



PADDLE SPORTS - Making Waves From Coast to Coast From outriggers canoeing to kayaking and rafting, paddle sports have become wildly popular in the disabled community in recent years. Part of the reason is due to their relative affordability and the extensive lakes, rivers, and shorlines available across the U.S. Happily, children and adults with disabilities are safely experiencing new freedom, exploring nature's waterways in increasing numbers.

The Lake Powell Experience: Sharing the Thrills



Colorado's Mike and Vicki Kane enjoy Lake Powell kayaking.

Imagine waking up on the shores of the Southwest's vast Lake Powell, with several ski boats, a quiver of water skis, fishing gear, a canoe, and a stack of kayaks at your disposal. Imagine shoreline feasts and music-filled nights by a campfire under desert stars. And imagine 10 to 15 like-minded people with whom to share the good times. That pretty much sums up the Adaptive Adventures Lake Powell experience: a bi-annual journey teaming able-bodied and disabled individuals in exploring nature's glory.

Our last trip included participants from Colorado and the Midwest joining together in southern Utah's spectacular Lake Powell for a week of skiing, boating, swimming, jet skiing, fishing, hiking, sightseeing and

experiencing life. No phones, no TV, no computers - only a break from the daily routine using one of the premier adaptive boats in the region - the MT Pockets houseboat. Originally provided by volunteer George Coburn, the roomy craft sports two levels and space for up to 20 people to sleep comfortably. Designed to be wheelchair friendly, MT Pockets has an extra-wide entry/exit ramp, a spacious cabin area, wide hallways, and a large, wheel-in bathroom. The group of 14 included four paraplegics, two amputees, a disabled veteran, a certified recreation specialist, four adaptive program directors, and two boat drivers. All trips include personnel certified and experienced in first aid, CPR, and disabled recreation.

"We had four wheelchairs and no problems," said Adaptive Adventure's cofounder and program director Matt Feeney. "The smaller boats we used for ski outings, sightseeing, and joyrides offered a few challenges to the wheelchair participants. But that's when able-bodied boaters would do lifts, help balance, or just do what was necessary," he noted.

Shelly Williams, an accredited recreation therapist from Chicago, was one of the volunteers on the trip. "It was nice having someone with additional expertise along," Matt added.

The disabled participants were all experienced athletes, although not necessarily skilled in water sports. Disabled alpine skier Sarah Will who lives near Vail is an eight-time Paralympic gold medalist. Before the Powell trip, she hadn't water-skied in years. Steen Seestedt, also a snow skier, is a member of the Adaptive

Sports Center in Crested Butte. Tom Reetz, a disabled war veteran who founded the Rocky Mountain Handicap Sportsman's Association, still runs raft trips with Disabled Sports Rocky Mountain and has combined forces with Adaptive Adventures to recruit more people for future whitewater trips.

Near perfect weather during the week offered numerous opportunities for water skiing, kayaking, fishing, camping, and swimming. From socializing to sports and sunning, Lake Powell held something for everyone. After a day on the water and a homemade dinner -chef's duty rotated among the group - Will and Seestedt provided guitar and fiddle music while others carried the rhythm section with makeshift percussion instruments. Some felt the evening campfire was the highlight of every day, with hours of musical pleasure under the stars.

Feeney reported, "The midweek timing prevented some people who wanted to come from making the trip. But next year's plans call for two trips."

For further information, contact Adaptive Adventures, a chapter of Disabled Sports USA, at 303-679-2770, or info@edaptive.org or www.edaptive.org.

Kayaking Liberates Quad from Shore

By Susan Brandenburg



Not many people would consider an invitation to go kayaking as much of a gift. But for Laurie Murrelle of Jacksonville, Florida, it was one of the best birthday presents ever - particularly since it took 39 years to arrive.

Born under the Zodiac sign of Pisces, the water sign, Laurie was raised in Palm Beach County on Florida's East Coast where her father owned a marina. Sailing, surfing and water-skiing were as natural as walking. Her summers were spent in the Bahamas on her grandparents' boat, swimming, fishing, and diving for

conch.

That life ended with a water skiing accident on the Intracoastal Waterway in Ponte Vedra Beach on July 13, 1986. She emerged from the incident as a C 5-6 quadriplegic with limited use of her arms and hands. Already the mother of 2-1/2 year old Brandon, she returned to school after six months of rehabilitation, earning degrees in Psychology and Health Science from the University of North Florida, and entering the Masters of Social Work and Rehab Counseling Programs at UNF. Until two years ago, when hit by a series of medical complications, she worked as an information and referral specialist for the Independent Living Resource Center of Northeast Florida in Jacksonville. Laurie drives a modified van with hand controls and uses a sliding board to transfer herself in and out of her wheelchair to bed, shower chair, and driver's seat. A home health aid comes daily to help her shower.

