

Cover Story News

Brotherhood of the Board, part 1

by Cynthia Dizikes

The water in Catalina's shadow was black and choppy. Seventy-one paddleboarders stood in the sand on the water's edge talking and joking in the dark. It was just before 6 a.m. A bonfire raged behind them on the shore, pale light threaded the horizon. The weather report had predicted calm seas and overcast skies — a paddleboarder's ideal conditions — but to step in the water and look at the stars was to know that was wrong.

The Manhattan Beach Pier, their final destination, sat 32 miles away, across a turbulent ocean.

The countdown brought silence to the line. Shoulders tensed, boards poised above the water. A siren's blare filled the harbor: The Catalina Classic Paddleboard Race had begun.

The paddleboarders dodged around the boats moored in the harbor and broke into the open water. Their pumping torsos were black silhouettes against the lightening sky. At dawn, from the lead boat Disappearance, the paddleboarders appeared like some rare species -- half man half water.

The paddleboarders' escort boats, responsible for providing food, water, directional, and moral support, began to search for their paddler in the semi-dark. Most of the racers were in it just to finish, what is arguably the most difficult, paddleboard race in the world. A handful of paddleboarders, however, broke away from the pack early. Any one of these elite paddlers had the ability to win. Four of them had won the race in previous years - Los Angeles County Lifeguard Ryan Addison in 2004, Palos Verdes stock broker Sean Richardson in 2003, San Diego Lifeguard Brian Zeller in 2000 and Los Angeles County Lifeguard George Kabris in 1997.

Addison, 33, and Zeller, 35, were leading the pack, paddling nose to nose and stroke for stroke. Their hands pierced the water on either side of their boards and their shoulders pulled the ocean behind them. They did not look at each other, only forward.

"I believe the winner to the Catalina race is decided weeks before the race starts," said Zeller, following the race. "There is a small group of people who can win the race. Of those people, it is the one who trained the hardest and is the most mentally dialed in who is going to win."

The rough water that paddlers call "morning sickness" usually smoothes out an hour into the race. By 9 a.m. the water was still so turbulent that when the paddlers went to their knees they had trouble staying on their boards. The time to beat was 5:02.12, Tim Gair's record time in 1999. That year the water had been glassy the whole



Ryan Addison (left) congratulates Brian Zeller after Zeller prevailed in their five-hour duel across the Catalina Channel Sunday morning in the 50th annual Catalina Classic Paddleboard Race. Photo by Cynthia Dizikes.

way. Last year the conditions were almost as good and Addison finished within seven minutes of the record.

This year Addison was the top California finisher in the paddleboard races that led up to Catalina. At the end of July he finished fourth in the 32-mile Molokai to Oahu Paddleboard race, which was won by Australia's three-time Molokai winner and 2002 Catalina Classic winner Jamie Mitchell, thought to be the greatest paddler ever.

But, paddleboarding two 32-mile races, in less than a month posed a grueling challenge.

"Some people say racing Molokai and then Catalina cannot be done," Addison said.

Addison and Zeller stayed with each other for 20 miles, but Addison was struggling.

"Between miles five and 20, I wanted to pull out," Addison said. "I don't know. I just didn't have it. [Zeller] seemed really strong, but I knew if I pulled out I couldn't live with myself. You can't just pull out because you don't think you are going to win."

Zeller and Addison, however, were about to have more on their minds than exhaustion and each other. As the two approached the R -10 buoy off of Palos Verdes, roughly nine miles south of the Manhattan pier, Richardson, 44, began reeling them in.

"Richardson just started catching up," Zeller said. "I tried not to look back because it's a dead give away and they know you're bumming, but [Richardson's] boat has a distinct engine noise, and I could hear it getting closer."

