

If only Manuel's boats were as big as his passion for sailing to Rio

DALE GRANGER

THERE'S one person in Cape Town whose Latin blood will be boiling next month at the start of the MTN Cape-to-Rio race. Disillusioned Portuguese sailor Manuel Mendes is not allowed to sail the 3600-mile ocean classic as his boat is almost a metre too small.

In sailing circles they don't come more passionate than Mendes, who is likely to cut a forlorn figure when the start gun fires on January 8 and the 90-strong fleet set off on their South Atlantic adventure.

The Capetonian boatbuilder had entertained aspirations of following in the wake of his great seafaring ancestors, the first Europeans to discover both South Africa and Brazil, in a race symbolising much more than a new millennium sailing carnival.

To Mendes, it's also the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Por-

tuguese navigator Pedro Cabral in Rio, a proud celebration to any Portuguese man with salt in the veins.

To commemorate the occasion, he had planned to sail his 22-foot boat, the J-22 Joe Moore, double-handed to Rio — until he was told it was too small. So he inquired about sailing his J-27, J-Too, only to be told the boat failed to meet the minimum race criteria by three feet.

"What I don't understand is how the yacht club (Royal Cape) can allow their general manager, Anthony Steward, to sail a 19-foot open boat around-the-world alone but I'm not allowed to sail a 27-foot boat double-handed on the Rio race. Now he (Steward) wants to row around the world and he's crazy. He'll probably do it," says Mendes in protest.

Mendes has a case. Not only does the archaic race ruling date back to the '70s, but he has already sailed a 26-foot yacht 7600 miles from Cape Town to Lisbon single-handed to prove he is more than capable of sailing half the distance to Rio with a crewman.

On his 1986 voyage, Mendes spent 82 days at sea alone delivering a tiller to Portugal which was used to sail a replica of a 15th century caravel to the Cape the following year to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Bartholomew Diaz becoming the first sailor to round the Cape-of-Good Hope.

"The tiller was longer than the boat and weighed 350kg, so we had to cut it in half to fit it on board," said Mendes, who has built more than 50 J-class yachts.

"The J boats are my life. I'll sail nothing else and I wanted to sail this race in the spirit of the great Portuguese seafarers. We discovered the Cape, the spice route to India and



RIO-LITY BITES: Royal Cape Yacht Club general manager Anthony Steward, the first person to sail around the world alone in an open 19-foot yacht, has been having a tough time explaining to tenacious Portuguese sailor Manuel Mendes that he's not allowed to sail in next month's MTN Cape-to-Rio race as his boats, Joe Moore and J-Too, are too small.

PICTURE: ALAN TAYLOR

Cape Horn. Cabral was also the first European to discover Brazil and we taught the English how to sail," says Mendes, explaining his inherent love of sailing and why the Rio voyage is such a cherished goal for him.

The smallest boats in the fleet are the two 30-foot navy Centurions, Southern Maid and Southern Floe. Mendes believes they would be no match for either his J-27 or his J-22.

"I believe I would be able to average 120-130 miles a day and make the prize-giving (on April 4) with time to spare. My J-22 is much faster and safer than the Royal Cape One Designs, which are old, heavy displacement boats. The problem is while modern technology has evolved, the rules of the race have not kept pace.

"In Table Bay, I race my boats

against 34 footers and I've been out in 40-knot winds. Boat for boat I have no doubt I would be faster than the Centurions and on handicap I would be miles in front of everyone," says Mendes.

Steward said when he set sail in 1993 on his quest to become the first man to sail solo around-the-world alone in an open boat, he was not constricted by rules and regulations.

"If you want to sail around the world in a bathtub, no one can stop you. But this is different, it's an organised event and the committee tries to lay down some safety parameters. My personal view is that if Manuel wants to do it, let him, but the race committee still has to consider the self-righting criteria of the yachts and the cut-off date (for official finishers)."

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QUESTION: Name one of the yachts mentioned in Dale Granger's Cape Times MTN Cape to Rio yachting column today.