht was seen in the vicinity of Gabo Island, seemingly on no set course. There was no sign of the sailor.

Let's hope for smooth sailing, safe sailing, for all those now about to face the challenge of a lifetime.