

Fairer sex take to the decks

RAMSAY MILNE
in New York

IN an adventure once dominated entirely by men, two women sailors are to challenge for the first time a 25-boat fleet of super hi-tech racing yachts sailed by some of the world's best racing yachtsmen in a single-handed race round the world.

They are Isabelle Autissier, a 33 year-old French woman, and Jane Weber, 45, a Canadian.

They will be on the starting line in Newport, Rhode Island, on September 15 when the 25 yachts in the BOC 1990 Challenge race set out on their 43 400km voy-

age round the world, heading for Cape Town on the first gruelling leg.

Of the two, Autissier has the better chance of winning. She has better financial backing and more racing experience than her Canadian opponent. Her yacht, the Ecuil-Poitou-Charente, carries unusual sponsorship: sharing the cost of the \$1-million project is a French bank, a government ministry on women and the Poitou-Charentes region of France.

Half of the cost was the purchase price of her 18.28m boat, which may prove to have been worth it. In a recent non-stop global race, the

yacht was sailed to a third-place finish.

Ms Autissier, a fisheries professor, says that in sailing round the world she will be fulfilling a childhood dream. "So I might as well do it by myself," she says. "It would be stupid to say I will win. Nobody knows what will happen."

Compared to her, Ms Weber, in her own words, "is a beggar." As of this week, she still needed \$6 000 worth of equipment for her 13.7m yacht to be approved by the race committee.

She said that women were entering the BOC solo round-the-world race because modern technology enables them

to handle large yachts by themselves.

She has invested \$12 000 in self-tailing winches, which allow her to trim sails single-handedly in strong winds.

In a highly competitive field, Cape Town's John Martin, 35, is considered one of the top favourites.

Martin, who won the Newport-Cape Town and Rio-Newport legs of the 1987 BOC race, has returned this year with what is regarded as the most radical boat in the race.

His 18.28m Allied Bank is a flat and beamy boat designed to surf through the following seas of the Pacific

and Indian Oceans.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating," says Martin. "For me, this project started five months after the last BOC race ended. It has been years of working and thinking about this race."

His most formidable opponent is the 38-year-old Frenchman, Philippe Jeantot, whose record-setting pace in the 1983 race earned him the nickname 'The Flying Frenchman'. Jeantot also won the 1987 race.

The race is an eight-month journey, with only two other stops besides Cape Town along the way: Sydney, Australia, and Punta del Este, Uruguay.