Despite her rehab progress and career achievements, she was feeling depressed when her 39th birthday rolled around on February 26, 2001. That night in her wheelchair, surrounded by friends at her birthday celebration at a local pub, Laurie felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Walter Bunso of Kayak Adventures in Jacksonville Beach, and he asked simply, "Have you ever kayaked?"

Handing her his card and ignoring her amusement at the question, Walter explained that he was a certified American Canoe Association (ACA) instructor and had an Adaptive Paddling Endorsement, which qualified him to train people with disabilities. With some misgivings, she agreed to try.

On a spring morning a year ago in March, Laurie met Walter and his friend, Chuck Williams, at the University of North Florida Lake. After picking her up and setting her into the front cockpit of a red tandem kayak, Walter began to stabilize Laurie's upper body, fitting foam on either side of her hips, behind her back, and under her knees. Once she was comfortable in the cockpit, he made adaptations to the paddles. Using two tile trowels, tiny pieces of foam and several inches of duct tape, he fit the paddles to her hands. The whole process took about 30 minutes. Then it was time to go kayaking.

Except for a brief stint of aqua therapy in the mid-1990s, it was the first time Laurie had been in the water for 15 years.

"When we slid into the water from shore, it was like being home again," remembers Laurie. "We paddled around for about an hour. I wanted to roll over. I wanted to paddle backwards. I wanted to race. My cheeks hurt from smiling so much. I never wanted that experience to end and I haven't been the same since."



After taking that first plunge into kayaking, Laurie emerged from depression and embraced a new direction in life. "I believe anyone can and should try kayaking at least once," she affirmed. "As a quadriplegic, when I sit in the cockpit with pads stabilizing my balance and the proper adaptations to my paddle, I'm in total control of the situation. It's empowering."

Last October, Walter and Laurie partnered to establish the Disabled Paddlers Association (DPA), a not-for-profit organization open to a cross-section of the disabled community. They want to introduce inclusive and accessible paddling opportunities for everyone. "Our membership welcomes the able and the disabled alike," says Laurie. "We encourage family members and friends to join us."

The young group's first major outing was this past March, a "Spirit of Suwanee" paddling overnigher with meals and entertainment. For details on the Disabled Paddlers Association, call Laurie Murrelle at 904-285-2097 or visit the Web site at www.disabledpaddlers.org.

As for Laurie and her newly-found pastime, she stresses, "It's a fantastic feeling to look back at my wheelchair sitting on the shore without me in it!"



By Ellen Handa

When I saw Rebecca Lloyd this spring, she had dyed her hair blonde. She is living proof that you can be a quadriplegic, and still be a pistol. The glamorous Ms. Lloyd was about to participate in the Rochester River Challenge, a series of outrigger canoe sprint races on the Genesee River in Rochester, NY. Her team, combining paddlers with and without disabilities, finished second (women's masters division).

But winning isn't the point. Getting your life back is.

If you think of yourself as an athlete, then that's a big part of who you are. A disability may leave you feeling like a different person, cut off from your former self. To fight this, there is a growing movement to create opportunities in sport for everyone who wishes to participate, regardless of ability.

Some of the impetus for this movement comes from the athletes themselves. Rebecca, an accomplished horsewoman before her accident, still lives alone, drives a car, keeps a horse, and rides every day. "I've always been athletic," she says. She goes to hospitals to talk to people with recent spinal cord injury, to tell them about all the things they still can do that they think they can't.

ADVOCATE IMPACT

And some of the impetus comes from advocates like Jan Whitaker, a marathon paddler from Rochester, New York, who has won over 30 U.S. Canoe Association national championships. Jan has discovered that outrigger canoe paddling is a perfect sport for athletes with disabilities. She has worked with Rochester Rehabilitation Center therapeutic recreation specialists to develop the SportsNet outrigger canoe program that integrates paddlers with and without disabilities to the great benefit and joy of all concerned.

To date, SportsNet has served over 170 paddlers in recreational and competitive events, including the Rochester River Challenge and the Lake Champlain Challenge OC-6 sprint races for the past four years. But Jan doesn't intend to stop with a local program. Any athlete knows that nothing inspires participation and training like the prospect of a really great competition.

