

One of the world's great endurance tests, the BOC Challenge, is under way, and top yachtsmen are vying for the honour of being the first to arrive back at Charleston.

Story SILKE FRIEDRICH

Imagine being on a boat, 600 nautical miles south of Tasmania. The temperature is below zero, the wind is blowing at 60 knots, and the seas are huge. There is no visibility. There are ice-bergs everywhere. And it's starting to snow...

This has been the experience of most competitors in the BOC Challenge, one of the world's toughest ocean races. The risk factor is high, but the sailors' morale is higher, the number of entrants increasing with each event. Yesterday, some 27 skippers were due to set out from Charleston, South Carolina, prepared to take on whatever dangers might lurk beneath 27 000 nautical miles of ocean surface.

Among them are South Africans Jean-Jacques Provoyeur and Neal Petersen. Both are first-timers, following in the wake of BOC veterans Bertie Reed and John Martin, who not only distinguished themselves in moments of high drama, but in performance too. Provoyeur, sailing Reed's *Grinaker*, revamped and renamed as *Ben Vio*, could become the first South African to take line honours. Tipped to win the race, however, is Frenchman Christophe Auguin, placed first in 1991.

But anything could happen. Highly competitive vessels, purpose-designed and technologically super-advanced, enable participants to sail across several thousand miles of ocean and arrive at their destination within hours of each other. Levelling the playing field even further is a new weather routing software program, loaded onto each yacht's computer. This state-of-the-art program reads and displays satellite-relayed weather data. On entering the ship's position and the chosen endpoint, the skipper is presented with all possible routes, including the quickest, to that point.

Given the evenly matched technology, skill and sea sense become crucial — knowing when to coax that extra knot of speed; when to ease off to avoid disaster. Each of the four legs of the race — Charleston to Cape Town, Cape Town to Sydney, Sydney to Punta del Este and Punta del Este to Charleston — can be treacherous. Each has claimed victims. On average, two thirds of



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Veteran John Martin, left, can attest to the dangers of the BOC Challenge facing Neal Petersen, below



Anchor's aweigh... Jean-Jacques Provoyeur is SA's big hope

entrants do not finish the race — their boats sustaining irreparable damage or, worse, sinking.

When the first yachts start arriving in Table Bay in mid-October, after thousands of miles of sea and solitude, their welcome will be overwhelming. And this should be a spur to forge further south, towards another goal on a distant horizon.

BERTIE REED

"Biltong Bertie", 51, has completed all the BOC Challenges so far, but lack of sponsorship prevented him from participating in the race now under way. Reed, who entered because he felt strongly about South African representation in Class One, claims to be relieved. "Taking part," he says, "would have meant checking into the hydro for a week and going to gym, to get mentally and physically fit."

Reed, whose forte is single-handed sailing, has left his mark on the BOC. In the first race in 1982/83, he came second in the SA Navy-owned *Voortrekker*. "The BOC

was new and exciting," he recalls. "None of the entrants had been around the world before. That year the Sydney to Punta del Este leg was fairly rough. I remember the *Voortrekker* being in a trough, surrounded by waves at least as high as the mast."

One of Reed's most dramatic BOC moments was his daring rescue of fellow competitor John Martin, who struck an iceberg off Cape Horn in the 1990/91 event. He received the gold-class Order Of The Southern Cross for bravery.

NEAL PETERSEN

At 26, Neal Petersen is the youngest skipper in the BOC. Competing in the Class Two section, he is also sailing the smallest boat, the 40-footer *Stella-r*.

It was *Stella-r*, with the slogan *Save Our Marine Life* painted on her side, which carried Petersen across the Atlantic in the single-handed 1992 OSTAR transatlantic race, and around Britain and Ireland in the double-handed 1993 Teeside race.

"It was vital to compete in these events,"

he says, "to gain the necessary experience."

Petersen has overcome great obstacles to realise his dream. Born with only one hip joint, he underwent several operations before starting to walk at the age of six. He later worked as a diamond diver on the West Coast, a job he loathed, saving his money to build *Stella-r*. After leaving Europe to enter the OSTAR, he ended up being towed into Galway, Ireland, where he received a hero's welcome. The town is now his adopted home.

Should he complete the BOC, he will be the first black skipper to have circumnavigated the world. Not that this matters to Petersen. "The sea makes no distinction between black and white, rich and poor. It's a great leveller."

JJ PROVUYEUR

Jean-Jacques Provoyeur is South Africa's big hope for the BOC. The 44-year-old Capetonian is sailing *Ben Vio*, the 60-footer previously named *Grinaker*, which he built for Bertie Reed to sail in the 1989/90 Globe Challenge. "It has been my dream to do the BOC since building that boat," he says.

Specially designed for a non-stop around-the-world race, the former *Grinaker* was in fact ill-equipped for the BOC. Provoyeur gave her a complete overhaul, removing unnecessary fittings such as bulkheads and cupboards. He also worked on the rudder problems which caused Reed's withdrawal from the Globe Challenge. Now he is confident, believing the boat to have "a lot of unproven potential".

Despite his limited solo-sailing experience, Provoyeur is a Springbok yachtsman who has raced extensively and well in local events. He crewed on Duran Duran singer Simon le Bon's *Drum* for the Cape Town to Auckland leg of the 1985/86 Whitbread race, later going on to win the 1989 Mauritius-Durban challenge.

"I'm going to push *Ben Vio* hard," says Provoyeur — with Reed's blessing.

JOHN MARTIN

Another BOC veteran, John Martin, shared the headlines with Bertie Reed in the 1990/91 Challenge when his yacht, *Allied Bank*, hit a submerged iceberg, bringing Reed rushing to a dramatic rescue. The incident illustrated one of the biggest dangers facing sailors on the Cape Horn-Punta del Este leg. The collision happened when Martin changed course towards Cape Horn through an area that promised stronger winds. The winds duly arrived, but too soon, and Martin was swept onto the iceberg. The yacht had been gashed, and pounding seas and strong winds caused further damage. Up to his knees in freezing water, Martin gave up the struggle to save *Allied Bank*, and sent out an SOS. Reed heard the call, and raced to the rescue. □