Tom and Duke

Modern paddleboarding began in 1920 on a hot night in Detroit. Duke Kahanamoku, "The Father of Modern Surfing," was on his way back to Hawaii after winning an Olympic gold medal in swimming in Austria. Kahanamoku and his team made a special stop in a Detroit theater to see a talkie that featured them. According to Malcolm Gault-Williams in *Legendary Surfers*, an 18-year-old boy ran up to Kahanamoku to shake his hand after the show. That boy was Tom Blake. Blake was Midwest-raised, far from any oceanfront property. He excelled in speed and distance swimming in pools, and naturally gravitated towards the Pacific in 1921. In California he swam, taught swimming, lifeguarded, surfed, paddleboarded, and worked in movies as a stunt double. A success story already, Hawaii and the kings of surfing were still calling. Blake moved west again in 1924 and seemed to have an affinity for the Hawaiian way of life. He was one of the few Caucasians, to dedicate themselves to surfing and became good friends with Kahanamoku.

Blake began to wonder about three old boards that were hanging, seemingly forgotten, in a museum in Honolulu. They were the boards of a Hawaiian chief.

"Blake's eventual restoration of [the chief's] boards is of great historical importance...because it ultimately led to Blake's development of the hollow board," wrote Gault-Williams.

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Blake's construction of a hollow board, called a 'kook-box,' marked a pivotal point in paddleboarding, surfing, and lifesaving history. His board moved much faster and turned quicker than the traditional, solid wood boards.

"Tom Blake is the father of this sport [paddleboarding]," said renowned surfboard and paddleboard builder Mike Eaton. Blake was Eaton's swimming and surfing instructor in Palos Verdes. This year, Eaton, now 70, became the oldest person ever to enter the Catalina Classic.

In the 1930s, Blake participated in the first Catalina Channel paddleboard race with Pete Peterson and Wally Burton.

"Blake did not really consider it be a race as much as a test of endurance," Gault-Williams wrote.

Blake made a 26-mile-crossing, from the mainland to Catalina, in five hours and 53 minutes on his hollow board.

"If Blake had not met Duke," Eaton said, "there is a good chance this sport would not exist."

"Not all mountains are vertical"

Paddleboarders traverse a watery terrain that is alien to most of mankind. Miles into the ocean, North America's second largest metropolis, Los Angeles, ceases to exist. The booming noise of construction, the fleeting conversations of people — the evidence of human life — is whittled down to man and board, water and sky. It is elemental existence.

"It's passion, knowledge, and experience," said long-distance paddleboarder Kevin Eslinger, 42, from El Cajon. "Not all mountains are vertical."

Eslinger completed a 70-plus-mile-paddle from San Clemente to Ocean Beach in 14 hours and is planning on a 100-mile-paddle from Santa Barbara to Ocean Beach. On Sunday, Eslinger paddled a '30s era, Pete Peterson-modified Tom Blake board.

"You're so comfortable in the ocean," said County Lifeguard and Catalina Classic committee member Cindy Cleveland. "When you grow up around it and that's your playground, there are things you learn about it that can't be taught to you."



Mike Eaton, the oldest man to ever enter the Catalina Classic, keeps his eye on the Manhattan Beach Pier, one mile from the end of the 32-mile race. Photo by Cynthia Dizikes.

Cleveland was one of the first women, after Andrea Carr, to do the Catalina race. By the time Cleveland paddled the channel she had already swum from Catalina to the Palos Verdes Peninsula and back to Catalina, and had done a 34-hour-swim around Catalina Island.

"As much as I loved ocean swimming, I loved paddling so much more," said Cleveland. "You can see so much more, it's more social and you can go faster."

"It's the test of the waterman to be able to handle yourself if something happens," said Scott Conway. "If something happens [when you're paddling by yourself] you're either treading water until somebody gets you or you're swimming back."

