

By IVOR CREWS

THE most dramatic racing duel to hit the high seas began yesterday.

South African John Martin and Frenchman Jean-Philippe Jeantot, fierce hi-tech yachting rivals, are favourites to win top honours in the world's toughest sailing event.

The two were among 26 yachtsmen who left Newport, Rhode Island, at noon yesterday bound for Cape Town on the first leg of the daunting BOC Challenge single-handed round-the-world race.

The race began with huge fanfare and intense media coverage in the US.

Although Martin and Jeantot are favourites, another South African veteran of the seas, "Biltong" Bertie Reed, 45, is determined to give them a good run.

Martin, 35, is sailing Allied Bank, designed by Cape Town's Angelo Lavranos and described by experts in Newport as "the most radical" yacht in the race. Reed, 45, is in Grinaker, also an ultra-modern design with the latest technology.

For Martin, winning the prestige event could turn him into a millionaire overnight.

Sponsors Allied Bank have promised the Springbok R500 000 if he comes first overall and R125 000 for every leg he wins.

Martin, a fierce competitor who has spent months of meticulous planning for the duel, has put himself under a lot of pressure to win.

Speaking from Newport before yesterday's start, a keyed-up Martin said while he welcomed the generous offer "it makes no difference because I intend winning anyway. But the incentive has helped lessen the last BOC post-race depression".

At the end of the 1986-87 BOC Challenge he said he felt "emotionally deflated". Sailing Tuna Marine, he won the first and fourth legs in record times, but bad luck pushed him back to fifth place behind Jeantot.

Icebergs

Admitting to being "very positive, but nervous" Martin said he was itching to go and his yacht was "100 percent ready".

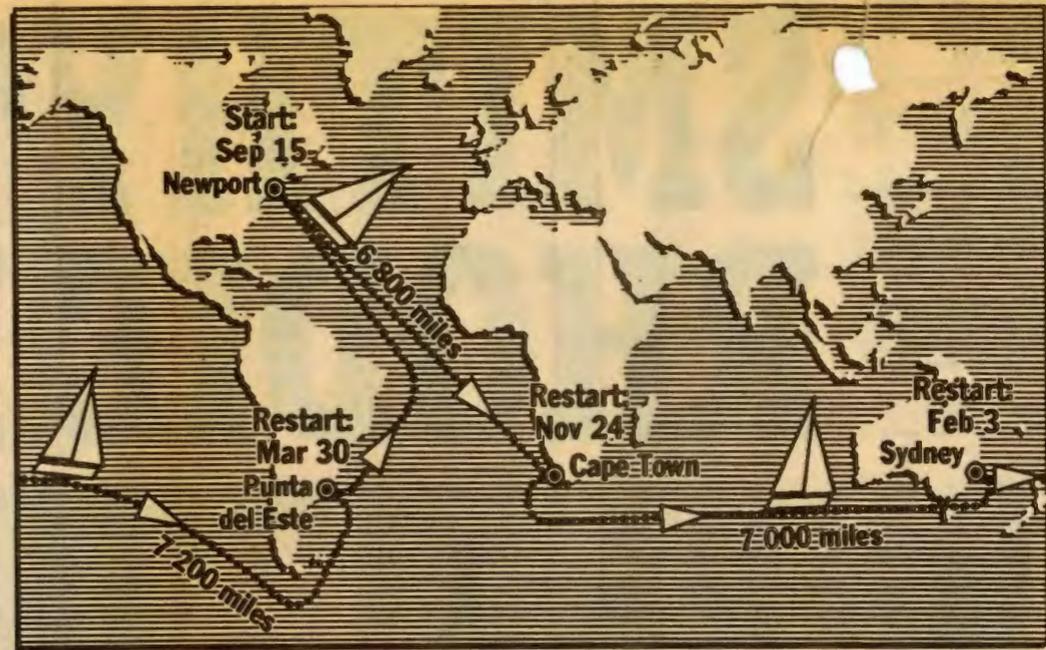
"Allied Bank has been tipped to win over here, but I feel that the Frenchman Jeantot, who won the last two races, must be in with a good chance," Martin said.

He said the Cape Town-Sydney leg was the "most difficult" because of rough seas and icebergs, but the Newport-Cape Town leg was the "most tactically demanding".

The vastly experienced Bertie Reed, taking part in his third BOC, feels his magnificent hi-tech yacht Grinaker



JOHN MARTIN ... he has a good chance of wresting the BOC title from Frenchman Jeantot



MARTIN ON TACK FOR A MILLION!



do a world solo again — there is still a lot of sailing left in me," he said.

For the next eight months each courageous sailor — in yachts the size of a whale — faces a long, dangerous and testing voyage of 43 000km alone against the most hostile oceans in the world.

The man who triumphs over treacherous currents, raging seas, icebergs, loneliness and a spartan diet will win a solid silver trophy as well as R250 000 and a gold finishing plate.

The trophy — designed by royal jewellers Garrards of London — is engraved with the names of sailors and yachts that have completed the BOC Challenge since its inception.

The yachts will stop at Cape Town, Sydney, and Punta del Este, Uruguay, and finish at Newport on the US east coast after months of gruelling racing which will



JEAN-PHILIPPE JEANTOT
Top favourite

test their skills and endurance to the limit.

Race organisers this week said the sailors were expected to arrive in Cape Town by October 25 where they would rest for a month and prepare for the second leg of their voyage to Sydney on November 24.

Allied Bank is likely to set the pace. The 18.5m sloop has been described as the most technically advanced in the fleet.

Martin's yacht is flat and beamy — a wide boat designed to surf through the flowing seas of the mighty Pacific and Indian oceans.

Besides Jeantot in Credit Agricole, tough opposition is likely to come from American Mike Plant in Duracell and Frenchman Alain Gautier in Generali Concorde.

One of the highlights of the race will be the battle of the sexes.

The two women in the race, broad-shouldered Isabelle Autissier, 33, of France, and petite Canadian Jane Weber, 45, are about to stamp their mark on the race previously dominated by men.

Of the two, Autissier appears to have the better chance of lifting the trophy.

Autissier has better financial backing and more racing experience than Weber. Sailing around the world has been her dream since childhood.



BILTONG BERTIE REED ... determined to put up a hard fight in his hi-tech yacht, Grinaker