

Rough time for crews as race leaders draw away

GRAND BAIE — Near gale-force winds off Mauritius modified somewhat yesterday as the majority of the Crystic Beachcomber Crossing racing fleet continued to make record time towards Durban in rough seas.

However, few boats have escaped unscathed with reports of torn sails and other minor damage being received during the two-day battering since the race started here on Saturday.

The heaving Indian Ocean has been the scene of some spectacular broaches during the past 24 hours.

Winds on Sunday were gusting to more than 30 knots, but yesterday winds were blowing steadily at about 18 knots with most boats flying light-weight spinnakers.

With both handicap favourite Corum Cape Concrete and line honours favourite The Boss out of the race, the field is said to be widening rapidly.

Durban maxi Get More Fun is some 200 nautical miles off the southern tip of Madagascar, followed by Tuna Marine Voortrekker, about 30 nautical miles behind, and Ilse-Bel and Hulett Aluminium fighting for third place.

Corum Cape Concrete snapped her mast raising a spinnaker at the start of the race and The Boss retired soon after the start when she began leaking water from her keel.

It appears that now the most exciting tussle is the "race within the race" where the L34 Class are locked in extremely close combat.

On Sunday, at least five of these 10m racers were all in sight of one other.

Leading the pack by only 10 nautical miles is Close Again, skippered by Roy Close and Ian Park-Ross, followed by Spar Sunseeker, with Andrew Dominey at the helm, and snapping at their heels is Dave Cox's Credit Guarantee Solar Wind and Derick Warne on Vuarnet Roulette.

Just behind are another group consisting of the Cape LK34, Suburban Hardware, skippered by Rob Meek, Ernie Shaw's AFI Warrior and David Raphael's Rip 'n Tear Freebooter, which has a largely hobiecat specialist crew.

In a radio interview, Cox said the race so far had been "extremely exciting" and they had been pushing the boat to the limit.

"We lost some gear during a high-speed broach, and the stew we were cooking was splattered over the galley and navigation table", he said.

Richard Crockett, with spinnaker trimmer on Vuarnet Roulette, also said via radio link-up that it was "exhilarating in the extreme".

"It's been pretty hairy at times and we have kept as much sail up as we dare. But, unlike Cox's crew, who are throwing their stew about, we've at least managed to have one hot meal."

Both boats have averaged 215 nautical miles since Saturday.

Crockett said at one stage they were surfing down waves at up to 17 knots.

If the winds hold, it is expected that the race record of 8 days 7 hrs will be improved by a large margin — Sapa