

Age 'not a barrier' for sailor Derek Bird

DALE GRANGER

HE'S the oldest man in the fleet but when the gun is fired at the start of the sixth MTN Cape-to-Rio race next Saturday, cancer survivor Derek Bird will relish his first ocean crossing with as much enthusiasm as 12-year-old Gareth Arnott, the youngest sailor in the race.

Ironically, while Gareth, a grade six pupil from Melkbos, is

sailing the race with his father, Dave, on the family's Farr 38, Madonna, Derek is crewing for his son, also named Dave, on his 40-foot catamaran, Merck Genericks.

After beating prostate cancer, Bird says he found a new lease on life which has set his sights on Rio and also had him playing golf twice a week off a 14-handicap. Both he and Arnott concur that age is no restriction to braving the high seas.

"I'm not ashamed to say I've still got prostate cancer but as far as I'm concerned I'm on my feet and I don't believe I've got it anymore. Three years ago my prostate-specific antigen (the body's immune response to the cancer) reading was sky-high, now it's 0.2. You must keep going, pal, life is wonderful."

Bird believes the turning point in his battle with cancer came last year when his son invited him to sail 7 200 miles with him on an eight-month return voyage to the Seychelles: "He's a great believer that the sea cures all and since then I've never had a day's problem," he says.

David said of his father: "He was dying of cancer but he's as strong as a bear and now he's beaten it."

Bird says: "During the trip we went diving and fishing and on one of the islands I caught a 1.5m wahoo which the islanders said was a record. The whole experience reaffirmed my philosophy to life which is, thank God I'm still alive and can do things such as walk as there are many who can't. I have to thank my wife of 44 years, Iona, who's taken care of me and always makes sure I get the right food. She's made a huge

difference to my life."

Since his Indian Ocean venture, Bird has completed a navigator's course and a pilots course which qualify him to sail a yacht in and out of port.

"I've got a zest for life and I'm a competitive type of guy. I'm looking forward to this race as I've always wanted to go to Rio and I don't think my age is such a big deal. I wouldn't say I'm the best of sailors and I do get a bit queasy until I've got my sea legs, which is why I'll be staying on the boat from next week to get my mind right. I look forward to coming into Rio after 23 or 24 days. When I see Sugar Loaf I'll be the happiest man in the world," he says.

"It's nice to be the youngest," says Arnott who has already sailed the Double Cape race and braved 60-knot winds with his father in the Langebaan Lagoon.

"I haven't told my friends about it as I don't think they're

that keen on sailing. I once took five of my mates sailing but they all got seasick and that's the last I saw of them at sea. I'm like my dad, I've never been seasick," he added.

"I've never been to Rio before and I'm very excited, I can't wait. I know you must be careful on-board but I'm not really worried about the voyage. I just hope we don't have any really bad weather," says Arnott who will be working the halyards in the cockpit.

Last week Arnott met Bird and the youngster says: "He's a nice guy. He wished me a nice trip and I hope I see him in Rio."

While Bird and Arnott are both Rio rookies on their first ocean crossing, 70-year-old Cliff Leih is making a comeback to the race as crew on the Swede 55, Spilhaus, 28 years after he sailed the first Rio race with legendary SA sailor Bruce Dalling, on



AGE IS NO BARRIER: Although they're three generations apart, Gareth Arnott, 12, and Derek Bird, 72, are both Rio rookies who will be sailing their first ocean crossing next Saturday as the youngest and oldest sailors respectively in the MTN Cape-to-Rio fleet. **PICTURE: PERIDOT**

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