OUTRIGGERS IDEAL

She has her mind set on the Paralympics. Unlike many Olympic or Paralympic sports, outrigger canoeing can be done by almost all disability types. The outrigger canoe, with its stability and focus on upper body strength, would broaden the range of athletes capable of participating.

Jan feels that sprint racing, an exciting spectator sport, would be the best format. The Olympic rowing venues that currently remain idle during the Paralympic Games could be used for outrigger canoe sprint races. It is no small task that she has undertaken. Like the Olympics, the Paralympics will only include a new sport if it is "widely practiced," defined as practiced on three continents and in ten countries. But Jan's determination is so strong, that success seems inevitable. One important advantage to rowing, from the standpoint of the athlete with a disability, is that the disability becomes invisible.

"There are a lot of benefits if you can contrive to live as you did before the injury," says Jill Atkinson, a therapeutic recreation specialist from Rochester Rehabilitation Center. "That's where the fun comes in. It's the way it used to be, and that's the way it should be."

Back in 1997, nothing could have been further from Jan Whitaker's mind than an international program of outrigger competition for athletes with disabilities. Outrigger canoe paddling, while popular in Hawaii and California, was brand-new on the U.S. East Coast. Jan, a former Phys. Ed. teacher and a dedicated marathon paddler who had also paddled outrigger, immediately saw the possibilities for an outreach to inner city kids.

She started a program for Rochester children who had never seen a boat or been out on the coffee-colored river that ran through their city. One little girl in leg braces, Jessica Jones, was transformed after her first trip. "She kept saying, 'This is so wonderful; this is so great,' as I was pointing out historic bridges," Jan recalls.

Jan was so moved by this child's joy that it created an added purpose to her life - to see wheelchairs sitting abandoned on the shore as their occupants paddled off with their teammates. One paddler said to Jan, "You have given me wings. Everything is cast aside. That is such a powerful feeling."

The efficiency of the races, where safety amas are whipped on and off and special seating arrangements installed in a jiffy, belie the work and thought that go on behind the scenes. A key part of the arrangements is the Force 5 canoe seat that Jan, Ted Perry of CanoeSports East, and the late Dick Michelson, designed to

convert to the use of paddlers with disabilities.

ADAPTATIONS HELP

Wheelchair athletes have to have their knees raised, otherwise they pitch forward. A band around the thighs holds knees together and a seat back provides extra support. Areas of the body that have no sensation are also slow to heal, so they must be padded and protected. A conventional paddle stroke involves the whole torso, but many of the athletes can only use their arms - another reason for a sprint format.



TEAM SPIRIT: Rebecca Lloyd, seated in front of the canoe on the left, joins teams from SportsNet, a division of Rochester Rehabilitation Center. sportsNet helps individuals with and without disabilities enjoy recreational and competitive sports, including adaptive outrigger canoeing.

"Anyone's arm will last 1,000 meters," says Jan. "As long as you work together as a team, you can make it fly."

Two athletes in Jan's program are Susan Podsedly and Noreen Fenlon, both funny, friendly ladies with multiple sclerosis.

"They used to tell people (with MS) that activity makes you worse," says Sue. "Now that's totally changed. They're finding it helps us mentally and physically. My doctor said 'Go for it.' Physicians feel it's important that we get aerobic exercise. It's hard to walk, so this is an ideal way to do it."

SHARING THE FUN

Says Noreen, "I thought it was a great opportunity, because it is something I can do with my kids. You learn about other people's disabilities too, how they're restricted."

"It just gives you a good feeling - it builds your self-esteem, let me tell you," adds Sue. "One of the things I missed the most (after I got MS) was to run and walk. I've met a lot of people through the outrigger program, too. We normally practice and go out to dinner afterward, so you get a social thing. We have fun together on and off the water, which is really nice."

Noreen and Sue's team have a motto: "Only one in its class." It combines the idea of an outstanding team as well as the only team in competition whose members have disabilities. But if Jan Whitaker has her way, the people she introduces to outrigger paddling may find themselves the forerunners of many paddlers with disabilities. And their competition may someday reach the Paralympic level.

Inquiries about the Rochester SportsNet program can be directed to Jan Whitaker (716-292-6107). For more information on the modified seat design for paddlers with disabilities, available in the OC-6 CanoeSports Force 5 and the New England-designed OC-4, "the Duke", contact Ted Perry, CanoeSports East (207-439-4769).

About the Author...

Ellen Handa helps her husband, Mike, run the New England Outrigger Canoe Club in Beverly, Mass. One NEOCC canoe, the Kaniela, is equipped with special seats for paddlers with disabilities.

