

Voyage on paddle board 'was quite an adventure'

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October 29, 2002

A 39-year-old San Diego-area swimming coach paddled 61 nautical miles from San Clemente Island to Ocean Beach yesterday, becoming the first to accomplish the feat on a modern paddle board.

"It was quite an adventure," said Kevin Eslinger, just moments after landing his 14-foot fiberglass paddle board next to the Ocean Beach pier.

"There were times when it was painful and times when it was ecstatic," he said. "It was just a lot of water."

Eslinger, who completed the marathon in approximately 14 hours, paddled the final 20 miles alone after his two-man support crew, who were trailing him in their 21-foot powered boat, lost sight of him while taking a break to fish.

"They were the ones who got lost," he said. "I knew where I was going."

His paddle board was outfitted with a global positioning device that allowed him to stay on course.

During the journey, he accidentally paddled over a 7-foot-long thresher shark that was basking at the surface.

"I don't know who was more scared, him or me," said Eslinger.

Eslinger managed to keep a steady pace of between 4.5 and 5 knots and refreshed himself by consuming several quarts of a carbohydrate energy drink.

He said he couldn't find his rhythm and was uncomfortable for the first six hours. After he finally found his groove, he developed a sore shoulder that was painful but bearable.

Eslinger attempted the same paddle 21/2 years ago, but foul weather, uphill currents and fatigue forced him to abandon the effort.

"It was the ocean 1, myself zero," he recalled. "I didn't care about winning, but I sure wanted to get even."

Among the half-dozen friends who came to the beach to congratulate Eslinger was surfing legend and paddle board shaper Mike Eaton.

"No one to my knowledge has done a paddle this long on this coast in a single shot," said Eaton, who compared the feat to the 100-mile runs by ultra-marathoners.

The longest documented distance paddle of similar length was a 90-mile paddle accomplished in 1940 by Gene "Tarzan" Smith, who paddled from Oahu to Kauai in the Hawaiian Islands, Eaton said.

Upon completing his history-making paddle shortly before 5:30 p.m., Eslinger didn't have time to refresh himself with food or drink.

"I've got to go to work," he said, referring to his job as a coach for the Heartland Swimming Association in El Cajon. "I've got 33 kids counting on me."

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