Conway, 31, has been doing the Catalina race for 11 years. He prefers stock boards, a board that must weigh at least 20 pounds and be no longer than 12 feet. The other class of board in the Catalina race is unlimited, and can get up to 18-feet-long or longer. The longer the board, the faster a paddleboarder can go, providing he has sufficient horsepower. The only stock paddler to win the Classic was Brendon Shea, who finished in 6:16.52 in 1992. That year conditions were choppy throughout the race and the shorter boards work better in those conditions.

This year only 10 of the 74 entries paddled stock boards.

"Stock is harder and it takes longer," said Kyle Daniels, a LA County lifeguard, who won the stock division in 1998 and the unlimited division in 2001. He sat out this season due to a shoulder injury. "For every two strokes on an unlimited board you have to take three on a stock."

Over 32 miles, those strokes add up. This year, Brian Szymanski, 37, finished first in stock at 6:08.30.

So why do people choose to do stock?

"Do you want my pig headed answer?" Daniels joked. "Real men do stock."

"No, it's because for lifeguards before, it was the easiest to get a hold of...it has a wider use than an unlimited board. I think it's a rite of passage."

"That's a typical answer for someone who started on stock," said Daniels's friend, fellow paddleboarder Matt Walls, who finished in 19th place in unlimited at 6:25.00 this year. Walls smiled.

"Ask him why he doesn't do stock anymore," he said.

Officials found that some in the stock class were using lighter boards, so this year stock paddleboarders were required to weigh-in before and after the race. There was some discussion over whether or not a full water bottle should count towards the weight.

The course is almost due north from the Catalina Isthmus, across the Catalina Channel to the R-10 buoy, off Lunada Bay where the remains of the Greek freighter Dominator can still be seen beneath the cliffs. From the R-10 the course continues north to the Manhattan pier.

"The R-10 buoy separates the men from the boys," said "Gibby" Gibson, one of the original Catalina racers, who now co-chairs the race.

Extinction and re-birth

In 1955, some 20 years after Blake had paddled the channel, lifeguard Bob Hogan founded the Catalina Classic as part of the South Bay's surf festival. Hogan was a boat and board designer and enlisted the Manhattan Beach Chamber of Commerce to provide trophies and escort boats.

"Nobody was paddling channels then," said Gibson. "They were using outrigger canoes in Hawaii."

The original 13 racers were watermen who felt they were up to the challenge, said Gibson.

"I did it cause I wanted it on my resume," Gibson said. "It's the bragging rights, absolutely, you got it. It's the runner who runs in 5k and 10k races, but his ultimate goal is a marathon."

"I was not scared, just excited. There was never any doubt in my mind that I wouldn't finish," added Gibson.

Staying on the right path, however, was always more of a guess. In the early days of the race there was not a lead boat. Gibson remembers the race of '57 when his escort boat led him approximately eight miles off course and he ended up in the Los Angeles Harbor. Now a lead boat follows the rhumb line, the shortest path from point A to point B, while individual escort boats provide their paddleboarders with alternate path suggestions, based on the direction of the swells and currents.

The race continued until '61 (skipping '59), when a storm caused the crossing to be cut short in the middle of the channel.

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"Hogan left for the islands [Hawaii] and no one else picked up the ball," recalled Gibson.

The Catalina race disappeared. Paddleboards were still used by lifeguards, in shorter races, and to keep in shape, but most were buried in basements and garages. Long distance paddleboard races faced extinction, until LA county lifeguard "Buddy" Bohn began to question where it had gone, 20 years later.

Bohn had grown up on the beach, and as a boy had watched the paddleboarders finish at the Manhattan Beach Pier.

"I used to sit on the railing of the Manhattan Beach Pier," Bohn said. "Me and my friends, thinking how difficult it seemed, how impossible -- yeah just sort of in awe of it."

Bohn had come from a long line of ocean-oriented people and was a competitive swimmer and water polo player in high school and college.

"My first memory is riding on my dad's back with my arms around his neck while he body surfed," said Bohn.

