

Kanesa Duncan: Power Paddler



If you ever find yourself competing against Kanesa Duncan, run the other way. At least, that's what her competitors tell me.

"She is very, very determined," says kayaker, and former Lokahi Canoe Club teammate, Mikala Bradley. "She has a different mindset than most people, combined with the physical strength to help her reach her goals."

Bradley, who considers Duncan a good friend, says with awe, "My husband escorts her in all her (paddleboard) crossings, and he says she gets faster throughout the race. *Faster!* She sprints in (to the finish line) at Portlock."

Paddleboarding is Duncan's "thing" now, but the versatile athlete quite literally throws herself into any sport she tackles- with the goal to emerge as the champion.

Her athletic resume is so long, it spans a page and a half. Hawaii residents will know her as the preeminent female paddleboarder in the state. In August, she claimed the womens' crown in the Quicksilver Edition Moloka'i to Oahu Paddleboard Race, a course that spans 32 miles across the Ka'iwi Channel.

"I'm very competitive," she explains. "Mostly with myself, although competing against other people makes me push myself harder to see if I can go faster, farther. It's about seeing what my body can do."

Apparently, it can do a lot. It took her 5 hours, 5 minutes, and 9 seconds to win the Quicksilver title, considered the world championship of long-distance paddleboarding. She also won this race in 2004, 2002, and 2001, each time setting a new female record.

As her friend Bradley says, Duncan has a "take no prisoners" attitude towards victory. She sacrifices her body in the process; in the recent Quicksilver race, she ignored the pain of a rash caused by new pads, and emerged from the water with blood running down her leg. She dislocated both shoulders so many times, she finally endured her first shoulder repair surgery in October.

Aside from the thrill of victory, Duncan considers paddleboarding her favorite sport for its subtler qualities. "I love that I can go places that most people don't have access to," she reflects.

In Native American Indian, "Kanesa" means "sacred place." That's just what Duncan seeks out each time she heads out on the water. She favors a coastline trek along East Oahu, from Makapuu to Sandy Beach. "There are beautiful cliffs, and at times, rough seas because it's deep water. I'm often alone out there, and I enjoy the alone-time to enjoy the beauty and to think."

Duncan is a consummate athlete. Despite the amount of energy and time she spends training for her paddleboard races, she still finds time for yet another sport: canoe racing. This year marked her first season with the Outrigger Canoe Club. "My coach Ian Forrester is great, and my teammates are amazing women in addition to being great athletes," she says. The group absorbed its new member quickly to take third in the Na Wahine O Ke Kai (the women's Molokai to Oahu Canoe race) in September.

Before moving to Hawaii in 1999 for graduate school, she was a nationally ranked, sponsored triathlete. In the Collegiate National Championships for triathletes, she placed no lower than the Top Six. Concurrently, she was a lifeguard competitor, winning the California Central Coast competition three times.

"I love sports in general. I like anything with forward motion. No ball sports," she laughs. "I'm terrible with hand-eye coordination." We've finally found something she doesn't excel in.

Duncan started her athletic career in the pool, competing in high school and college as a nationally ranked swimmer. It's easy to see she's maintained – and built upon- her telltale triangular swimmer's frame. Her intimidating physique is all muscle, no fat.

As one would expect, an athlete of this caliber has attracted a number of sponsors: Eaton Surf, Eyecatcher Sunglasses, Kai Clothing, and Hawaiian Design canoes. Duncan is grateful to all of them. "I couldn't enter some of the races without their financial support," she says.

When Duncan isn't pursuing her athletic endeavors, she's racing towards a doctorate in science. At only 30 years old, she is already on the brink of a PhD. The University of Hawaii at Manoa student expects to graduate next spring. It's not a coincidence her specialty is hammerhead sharks.

"I knew I wanted to study fish. I like how they swim and how they move. That's why I love paddleboarding- I like the feeling of gliding in the water. Sharks are amazing creatures," she says.

Duncan is a bit of a celebrity marine biologist, with a segment in a National Geographic documentary, *Sharks of the Ocean Desert*. She wants to work as a researcher and professor upon graduation, although that currently presents a small problem.

"I want to make Hawaii my home. I love the life I've created here, and the ocean sports I can do in the islands. Unfortunately, it's hard to mesh my personal goal with my career goal. It's uncommon to get a job at the institution you got your doctorate at," she says.

That is, however, where chance steps in. "Miss Duncan" has two part time teaching jobs, at the UH Lab School and at Hawaii Pacific University. Her students aren't the only ones learning something in the classroom. "I realize I enjoy integrating science into school curriculum. I wouldn't mind working in education, and coming up with compelling new ways

to teach science to kids."

For example, Duncan jointly coordinated a National Science Foundation project one summer, in which 46 Oahu high school students helped Duncan with her doctoral research and got a taste of being a scientist.

Duncan's days are jam packed with work, school, and a little exercise (just running, she emphasizes, wanting to assure her surgeon, Doctor Kimo Harpstrite of the Orthopedic Services Company out of Queen's Hospital, that she's adhering to his recovery orders!)

Will she find a way to stay in Hawaii? We're sure the answer is yes, because when Kanesa Duncan wants something, she usually finds a way to get it.

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