

AGAINST THE ELEMENTS, SEA IS ITS OWN MISTRESS

By HENRI du PLESSIS
Yachting Reporter

HUGE rolling swells as far as the eye can see, a constant howling wind whipping up spray from the chop, fog and marrow-numbing cold. That's the Southern Ocean in December.

The night is only about three hours long and it's impossible to keep anything dry in the heavy, wet air.

Even a modern yacht affords poor sanctuary in these conditions. And there will be 21 of them out there in December as intrepid sailors in the BOC 1990/91 round-the-world challenge tackle the second leg of the world's toughest yacht race.

Fear will be part of the daily lives of the sailors and each has his or her special nightmare.

Isabelle Autissier of France in Ecureuil Poitou Charente and South African Bertie Reed in Grinaker have a fear in common — breaking something on their boats.

"I am very afraid of breaking something, especially the mast," said Autissier, the only woman in the race after Canada's Jane Weber withdrew.

Autissier sails a proven boat, previously known as 36.15 Met when her compatriot Jean-Luc van den Heede sailed it to third place in the Globe Challenge round-the-world race this year.

Although her boat is a veteran of the Southern

Ocean, Autissier has not been there before and admits she does not really know what to expect.

"I know it is very fast, very rough sometimes. I have spoken to sailors who have been there, like Philippe Jeantot and Jean-Luc, but I cannot really form a picture of it in my mind."

Known as a tough and experienced sailor, Reed is afraid of breaking something purely for competitive reasons.

"If you break something on the yacht, you have to fall back and repair the damage."

Reed, like most of the other sailors, believes the sea, not the wind, is the greatest danger.

At times they will surf huge swells to really

plane for exhilarating bursts of great speed, but the rolling yacht could touch the water with its boom or spinnaker pole, breaking the gooseneck on the mast or the spinnaker pole itself.

Jeantot, the reigning BOC champion after winning the race twice in a row, fears every time he has to gybe his yacht. His thoughts are echoed by Spaniard Jose de Ugarte, sailing BBV.

"You have to take great care when gybing (turning the yacht with the wind from behind), because the forces on the sails are very great. If you lose control, you can lose everything," de Ugarte said.

Frenchman Alain Gautier, the skipper of Gen-

erali Concorde and record line honours winner of the first leg, fears the times when he will be wakened suddenly and has to do something on deck immediately afterwards.

"You are still half asleep, your balance is not so good and in the dark your eyesight has not adjusted," he said.

According to South African John Martin, skipper of Allied Bank, the most dangerous time is when a sailor is exhausted and still has to take a risk of some sort.

"Your judgment is not at its best, your reactions are slow and you can easily make a mistake and fall overboard," he said.



Above: Philippe Jeantot's Credit Agricole leads Kanga Birtles' Jarkan, Jose de Ugarte's BBV and Josh Hall's Spirit of Ipswich away from the start line.

■■■

Left: Almost abreast, Generali Concorde, Innkeeper, Credit Agricole and Isabelle Autissier's Ecureuil P C (sail number 34) head out of Table Bay, with spectator boats at close quarters.

Pictures:
JIM McLAGAN
and HANNES
THIART
Weekend Argus

Below: The Silver Falcons swoop low over the sea behind a River-class minehunter of the South African Navy shortly before the start of the BOC Challenge in Table Bay today. The pride of the Air Force, the Silver Falcons put on a magnificent display of aerobatics until about 12 minutes before the start of the race.



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