Then a request from the Manhattan Beach Historical society changed Bohn's life and the world of paddleboarding. The historical society asked Bohn to locate an old paddleboard for its museum. In the process of searching for one, Bohn began to wonder why the race was not held anymore. He asked Gibson for pointers about starting it up again. It took a copy of the by-laws and a few good men, and the sport was rescued from museum-wall history in 1982.

After their first race the paddleboarders celebrated in a bar in Redondo Beach. Joe Bark was an employee at the bar and was so impressed that he decided to do the race the following year. Subsequently Bark began to build paddleboards and is now the leading paddleboard builder in the South Bay. This year was his 22nd Catalina Classic. Most of the paddleboarders on Sunday crossed the channel on Bark boards. The sport has grown considerably since the early '80s. In fact, the demand for paddleboards has almost doubled since last year, said Bark.

"We created a whole sport out of something that had gone dormant," Bohn said.

"It's the closest thing we have to taking a walk in the forest."

This year marked the 50th anniversary of the Catalina Classic. The design of the boards has changed significantly, from wood to polystyrene foam, epoxy resins, and carbon fiberglass, but the paddlers are still made of the same stuff.

Getting to the sand

The paddleboarder's biggest competition is usually not the other racers. When paddlers leave the shore they are up against the ocean, sun, and their own physical limitations.

"Looking across the ocean at dawn from Catalina is like staring into the vastness of the cosmos of space,"

Conway said. "You just put your head down and go."

There are many reasons people choose to do long distance paddleboard races. Some do it as a way to enjoy the ocean, or because they did shorter paddleboard races as lifeguards. Others paddleboard as an extension of sports such as triathlons and marathons or because a friend suggested they do it. Some are out there just for the camaraderie.

"If you are a surfer and like to think of yourself as a waterman, it is one of the ways to complete the picture," Eaton said.

"The people involved in this sport are one of the best groups of people I have ever been around, the camaraderie is marvelous."

Whatever the reasons for starting, for those who continue to come back to Catalina each year, it has become an addiction.

Waterwoman Jane Cairns has paddled Catalina six times.

"These guys are amazing," Cairns said. "I have to say there are many who I now consider family."

Cairns was a long distance swimmer before she decided to do paddleboarding. She finished fourth in stock and 34th overall at 6:53.10. This year she was paddling for her father, who died in December.

"He was my life," Cairns said. "He came to every swim meet in Santa Barbara, and every year [during the Catalina Classic] he would walk down to the end of the pier and stand with a sign. He said, 'Next year I'll be there, Janie,' when he was sick in the hospital."

Cairns was also one of 14 paddlers paddling for the Ocean of Hope Campaign to raise money for Sarcoma Alliance. Jane paddled the Catalina race with a picture of her father and the name of a cancer victim on her board.

"When I was hurting out there and started whining," Cairns said. "I just looked at his face and the name and I sucked it up...it's all mental. I put my head down and paddled."

Eaton and his friend Carol Sing, 63, the oldest woman ever to do the Catalina Classic, were still on the water after eight hours. The race is different for those at the back of the pack. The sun is more intense, the paddler has been paddling for a much longer time, and water becomes rougher.

After passing the R-10 Buoy Eaton began his battle with the afternoon chop and the Hermosa Beach Pier.

"The Hermosa Beach Pier took forever to get past," Eaton said. "You keep looking at it and it seems like it's moving with you."

Each rotation of the shoulder was a struggle. But Eaton put his chin to the board and kept reaching one arm after another, crawling towards Manhattan Beach.

"Surfers call it noodle arm," Eaton said. "As you get older, you lose your aerobics...right now I paddle mostly prone."

The prone position stroke is the most widely used and the easiest for long-distance paddling. The paddlers lie on their stomachs and do a type of free-style stroke. The kneeling position, where the paddler paddles with both arms at the same time, requires more effort, but is faster. Most paddlers do a combination of prone and kneeling.

