

# MidWeek



CURRENTS

By Ron Mizutani

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## Disabilities? What Disabilities?

The Molokai Hoe is considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe racing. The event features the best of the best, but even the elite are physically and emotionally exhausted after 41 grueling miles across the Kaiwi Channel.

Radio personality Mike Buck welcomes canoes as they cross the finish line at Hilton Hawaiian Village. Buck's voice trembles as the white-hulled Iwalani glides to shore with paddles striking the ocean in perfect unison.

"Please welcome to our finish line the Pure Light Racing Team," Buck announces with a smile. "Aloha! Aloha, Pure Light!"

Crewmembers raise their paddles in jubilation as friends, family and supporters cheer. Others are moved by what they see. The Pure Light Racing Team has accomplished what some said could not be done. The 12-member adaptive paddling team has conquered the world's most unpredictable channel.

"Congratulations, you did it, you did it, Joseph," screams a friend to North Shore paddler Joe Broc, who smiles as he powers his way through the deep sand on crutches. His muscles obviously fatigued, Broc slowly makes his way to a waiting wheelchair. Spina bifida has not stopped him from dreaming big.

"It's just so unbelievable and such a great accomplishment for all of us," beams Broc. "It means so much to me because I've been a paddler for a long time, and to say you've done the Molokai Channel is amazing."

Each paddler has a story to share. Daralyn Clarke uses a paddle adapted for her prosthesis. She was born without an arm. Others are carried to their wheelchairs. Many are missing limbs, but not desire.

"Right on, guys, right on. Great job!" shouts steersman John Greer as crewmembers share high fives.

“We’re all good friends, so it was really easy trusting each other to do what we had to do to get over the channel,” says Lea Klepees. “It was tough at times, but we made it through.”

Their coach, and co-founder of Project Pure Light, Aka Hemmings says the crew did more than make it through.

“All of us, we think we’re pretty tough, but these are true warriors,” says Hemmings. “These are some of the toughest people you’ll ever meet.”

The crew endured the same sloppy conditions as the rest of the field. Observers watched in amazement during open-ocean changes, with swells approaching from different directions as fresh paddlers replace those in need of a break.

Most have no use of their legs, but they find their way into the canoe. They catch their breath and they’re off and running in pursuit of history.

“We flipped one time and we weathered that fairly well,” says Hemmings, a veteran waterman who helped steer the crew. “I’m a little speechless now, just overwhelmed by what they’ve done.”

Team members include Dawna Zane, Klepees, Tami Hetke, Beth Arnoult, Clarke, Sammi Stanbro, John Greer, Broc, Jeremy Wagner, Mark Wormley, Carl Kahui and Hemmings.



The adaptive Pure Light Racing Team takes on the Kaiwi Channel

Together they crossed the finish line in a time of 7:59:25.

“We all love paddling, and Molokai is the big race, so we definitely wanted to try to do this one,” says Klepees. “The next challenge will be getting back together next season and doing it again.”

Hemmings says this was a true team effort and could not have happened without the support of the paddling community and those who understand their mission.

“We especially want to send our deepest heartfelt aloha to New Hope Canoe Club,” says Hemmings. “Without our brothers and sisters from New Hope, this effort would not come to fruition.”

Hemmings believes the crew's accomplishment sends a strong message of hope, and he is delighted athletes from Hawaii set this precedent for the rest of the world.

"I believe they're affecting people and other cultures, and now everybody sees that people with disabilities can participate in competitive paddling," says Hemmings. "I'm moved to tears pretty regularly by this group, and this day is no different. It is a very special day."

A day 11 disabled athletes proved there are no limitations.