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Because Its There: The Enduring History of the Catalina Classic



by Brad Melekian on
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“It started out as a test,
not a race.” —**Tom Blake**

Nine years before Tom Blake, Preston “Pete” Peterson, and Wally Burton decided to paddle the 26 miles from the Palos Verdes Peninsula to Catalina Island in 1932, British Mountaineer George Leigh Mallory was talking to a New York Times reporter about why he would want to climb Mount Everest, a conversation that would net the laconic quip-cum-cliche: “Because it’s there.”



One wonders whether or not the same logic applied to that entirely different group of pioneers—Blake, Peterson and Burton—based in Los Angeles, California and steeped in an entirely different type of outdoors tradition. After all, it’s not unfair to assume that the trio decided to become the first to paddle to Catalina because—well, because Catalina was there.

In a more pragmatic sense, Blake was looking for a means of popularizing his newly patented hollow board, so he turned his eyes to the island off the coast of California and thought that getting there with his own arms might be just the thing.

For his part, Blake didn’t undertake the “test” lightly; to train, he would tie himself by rope to the Corona Del Mar Jetty and paddle stationery for three hours.

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Then, with Blake's boards beneath their bellies (all three paddled 14-footers weighing in at 75 pounds), the trio left at midnight on September 30, 1932, paddling the 26 miles *into* the oncoming sea, with Blake finishing the expedition/race ahead of his two partners/competitors, in a time of five hours and twenty-three minutes. The other two came in an hour later, and, according to Gary Lynch's book *Tom Blake: The Uncommon Journey of a Pioneer Waterman*, all three were soon to find that the food had been eaten by the crew of their support boat. They immediately got on the boat, seasick now, and got back to land, where Blake had to walk home for lack of a ride.

Regardless, and whatever their reason for going, the group likely didn't know that that initial expedition would lead to a decades-long obsession between California watermen and Catalina island, one that endures today and has forged a relationship between would-be watermen and a body of water.

Today's preeminent South Bay boardbuilder Joe Bark once told me that growing up as a surfer in the region, the island played a prominent role in his life. "You just always look at it," he told me, describing the allure the place holds and the motivation that spans decades.

Still, Blake's '32 foray stood as an isolated event for the next 23 years. It wasn't until '55 that L.A. County Lifeguard Bob Hogan founded the Catalina To Manhattan Beach Pier Race. In plotting his course, Hogan reversed the Blake route, using the advantage of traveling *with* the swell, adding six miles to Blake's route by heading around the R-10 buoy in Palos Verdes and then traveling another ten miles north up the coast, for a total distance of 32 miles.

Ricky Grigg finished that first race ahead of a dozen other paddlers with a time of eight hours, twenty-seven minutes and fourteen seconds, to become the first champion of the first Annual International Paddleboard Race From Catalina to Manhattan Beach Pier.

For the next five and a half years, the race existed as a sort of rite of passage for Southern California surfers: Do Catalina, become a waterman. There weren't many competitors in those first years, but those who did paddle were committed; some of the most legendary names in surfing and paddling. Greg Noll finished second in the stock class in 1956. Tommy Zahn won the race in 1958 and 1960.

During the middle of the 1961 race, things unraveled. High winds marred the event. The surfers who were paddling to the Peninsula they couldn't see in the grey-shrouded distance were making progress, but barely. Moving in three dimensions and four directions as the ocean rose and fell and pushed and prodded the contestants, the decision was made mid-channel to cancel the race. Demoralizing for the contestants and for the race, and, ultimately, the end of something special.

Before 1961, surfers were a small and handily dismissed subset in the United States. Surfers had a lifestyle, and being a surfer then meant being a paddler, a fisherman, a diver. In '61, surfing took off. *Gidget* came to the big screen and the masses wanted in on the sport. The day of the cold paddle out and the beach bonfire ceded to a new age of rainbow colored beach umbrellas, pop culture, Franky and Annette, packed beaches and full crowds. A lot of ink has been spilt on the divide between pre-*Gidget* and post-*Gidget* surf culture; suffice it to say that surfers before 1960 were watermen before there was a term for such a thing, and surfers after were, well, something else.



The changing surf culture had a trickle down effect on the Catalina Race. The stormy conditions in '61 and the rise of surf culture were, in themselves, a perfect storm. The race—and paddleboarding itself—fell victim to surfing's explosion. After the half race in '61, the Catalina to Manhattan Beach Pier Race was canceled, not to be held again for another 21 years.

As surfing took off, paddleboarding faded to black. Surfing boomed in the '60s, then went dark under a reclusive backlash in the white board/black wetsuit years of the '70s. Only a handful of surfers in the world paddled during this time, and the Catalina Race was a forgotten memory, an exploit that resurfaced only in post-surf conversation.

