

A Paddleboard Named Desire

My answer was the same as the chicken's. "To get to the other side." At least that was what I wrote in the application.

My knowledge of the race was sketchy at best. I had seen the faded photos of those proud watermen with their outsized boards posing "Kahanamoku style" in front of the pier. I had a dim awareness of the legendary lifeguards and surfers who had made the crossing. But it wasn't until I purchased a used 18ft "Unlimited" paddleboard did I get any notion of what the Catalina Classic was all about. The thirty-two mile open ocean trek from the Isthmus to the Manhattan Beach pier was more than a test of speed and endurance; it was a rite of passage.

My own aquatic resume was distinctly pedestrian. I surfed regularly at Malibu. I had entertained a notion of becoming an L.A. County lifeguard but had twice failed the swim test. After two years of swimming masters I was just able to claw my way out of the medium lane. And in the qualifying paddleboard races I was at best a straggler. At fifty-one years old maybe father time was finally on my heels.

We few, we lucky few...

We motored over to Catalina Island on Rob's new sailboat, "The Summer Solstice." He had just bought it and this was only his second time out. My brother, Jim, came along to give me water and food. We dropped anchor at the isthmus in the late afternoon in time for the barbecue and the pre-race briefing. I chatted with familiar faces and greedily devoured two massive fish burritos before returning early to the "Solstice" for a long night of rest. Or so I hoped.

For the next ten sleepless, anxiety ridden hours, I was rag dolled by a heaving swell that battered Rob's boat from the northwest. "I must be some sort of masochist," I thought to myself. This was hell. I braced my feet and shoulders against the cabin bulkhead and prayed that my stomach would hold. If I barfed back those burritos I'd lose the valuable calories I needed to sustain the 32-mile paddle.

By four-thirty in the morning I abandoned any hope of sleep and lurched out of my berth. I slipped into my board shorts. I smeared Vaseline across my chest over which I pulled a rash guard and my orange competitor jersey. I wolfed down a bagel, an orange and sloshed it down with a cold blast of chai tea. My last fear filled words to Rob before I boarded the water taxi were, "Be ready to yank me out of the water."



On the short ride to the shore the pilot, an old salt who had seen many of these races observed stoically, "It's a shit bowl out there. I've never seen it this bad."

Before night merged into day I was pacing on the sand with the other racers. Nobody said much but the collective nervousness was palpable. I went to the bathroom three times since I had arrived on shore but it didn't matter. I was free flowing in my board shorts.

Blow winds, Crack ye fires...

But for the lights twinkling on Palos Verdes and the first sliver of daylight peaking out of the east all was dark on Catalina. I stood in ankle deep water poised for the run of my life. There was a count down and at 6AM sharp the horn went off. I howled at the heavens and with ninety other paddlers made a mad dash through the maze of boats into the pre dawn twilight.

Within minutes we were out of the protection of the harbor and the full force of the ocean was upon us. With whitecaps flaring out of the west I paddled into an angry seascape. Each swell gifted me with a mouthful of seawater. It felt like the ocean was screaming, "Screw you, buddy! You think you're a waterman? You think you belong out here? Ha-ha, no frigging way!" Within the first hour most of the other racers were already out of my field of vision. Occasionally, from the crest of a swell, I could make out the head of another paddler. My position near the back of the pack secured, I was alone at sea.

By the time I passed Ship Rock just a few miles beyond the harbor I could see the armada of follow boats merge with the long line of paddlers that were stretched out in front of me. I scanned the horizon for the "Solstice." It was nowhere to be seen. If they didn't find me soon I would be D-Qued from the race. I focused on my GPS that was mounted next to my water bottle and took little comfort in the fact that I had already covered four miles. Only 28 more to go. Yahoo!!!

Still the ocean raged and still no follow boat. The sharp bow of my paddleboard looked like a WWII submarine as it plunged crossways through swell after angry swell. The warrior spirit surged within me. With Ahab-like fury my hands clawed into the water. For the first time it occurred to me, maybe just maybe I could make it. Only problem was the rules were clear. If Rob and Jimmy didn't show up soon I would be pulled from the race.

A race patrol boat circled up to me. Bobbing on the crest of a swell the guy yelled down at me, "You're looking awfully lonely out here."

"Fucking A," I yelled. "Where the hell is my boat?"

"What's your number?" he shouted.

He got on his radio. I swore to myself that if Rob didn't show up I would never talk to that bastard again. A few moments later the patrol boat circled back to me. "They're having some problems in the harbor. They should be on their way." He engaged the throttle and zipped away.



With that I sucked down the first of many Cliff Shots that were duck taped to my board. If I didn't keep the calories coming in there was no way I could make it. Sustained by a rush of sugar I tried to keep faith that conditions would improve and my boat would arrive.

The sun was peaking over the horizon and thunder rumbled out of the east. A thick blanket of storm clouds cast the ocean into a blackish hue. The wind and rain had ionized the atmosphere, which made the white cliffs of Palos Verde seem incredibly close. But my little GPS said otherwise. I was still some 18 miles from the R10 Buoy that sits about a mile off of Lunada Bay. From there it was eight miles and change to the Manhattan Pier. But I couldn't even think about that.

