

Hard graft pays off for Dalton

Sailing has provided one of the country's grittiest competitors with many highs and lows.

JARED SAVAGE talks to **Graham Dalton** about the sacrifices he made to chase his lifelong dream.

Roaring up Symonds St in his blue Merc, Dalton points out one of his favourite haunts.

"Chased some lovelies in there. Gorgeous!" For just an instant, his set jaw relaxes into a cheeky grin and a twinkle resides in his steely-blue eyes.

The comment is a far cry from how Dalton romantically describes his true love.

"There were moments when I'd be sailing the Southern Ocean, just cruising along through 40-foot, breaking rollers. There'd be ice about, the temperature would plummet, and I'd have the stereo blasting down below.

"The full moon was shining, reflecting off the water, and the stars were out. You could just reach out and grab them. Beautiful. Just magnificent."

Dalton, brother of the well-known Grant, is fit and strong for a 50-year-old.

As he steps out of his car and strides into the Sheraton's lobby I struggle to match his pace.

He looks relaxed in casual jeans and a polo jersey, his weathered face framed by cropped, greying hair and crowned with red Oakley sunglasses.

He orders two flat whites, immediately lights another cigarette - his second since our meeting five minutes ago - and sinks into the couch.

He seems weary, as if he hasn't recovered from the rigours of seven months on the open seas.

In Auckland circles, the name Dalton is synonymous with sailing.

Both brothers have forged their reputations as first-class sailors.

After spending two decades working towards circumnavigating the globe single-handedly, Dalton had his childhood dream cruelly snatched from his grasp.



But while most people let their dreams fade after one failed attempt, Dalton has already begun preparations for another assault on the world's oceans.

He plans to brave the ice-ridden waters of Antarctica in his next circumnavigation in 2004 - a project tentatively named "Operation Ice".

"There are still some things that people haven't achieved down there in a solo sense."

Once already, Dalton has come agonisingly close to accomplishing his goal.

His yacht Hexagon was irreparably damaged in the fourth leg of the 2002/3 Around Alone race, after sailing more than 25,000 nautical miles in ferocious conditions.

"It was gut-wrenching. I gybed, like I had a thousand times before, and the mast just snapped into three pieces.

"I never wanted to give up. We worked night and day to get back racing, but we didn't have it in the budget."

Around Alone is the longest race on earth for any individual in any sport. The course spans

some 28,755 miles of the world's roughest and most remote oceans.

It is a gruelling, single-handed sailing race, where competitors are both captain and crew, and the finishing line is literally a

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world away.

In a cursed campaign beset with problems, the de-masting of Hexagon was the final straw.

"I wanted to win. But win, lose or draw, if you can look yourself in the mirror and like what you see, you're not a failure. And I can still do that."

Raised in a boating environment with a lust for exploration, Dalton knew from a young age he was destined for a life on the high seas.

"I must have been only two or three years old when my mum gave me a sailing book. She sat me down and said, 'Look at this because one day you'll be a sailor.'"

Like thousands of other Kiwi families, the Daltons spent their summers on the water. And like thousands of other Kiwi kids, Dalton began honing his sailing skills in the P-class yacht.

But he remembers a determination and drive to succeed set him apart from the crowd at a very young age.

In 1967 Sir Francis Chichester announced he was sailing solo around the world, from Plymouth to Sydney and back. The public thought he was attempting the impossible.

"People said he was mad, that it couldn't be done.

"I remember being in the playground at St Kent's - I could show you the spot - and I heard three lads say they were going to be just like Sir Francis.

"And I thought, 'No you're not. You're only saying that because you're boys. But I will.'"

From that moment on, Dalton set his sights on sailing single-handedly around the world.

However, corporate sponsorship is necessary to fund the multi-million-dollar costs of a circumnavigation campaign.

"You can't be a sportsman in a suit trying to convince corporates to back you."

So in 1989, Dalton went back to night-school. After completing courses in journalism, public relations and marketing, he teamed up with "New Zealand's best kept secret".

Bob Gill was the strategic media manager responsible for gaining the hosting rights of the 1987 Rugby World Cup and the 1990 Commonwealth Games.

"We sat down and formed a game plan, a set path with goals that we had to achieve in order to sail around the world."

But getting international corporations to listen wasn't easy.

"We got turned down hundreds, perhaps thousands of times. But each 'no' that I got meant I was getting closer to a 'yes'.