The 1980s were in many ways a boom for surfing—at least as a professional entity—as the sport got an infusion of money, and once-hardscrabble surfers now found viable livings jockeying products on sponsors' behalfs. Shortboards and neon colors, photo spreads and publicity became part and parcel of the sport. On the far end of that glitz and glamour, a very select group of paddlers returned to their tradition, the Catalina Classic an emblem of that shift, and in 1982, a tiny group of paddlers set about to reconnect with tradition as surfers, and as South Bay watermen.

Just as L.A. County Lifeguard Bob Hogan had founded the race, it was a pair of L.A. County Lifeguards that brought the race back from extinction in 1982. The Manhattan Beach Historical Society had raised the issue of reinstating the race and Buddy Bohn and Gibby Gibson organized that year's contest, this time calling it the Catalina Classic. About ten paddlers competed in it, and Kip Jerger became the first paddler to add his name to the perpetual trophy since Tommy Zahn.

Ten paddlers that first year, and more the next. As news about the race spread word of mouth, entrants grew steadily. Five years in, there were thirty or forty paddlers, and the race was held every year to an increasing amount of attention. By the mid-'90s, there were sixty-plus entrants in the race every year. Paddleboarding was still relatively small, but the signs of life and growth were undeniable.

More races were organized around the world—including another 32-miler of an entirely different sort, with its own tradition—the Molokai to Oahu race, which became the unofficial world championship of the sport and the first event to offer a prize purse.

Still, Catalina had all the history, and even as it retained its prestige amongst Southern California watermen, it drew paddlers from around the world.

In the early 2000s, a resurgence in ocean culture contributed to a great boom in the sport. Smaller races in California, Australia and Hawaii saw record numbers of entrants, often shooting well into the hundreds, but the elite nature of the Classic kept its entrants small—not everybody could paddle 32 miles. Still, the race grew. In 2005, there were 76 entrants; in 2006, 88. Today, the race is the most historic and longest-running paddling event in the world.

Things have changed. Equipment has changed, training has changed, knowledge has changed, preparation has changed. But the channel, the channel has not changed. Which is perhaps why the race holds so much allure for paddlers. To paddle the Catalina Channel—particularly for Californians who look at the island as they drive down the coast on their way to work and throughout their daily machinations—is to participate in a timeless and humbling experience.

One that is not always enjoyable.

In the middle of the Catalina Channel—and I write this as someone who has only experienced that channel from a boat and never from the deck of a paddleboard—the ocean is large and unforgiving. Many times, when the race is run in late August, the morning fog shrouds a paddler from the time the 6 a.m. gun goes off to the time that they round the R10 buoy and head up to the Manhattan Beach pier, be that in five hours, two minutes and twelve seconds (as Catalina record holder Tim Gair did in 1999), or in an unofficial and agonizing ten hours. After three hours of paddling as determinedly as they can, a paddler finds himself stroking through shipping lanes, dodging freighters, no land in sight, in the middle of the ocean, each stroke seeming an ineffectual swipe against the inevitableness of the sea, water bottles the only sustenance, the sound of water slapping board the only soundtrack.

It can seem an impossibility, and at first it was.

Bob Hogan once told an Orange County newspaper that, at the time that the race was first started, “it was one of these things that no one knew if it could be done, like the Ironman. Then it turned into a race.”

Still, even today’s top finishers—like world-class paddleboard champion Jamie Mitchell—will tell you that they’re happy just to finish.

Humility. That’s what a 32-mile stretch of water can teach a person paddling an 18-foot board. It’s one arm in front of the other for five, six, eight, ten hours.

Today, as it was then, to finish the Catalina race is to achieve a major accomplishment, regardless of time. It’s to be included into a fraternity of watermen, and to rate a personal accomplishment next to the names of some of the most legendary watermen in the world—Blake, Zahn, Grigg, Noll, Munoz, Eaton, Bark, Mitchell and Hamilton—and to say that in some tangible way you accomplished what they did.

A survey of the archives of Catalina Classic results offers a telling insight into the allure of the race and the psyche of those it draws. Over the decades, the drop out rate—that is, the number of paddlers who start the race but don’t finish—is between five and ten percent—significantly low.

As legendary as the race is, it is equally terrifying. Later this month, in the middle of the Pacific on a grey day, in a shipping lane lined with sharks and high with chop, on a summer day where normal people are taking in sun at the beach, dozens of paddlers will be plodding through, one arm in front of the other, hoping to finish a race, and so to become part of a historic tradition, but mostly wondering why on earth they would sign up for the thing. Wonder, that is, until their toe steps on the sand, at which point they’ll remember why they did it, which is the same reason anybody’s ever done it, and the same reason why plenty of people will never do it: Because it’s there.

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