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Nonstop circumnavigator, 71, sails into record books

By ERIC L. DUE
Staff writer

MISAKI, Kanagawa Pref. -- Sailing legend Minoru Saito cruised into the record books Monday evening when his aging, battered sloop Shuten-dohji II crossed a line off the port of Misaki, ending a 7 1/2-month, nonstop unassisted solo circumnavigation and making him at 71 the oldest person ever to perform the feat.

The line was where Saito, then 70, hoisted sail Oct. 16 to embark on his adversity-fraught odyssey Challenge 7 aboard the 15-year-old, 15-meter sloop, which has taken him over those years more than the distance to the moon.

His arrival Monday marks his seventh solo circumnavigation. This time around, famed sailor Kenichi Horie and Saito shadowed each other, but they denied it was a "race." Horie departed Oct. 1 from Osaka aboard his sleek, new Suntory Ltd.-sponsored sloop Mermaid. He is expected to arrive back there Tuesday.

"I'm tired. Two hundred and thirty-four days was a long time," said an unshaven Saito after a doctor gave him a quick checkup.

"Anyway, my heart is fine and I feel good," he said. "I've had some cold beer, so I feel better."

The sparsely funded Saito, who, as always, entered the equation with a long-running heart ailment, survived damaging knockdowns near Cape Horn, frostbite among icebergs in the Southern Ocean ultimately cured with Tiger Baum, a nagging toothache only anodyne could alleviate, bowel trouble in both extremes, a never-healed broken finger that only worsened, food that turned bad and water that spoiled.

The woes suffered by his aging Shuten-dohji II (Drunkard's Child) ran the gamut from an engine that quit early on, disabling his refrigeration, to



JT SATOKO KAWASAKI

Minoru Saito raises his arms in triumph aboard his sloop, Shuten-dohji II, at Koajiro Bay in Misaki, Kanagawa Prefecture, on Monday evening after completing a nonstop unassisted circumnavigation.

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auto-helm and steering vane breakdowns, mainsail and storm sail damage, radio and satellite phone disruptions, and "gremlins" who silenced his critical weather fax system -- problems that each would have sent a less intrepid sailor scurrying back to port.

The stores he embarked with included tanks of drinking water and diesel fuel, hundreds of bottles of water, propane canisters, cans of beer, bottles of wine, whiskey, rum, "shochu" spirits, some 200 potatoes, 200 onions and Japanese squash (which "with beer is not so bad.") He also had prepared rice and instant noodles, canned foods and thawing meat he had to quickly consume.

In mid-April he reported still having lots of green tea, but couldn't find his teapot in the chaos below deck.

Short of fresh food toward spring and as he started climbing his way back north to Japan, he started growing "kaiware" daikon sprouts, broccoli and mustard greens below deck to augment the processed and canned foods with a little salad.

"My vegetables did very well," Saito said, adding, however, that his alcohol supply was running "very, very low" near the end.

Notable log entries include Dec. 6, after constant storms and little sleep: "I'm in a pod where low pressures are rambling, feeling there's no sane Earth I'm staying on." Or his first knockdown on Dec. 29 while running with "bare poles" for days on end, when the wind was too fierce for any sail and the waves topped 10 meters.

"My worst day was the knockdown before Cape Horn. After that, winds and waves were terrible and I had to stay at the helm," Saito said as his friends and media toasted him with more beer.

January saw frostbite. In February came the toothache, an iceberg "with a sharp tip like Mount Everest," and "a fish 18 cm long waiting for me on deck, and I'm going to cook it." Later his boat sprung a "syringelike leak that kept going 'shooo.' "

April 24 was notable as a squall afforded him his first bath in five months, and he even slapped on some hair tonic. He washed his hair in the rain again a week later.

On May 11, he almost fell overboard -- some lifelines were missing. The next day the toothache returned and some birds came calling.

Saito did his best to keep in touch with his support group during the 234-day saga, battling frequent repairs and sail-changes, storms and calms, difficult-to-see islands and chronic lack of sleep. And he always kept his spirits up, even when they were running low.

Almost home on May 20, he counted four cans of beer, one bottle of whiskey and a jug of shochu left. Things were getting desperate. He dreamt of cold beer and sashimi.

All of that awaits him now that he has set foot on land, as well as a congratulatory call from an old friend -- Britain's Sir Robin Knox Johnston, who in 1968 was the first to complete a nonstop circumnavigation -- but at a much younger age.

The next question for Saito, whose feat awaits recognition by the International Sailing Federation as well as the Guinness Book of Records,

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will be when he and the Shuten-dohji II are ready again to put to sea.

But for now, Saito will settle for a hot bath and a few nights' sleep on a firm futon in Misaki.

The Japan Times: June 7, 2005

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