Photos courtesy of Bill Yates

Paddling Requires Few Modifications

Typically, few or no modifications to standard equipment are needed. As a sport, paddling emphasizes the individual's ability, with water acting as the great equalizer. Instruction is essentially the same for everyone.

Kayaks come in different lengths, widths, and hull shapes designed for various types of water conditions. They are usually made from lightweight, modern materials such as Kevlar, fiberglass, and polyethylene plastic. The basic design and concept of the kayak is ageless. Its beauty lies in its simplicity and adaptability.

As is the case with all kayakers, disabled individuals must choose the type of kayak that meets their specific needs. The four primary kayak styles are 1) sit-on-top or "open decked," 2) sea or "touring," 3) white-water, and 4) inflatable. Kayaks also come in solo or tandem designs. The tandem works especially well for beginners, children, people with visual impairments, and those who can only generate limited paddling power.

A growing number of adaptive kayaking programs integrate disabled and able-bodied paddlers on the same trip, or in the same boat. The American Canoe Association (ACA), which promotes the benefits of canoeing and kayaking for everyone, has published a book entitled "Canoeing and Kayaking for Persons with Physical Disabilities."

Although standard kayaks and canoes are often used for adults and children with disabilities, modifications can make the experience more enjoyable. The rule of thumb with adaptations is use as much standard equipment as possible. Once adaptations have been made, common sense and creative problem solving will usually cover any other situations. Various changes to seating systems, paddle grips, and leg position can create a more efficient and safe paddling environment. Common materials such as foam, duct tape, plastic chairs, camping seats, old bike tubes, boat buoys, and other readily available supplies work well for countless adaptations.

Safety considerations are paramount in all water sports. The most important rule is that all participants be able to handle themselves in the water and, in the case of kayaks which confine occupants, know how to upright an overturned craft. Other considerations include proper clothing, approved personal flotation devices (life jackets), sun protection, ease of exit from the cockpit, and always paddling with a partner.

Resources

AccesSportAmerica
Boston, MA
Pam Rogers
(617) 303-2456
pam@AccesSportAmerica.org

The Adapted Adventure Sports
Coalition & Water Sports Camp
833 East Wind Drive
Westerville, OH 43081
(614) 823-7156
www.TAASC.org

Adaptive Adventures
P.O. Box 2245
Evergreen, CO 80437
(303) 679-2770
Fax: (303) 670-8290
Toll Free: (877) 679-2770
www.edaptive.org
www.adaptiveadventures.org

Adventure Pursuit
P.O. Box 431
Parkersburg, WV 26102
(304) 485-0911
adventurepursuit@hotmail.com
www.adventurepursuit.org

Adventures Without Limits
1341 Pacific Avenue
Forest Grove, OR 97116
(503) 359-2568
E-Mail: awl@awloutdoors.com
www.awloutdoors.com

Breckenridge Outdoor
Education Center
P.O. Box 697
Breckenridge, CO 80424
(970) 453-6422
Fax: (970) 453-4676
E-Mail: boec@boec.org
www.boec.org

Canoeing and Kayaking for
Persons with Physical Disabilities
American Canoe Association
(703) 451-0141
www.acapaddler.org

Disabled Paddlers Association
Jacksonville, FL
Laurie Murrelle
(904) 285-2097
www.disabledpaddlers.org

Michi H. Wong, PhD
Hawaii State Hospital
Rehabilitation Services
45-710 Kea'ahala Rd.
Kaneoho, HI 96744
(808) 236-8696
mhwong@hsh.health.state.hi.us

Philadelphia Rowing Program
for the Disabled
#4 Boathouse Row, Kelly Drive
Philadelphia, PA 19130
(215) 765-5118
E-Mail: pacenter@aol.com
Link through www.boathouserow.
org

Professional Paddlesports
Association
www.propaddle.com
(616) 472-2205

Rochester SportsNet Program
Jan Whitaker
(716) 292-6107

RIC Outdoor Program
Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago
(312) 908-9070, or www.
rehabchicago.org

Wilderness Inquiry
808 14th Avenue SE
Minneapolis, MN 55414-1516
(612) 676-9400
Fax: (612) 676-6401
Toll Free: (800) 728-0719
www.wildernessinquiry.org

Information on modified
seat designs
Ted Perry
CanoeSports East
(207) 439-4769

The DUKE Outrigger Canoe
www.dukecanoe.com

[[Back to top](#)]