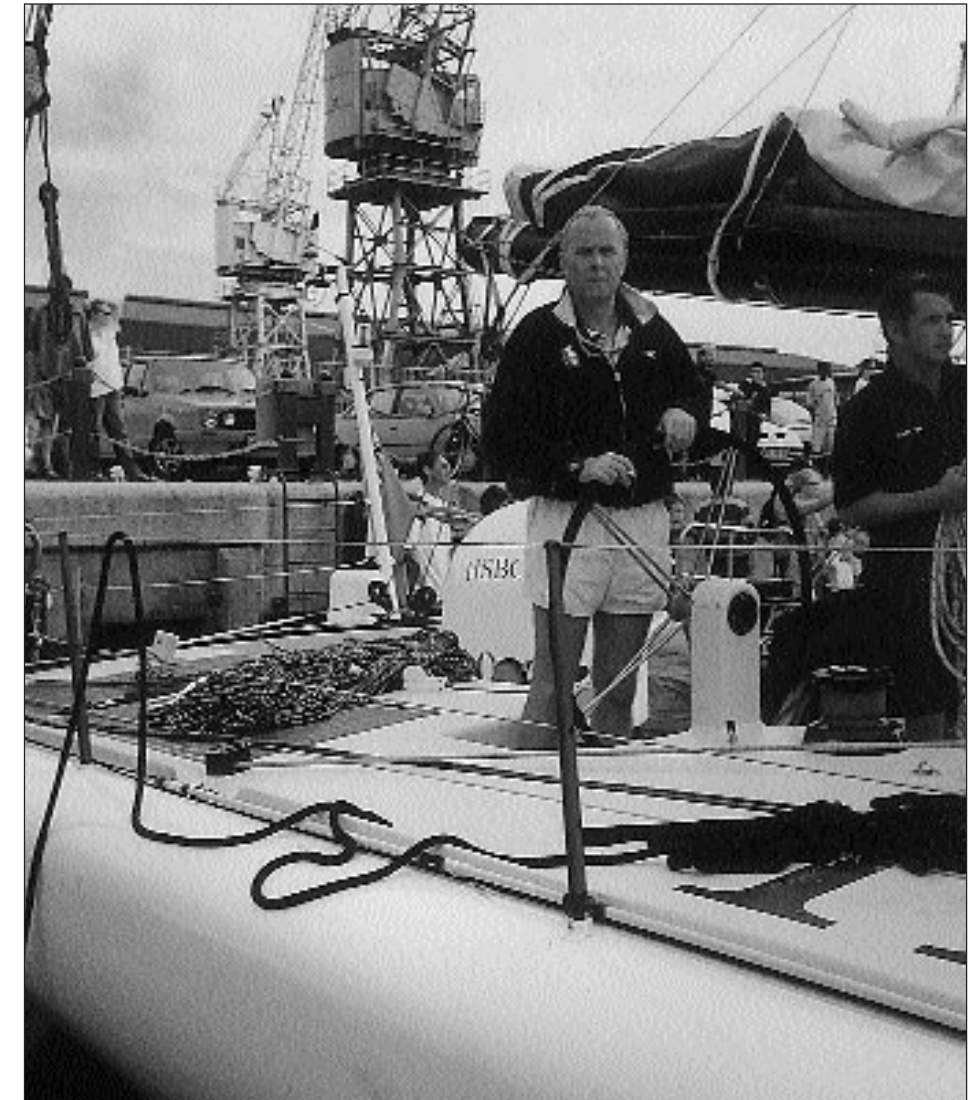
"Good, positive friends said to me, 'You're flat-broke and it's cost you your marriage. Give it away, Graham.'

"But you can't beat someone that doesn't give up. You can beat the shit out of me but, if I keep getting up, I'll knock you out."

Dalton eventually called the New Zealand branch of the Hong Kong-Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC).

"I rang every three days for three months, and they got so pissed-off they agreed to see me,"

"You can beat the shit out of me but, if I keep getting up, I'll knock you out."



AT THE HELM: Dalton is the centre of attention aboard his treasured Hexagon.

he says laughing.

His persistence garnered him an invitation to HSBC's headquarters in London.

"I was in the boardroom of the second-biggest bank in the world, surrounded by millions of pounds of artwork.

"It was 11 in the morning and I said to the CEO, 'I need the heads of agreement by five o'clock tonight and the money in by next week or we're walking.'

"He looked at me and said, 'I like the cut of your gybe, Graham, but you're a bit rough.'"

Dalton's success is even more surprising considering HSBC had spurned the advances of some of the world's most powerful men.

"Bertarelli [of Alinghi], Allen [of OneWorld] and Team New Zealand had all been there and been turned away. But we sought to give rather than to take."

For Dalton sport and education go hand in hand. He was adamant he was going to use his sailing experience to motivate and educate young people.

"It was non-negotiable.

"When I look at the faces of young people, I don't notice what they look like. I see the future and often I don't like what I see."

As part of the HSBC sponsorship, Dalton spearheaded an innovative internet-based education programme, The Global

Education Challenge (GEC).

Comprising 32 weekly modules, the website integrated the excitement of sailing the planet with interactive educational challenges.

The GEC website received over two million hits a week with an average time of 15 minutes spent on the site.

As well as filing reports and photos on the website, Dalton made countless visits to school-children in each city he visited during the race.

"I went into a township in South Africa, a place where even the police wouldn't go.

"When we arrived there were armed guards and razor wire surrounding the school. And although these kids were from a shantytown, they were beautifully turned out in polished shoes and spotless white shirts.

"They had pride in their appearance and they wanted to be doctors and biologists - the same as kids everywhere.

"And if one kid out of the tens of thousands that I've talked to comes up to me and tells me that I've made a difference, then I would have been successful."

However, the trials he faced on the water make his 20-year struggle to reach the starting line almost trivial by comparison.

Dalton effectively lost the first leg of Around Alone before the race had even started, receiving a 60-hour time penalty for failing to qualify after his mast snapped sailing to the starting line.

On almost every one of the three legs he completed mechanical failure cost him precious time and resources, and eventually his childhood dream. It seemed that Hexagon was cursed. A communications system washed overboard, a snapped boom, two broken masts and a smashed rudder courtesy of a wandering whale. "We were testing the boat inside the harbour at Cape Town. Bang. We stopped dead, and bits and pieces of the rudder started floating on the water.

"Then this massive whale surfaced. It must have been 25-feet long and it had this big groove in its back where the rudder hit.

"It looked at me with this big eye and just sunk to the sea floor. It was rooted."

Despite being able to laugh off the problems that dogged his campaign, Dalton still rues his missed chance.

"You think that it gets easier. But I didn't achieve what I set out to do and it's bloody hard to take.

"I never wanted to give up. It was a bad day because I'm not a quitter."

Although secretive about the details of his next attempt to emulate Sir Francis Chichester, Dalton says he is customising his yacht to handle the unforgiving nature of the Antarctic.

He draws one last drag of his final cigarette before breaking into that familiar cheeky grin.

"It's no place for fairies, and I'm not talking about the ones at the bottom of your garden."

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