

# Pushed to paddle

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**San Diegan Kevin Eslinger answered the call of his wild side to complete marathon paddleboard trip**

**By Don Norcross**  
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Point to point, the northeast tip of Santa Barbara Island to the Ocean Beach Pier measures 120 miles. On a typical Southern California summer day, with the wind blowing west to northwest at 12 mph, a 27-foot sailboat will require roughly 22 hours to cover the distance.

On Sept. 2, Kevin Eslinger stepped into the water off Santa Barbara Island holding a 19-foot paddleboard. Strapped to the board were five Powerbars, 16 carbohydrate gel packs, two flares, a one-liter bottle filled with a liquid energy supplement, a light attached to a pole, a diving knife, radio and global-positioning device.

He would be supported by a crew of four, escorting him by boat.

Eslinger's mission: paddle to the O.B. Pier.

"When I was a competitive (junior) swimmer, one reason I was a sprinter is because I was a bit work-averse," said Eslinger, 42, who lives off Shelter Island aboard a 40-foot boat he spent a decade refurbishing. "I have enough self-knowledge to know that I didn't always give everything I had. There just comes some point when you ask the question of yourself, "What am I made of?; "

Growing up in Covina, Eslinger loved to read.



JOHN McCUTCHEN / Union-Tribune  
After a morning paddleboard workout on Mission Bay, Kevin Eslinger is ready for some surfing and biking.

"He always had his nose in a book," said his mother, Lidia Eslinger. "I'd get angry because he'd bring kids home to play, then go off, read a book and wouldn't entertain the friends he brought home."

Eslinger's favorite books were nonfiction adventure tales. Like Sir Edmund Hillary's "High in the Thin Cold Air," recounting Hillary's Mount Everest expedition. Or Bernard Moitessier's sailing sagas. Or surfing stories.

If paddling 120 miles in the ocean, half the time at night, seems a strange attempt at self-discovery oneself, it's consistent with Eslinger's atypical lifestyle.

Since moving to San Diego to attend San Diego State, where he earned a degree in philosophy, Eslinger has lived on a boat all but two years. His first digs here: a 15-foot craft. "It was like living under a coffee table," Eslinger said.

He doesn't own a TV and commutes by bike to El Cajon where he works as a club swim coach. When he does drive, he relies on his third Volkswagen van.

A typical day for Eslinger: up at 4:45 a.m., paddle for 3 1/2 hours from Mission Bay, into the ocean, down the coastline to the lighthouse at the tip of Point Loma and back, surf for a couple hours, freshen up, then pedal to El Cajon.

Friends say he can't say no to helping others. He coached three San Diegans who crossed the English Channel, paddling beside them for hours in training. He rigged a surfboard so that a quadriplegic woman could experience the sensation of riding a wave.

About wanting to give back, Eslinger said, "It's what gives my life worth."

While surfing is his primary passion, he read a magazine article years ago about paddleboarding, entered San Diego's 20-mile Bay 2 Bay race and finished last.

"I wasn't embarrassed by it," Eslinger said. "From then on, I was hooked. While all these guys were passing me, I was very, very enamored with the way the paddleboard moved throughout the water. They're so beautiful."

Three years ago, Eslinger paddled 73 miles from San Clemente Island to Ocean Beach. Until 13 days ago, the world record for the longest continuous paddle was 90 miles.

Eslinger departed Santa Barbara Island at 3:30 p.m. Alternating between resting on his knees and lying on his stomach, he averaged 50 strokes per minute.

"The first 4-5 hours I'm out in the open ocean, riding these perfectly organized little bumps, just having a blast," he said.

He was averaging more than four knots per hour before sunset, which would have enabled him to meet his 24-hour goal.

Nighttime would not be as kind. Inexplicably, he slowed to less than three knots per hour. He kept looking at the GPS device and reading the numbers was like a slap in the face: 2.8 knots, 2.5, 2.9.

"It was like this little judge saying, 'Loser, loser, loser,' " said Eslinger.

Slowing down, his right shoulder aching, depression set in.

"I suffered mentally, spiritually, emotionally more than I'd ever suffered in my life," he said. "I started doubting my training, my nutrition, my manhood, my sanity."

At 6-foot-3, a sculpted 200 pounds with shoulder-length hair lightened by the sun and four-day facial growth, Eslinger has been likened to Tarzan. Nine days after the ordeal, sitting on a bench along Sunset Cliffs as he overlooks his favorite surf break, Eslinger turns silent and holds back tears as he recalls the struggle.

Come sunrise, the sun peeked through a cloud, the ocean turned a deep blue, indicating the water was calm and the GPS showed Eslinger paddling 4.8 knots per hour.

Suddenly, Eslinger realized why he had struggled. He'd been battling a current. "I had this epiphany," he said. "It wasn't me alone failing. There were obstacles I was unaware of."

There would be other struggles. Another current. He iced his shoulder four times and for the first time in his adult life took an ibuprofen.

And there were pleasures: He listened to a whale breach nearby at 1 a.m.; watched small bait fish light up the ocean beneath him in the middle of the night and celebrated dolphins dancing at daylight.

Just after 9 p.m. on Sept. 3, after paddling an estimated 88,500 strokes, drinking 20 liters of a carbohydrate drink and six liters of water, eating a dozen Powerbars, 24 energy gels, five peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and three cheese and mustard sandwiches supplied by his crew, Eslinger paddled onto shore, just north of the O.B. Pier.

"Relief, joy, exhaustion, all rolled into one big gooey ball," said Eslinger, explaining his emotions upon touching shore.

He had paddled 120 miles nonstop, in 29 hours, 31 minutes, setting a world record in an endeavor few can comprehend.

"I think my curiosity about my capabilities was solved," he said. "I had taken my body to its extreme limit and somehow survived."

The next day he went surfing, not once, but twice.

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