

Pure Light out to prove it can paddle with the best

By Star Bulletin

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There is hope, and there is belief.

The 11 members of Pure Light Racing will harness both as they set out tomorrow to accomplish a feat never before achieved—become the first adaptive crew to complete the 41-mile Molokai Hoe distance paddling race.

Two-time defending champion Shell Va'a of Tahiti returns to defend its titles in the race considered by many to be the world championship of long distance paddling. Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association club Lanikai, meanwhile, may provide the best chance at reclaiming the title locally across the treacherous Kaiwi Channel.

When the best crews in the world depart from Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai to begin the journey to Duke Kahanamoku Beach at Waikiki, at least one of the 96 teams will be comprised largely of fresh faces making their first crossing.

But the mixed-gender Pure Light Racing, headed up by coach Aka Hemmings, is determined to finish. Its members, with myriad disabilities (most have lost the use of their legs), have trained every weekend together for months in preparation for tomorrow with the support of New Hope Canoe Club.

"I guess maybe the thing behind all this is that we're trying to open up doors and worlds for people with disabilities, and let them know you can be a part of recreational canoeing and you can be a part of a competitive team," said the veteran and able-bodied Hemmings, who will act as a steersman for safety purposes. "This Hawaiian group, in my mind, is kind of leading the way in terms of adaptive paddling in the world."

The team doctor, Rob Durkin, will also be standing by on the team's escort boat.

Pure Light Racing is made up of Beth Arnoult, Joe Broc, Darralyn Clarke, John Greer, Tami Hetke, Karl Kahui, Lea Klepees, Sammie Stanbro, Jeremy Wagner, Mark Wormley and Dawna Zane.

Stanbro, 63, has six previous Molokai crossings under her belt and is the veteran among the crew. She was frank in her assessment of the effort the race required, but also of the resolve of her comrades.

"This race coming up will be more challenge, more difficulty for these athletes than any race they've ever been in," Stanbro said. "If you're out there and see what they do to do what they do

... elite paddlers have nothing on these guys. They're amazing because it's so much more effort for them to get in the canoe, get out of the canoe."

One of the crew's biggest challenges will be when making changes out on the water, or if the canoe should huli. But those transitions have been practiced.

Zane, 27, has been with Hemmings' team since it formed as a recreational club in 2002 as Project Pure Light. Since 2004, the team has been to three World Sprints and completed the 32-mile Henry Ayau Memorial Race last month, its longest event to that point.

"I think we exert a lot of energy because we have to make up a lot of it in our arms," explained Zane. "Paddling itself is such a demanding sport. I love it, we're all friends and it's just a good, competitive sport also."

Wagner, 27, started paddling last year after a motorcycle accident and has absorbed the sport like a sponge. He's considered by Hemmings as the team's steersman of the future.

"I'm stoked to be a part of it. It is a big thing," Wagner said. "If it wasn't for this situation, I wouldn't have started paddling and I wouldn't have this opportunity to be with these guys and cross the channel, which is going to be amazing because it sets the tone for adaptive paddling. This is one of the toughest races in the world, and we're gonna do it as adaptive paddlers."