Eaton did the Catalina race when he was 60, but then Bob Hogan, 62, entered. Eaton did it five years later at 65, but again he was bumped by 67-year-old Skip Connor. This year Eaton was determined to secure his place as the oldest man to finish the Catalina Classic. He not only did that, but he beat his 2000 time by 30 minutes.

Sing, who trained with Eaton and Eslinger in San Diego, finished in 8:58.08.

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"There are only two positions in the Catalina Classic," Eaton said. "First and finish, you can make anything out of the stuff in the middle you want."

Sing swam the Catalina Channel, which is about 10 miles shorter than the paddleboard race, and is the oldest woman to have swum the English Channel.

"Each time I swam an event someone said, 'You are the oldest person to do this.' It's been a pretty good gig so far," said Sing.

Eslinger is Sing's swim coach and introduced her to Eaton, who encouraged her to train and do Catalina.

"You either are an ocean person or you're not...It attracts a certain type of person," Sing said.

Next month Sing is traveling to Loch Ness in Scotland to do a triple relay with naturists.

Sing laughed as justification for the trip.

"Well, when will I ever get to swim in Loch Ness naked," she said.

Sing also has her sights set on swimming the Straits of Gibraltar in the future.

For Eaton, though, he said, this will be his last Catalina Classic. It remains to be seen.

Gibson, 67, plans to wait four years to become the oldest man to paddle the channel.

"It's like an upwelling," Eaton said. "The old guys kind of drift off the top and eventually out of sight. It's the natural course of things. Every dog has its day."

The three-man race

Just outside the R-10 buoy, whose day it would be, was still undecided.

Zeller, Addison, and Richardson were now far in front of the other paddleboarders. Zeller and Addison knew Richardson was a strong finisher and that keeping their distance from him was crucial.

"I knew he would be better, stronger, the further we went," said Addison. "He was definitely on my mind. Knowing he would be strong made me work harder, break through my demons."

Zeller was thinking the same thing. All year Zeller had trained by doing interval sprints and shortening his time on his knees, which helped him in Sunday's choppy conditions. He and his training partner, Eric Meech, who won stock at Molokai this year, would do two different workouts in addition to long distance training.

"We called them The Casa 10 Laps of Hell and The Casa 10 Lap Relay," said Zeller.

In the 10 Laps of Hell they would run down the lifeguard stairs, paddle 300 yards out through the worst water

and back to a reef where they would catch a wave back to shore and do it again. In the 10-lap relay they would alternate doing the loop, clocking each other to see who got the best time. The workouts were designed specifically for Molokai, which is raced downwind and downswell. In the Molokai, paddlers must be able to paddle fast enough to railroad, or catch the waves.

"It was specifically to train him for Molokai," Zeller said. "I personally hated doing that training with him but it really helped me because when I got out there I felt really comfortable."

The training definitely proved helpful in Sunday's tumultuous conditions. Around three hours had passed since Zeller, Addison, and Richardson left the Isthmus. Hour three was Zeller's strongest.

"Hour four I'm hanging on and hour five I'm limping to the finish line to get the lead," he said.

"I knew it was time to make a getaway."

Zeller surged ahead and never looked back.

Metallica, Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath, and the Ramones wailed from his I-Pod the whole way home. By the time doubts began to creep into his mind about the improbability of a 225-pound man winning on an 18-foot board in choppy conditions, his lead was already secured. Lighter guys on shorter boards usually do better in rough conditions because they have more control and do not get slowed down in the waves.

Zeller has placed in the top four in the Catalina Classic every year since he started in 1996.

"Zeller was phenomenal all the way through," Addison said.

Zeller finished in 5:20.49. Addison kept his lead over Richardson and finished in 5:26.40. Richardson came in just 2 minutes later at 5:28.12.

"I have great respect for him," Addison said. "If I didn't win I'm glad he did."

"It's like the stars lined up for me, everything went perfectly," Zeller said. ER

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