Anchors Away

My adult life had been lived, by and large, on a murky grey scale where the boundary between victory and defeat was forever rationalized into oblivion. I had spent my career chasing the Hollywood bitch

goddess but had never really had her. Unmarried and without kids, living the bachelor/uncle life in my Hollywood Hills studio apartment I was fast becoming an invisible man.

But today, I swore to myself, would be different. With a thousand feet of seawater beneath me my situation was strictly binary. To finish was victory. Not to finish was defeat. I wanted that finishers trophy. I wanted that T-shirt. I wanted to pose “Kahanamoku style” in front of the Manhattan Pier.

There was a shout over my shoulder. I looked back and there was the “Solstice.”

“Where the hell were you guys?” I screamed.

Rob shouted from the helm that his windlass had failed and he couldn’t raise anchor. He had to saw the chain to release the boat. Jimmy extended the pool net from the deck and I grabbed a fresh bottle of Vitamin Water and Emergen-C. Then my brother cupped his hands to his mouth and offered some weird encouragement.

“Two people have already dropped out.”

The message was clear. No shame if I quit. Let’s get this over with early so we can all go home. “Nice try.”

R10, That’s my Buoy

The course runs due north but the Southern California coast runs on an east west axis. So if you use points along the coast as a measure of progress you are in for heartbreak. As I scratched northward it seemed to take forever for the lighthouse at Pt. Vicente to move off my stern. Beyond that I could make out a vague depression in the cliffs that was Lunada Bay. Somewhere out there was the R10.

This year’s race was held in honor of legendary waterman and lifeguard, “Gibby” Gibson. He had passed just a few weeks before. He was a race founder and had paddled the classic countless times since its inception in 1955. I looked up at his photo, which was plastered on the bow of my board and felt a wave of gratitude. How brief is the moment we have and how soon it is taken from us. How lucky I was to be out here paddling for my life in the big blue.

The sun arched overhead. Somewhere beyond my horizon the leaders, Kyle Daniels and Ryan Addison were making their grand arrival at the beach packed with admirers. But I was still out in the channel with four more hours of paddling and a coarsening sea in front of me. The passion that had fueled me through the first half of the race had ebbed and I settled into a steady if diminishing pace.

Despite my best hopes of finishing within a respectable eight hours my GPS said otherwise. My four miles per hour had slipped to about three and half miles per hour. The math was obvious. I wouldn’t make the R10 by one o’clock.

I had been specifically and individually warned. If I wasn’t at the R10 in seven hours I’d be pulled from the race, no questions asked. My Catalina Classic had been reduced to a desperate race against the clock I grabbed a fresh water bottle from my brother and stuffed some sushi rolls down my throat. The moist rice was like manna from heaven. Feeling stronger I picked up the pace. At about mile 21, sticking straight out beyond the direction needle on my GPS, I could just make out a stationary stick near the horizon. As I drew closer that stick morphed into a big red can bobbing in the current. I could see the sea lions draped over the buoy.

As I passed between the R10 and the observer boat I did my best to put on a happy face and make a show of confidence. I flashed a broad smile and waved at the race official who stared grimly back at me through binoculars.

In the distance the south bay was coming into view. My follow boat circled up behind me. It was seven minutes past one. I hadn't made the cut-off time. I was going to be pulled. My race was over.

Rob shouted from behind the helm, "The guy said you look strong. They're going to let you finish the race." All I had to do was gut out the last eight miles. This was a distance I had covered before. I could do this.

The Long Voyage Home

"I can. I must. I will." That was my mantra for the last eight miles. I aimed the stiletto like point of my board at a distant building that I knew from my workouts lined up perfectly with the Manhattan Pier, which was still out of view. Directly behind that building, some forty miles into the distance I could make out the Hollywood Sign in the hills. I was paddling home.

But as the sun dipped into the west the winds redoubled their force and the whole of the south bay turned into a confused sea of slop. It was especially bad out beyond the whale mural at King Harbor where the current drags and the incoming swells rebound off the breakwater.

This area of the ocean had been the site of a near disaster for me just a few weeks before. I had been fighting off a lingering bout with stomach flu and was on a workout with my paddle partner, Dave Paquin. Battling nausea and exhaustion I was completely tapped. No measure of will power could get me to the beach. I ditched my pride and hailed a fishing boat. The guy kindly took me aboard and motored me the last few miles to shore. But that was then. This was now.

The "Disappearance," which was the lead race boat was anchored off the end of the pier. A few feet behind the boat were the two red buoys that marked the finish line. I looked back and waved at Jimmy and Rob as they came about and began their own voyage back to San Pedro. My brother stood at the stern. As they sailed into the distance Jimmy thrust his fist into the air and shouted, "You are one tough son-of-a-bitch!"

I charged through the red buoys and handed my board off to the official greeter who stood waist deep in the surf. Behind him there remained just a smattering of paddlers and well wishers applauding on the beach. My girlfriend Stephanie stood at waters edge in a new green dress.

I looked behind me, spotted a wave and bodysurfed the final ten feet to shore.

With my paddleboard balanced behind my back "Kahanamoku style" and a purple lei draped around my neck I stood in front of the pier and posed for the picture. I pumped out my chest and did my best to look like I had done this before.

One month later I finally passed the L.A. County Lifeguard Swim Test.

Bill Kalmenson
2007 Catalina Classic Finisher
9hr 47 min 78th place.

