

Sailing to Win

Not satisfied with just going for a sailboat ride, these sailors are out to win races, including the 2,000-mile Transpac, regardless of their disabilities

It was a scene I was quite familiar with, having watched a dozen years of Transpac finishes as a *SAILING* correspondent and CSTV reporter. The crew, in bright Aloha shirts, beamed Cheshire Cat smiles as they hobby-horsed toward Waikiki and the imaginary line marking the end of the 2,216-mile race. Beneath bright blue skies they waved proudly to the cameras and spectator boats, while the driver and trimmers focused for the last few moments in the rollicking seas.

By Betsy Crowfoot with
photography by Bob Grieser



"I'm more comfortable on the boat than I am on land. To the point that I was the only one who could walk so I had to learn how to do foredeck," said Urban Miyares, who founded Challenged America, a San Diego-based adaptive sailing program with an attitude, a can-do attitude.

But then Bob Hettiger, who was strapped into his cockpit seat, trimming, nudged Urban Miyares from his position on the rail. "Almost there," he told Miyares, who couldn't see Diamond Head looming, nor the big red buoy just 50 yards ahead. Miyares, blind since Vietnam, scrambled to the bow to await the signal, groped for the sheet and readied to douse the headsail.

Horns blared, onlookers cheered, grown men cried.

Of all the Transpac finishes I have witnessed, this would be the most unforgettable. *B'Quest's* crew from Challenged America had beaten tremendous odds in a journey that had actually begun 12 years before. With insurmountable tenacity and courage, six sailors—including a quadriplegic, a paraplegic, an amputee and a crewmember with debilitating rheumatoid arthritis—had mastered this taxing offshore yacht race from Los Angeles to Honolulu.

And then they came back in 2005 and did it again.

Challenged America is an adaptive-sailing rehabilitation program for children and adults with disabilities, founded in part from frustration and the desire to take charge of that rehabilitation and recreation.

In the past such programs were largely patronizing, according to Miyares, co-founder of Challenged America. "They didn't really test our limits. The people who were taking care of us assumed what we could and couldn't do."

As a disabled veteran wanting to sail, Miyares says he was told, "Sit on a boat and we'll take you for a ride."

"We said, 'No, we want to sail.'" So he and Hettiger bought their own Cal 20 and started sailing on weekends.

From those humble beginnings Challenged America has blossomed into one of the leading-edge programs supporting disabled persons of all ages and capacities, led predominantly by the disabled.

Call it "rehabilitation with attitude."

"A big problem is having non-disabled people rehabilitating us. At Challenged America we're all disabled, rehabilitating our brothers and sisters. And so we know what they can do; we're not going to put up with anything. Where someone without a



disability would say 'Oh, we understand, let's see what you can do,'" Miyares said his tough-love retort is, "Then get out of here. We only want people who want to push themselves. That's the only way they're going to make it in life today."

"We're pushing the envelope here—doing stuff that's unheard of. Most programs for the disabled in sailing, they'll be in small boats in bays. We're going across the Pacific." They set their sights on the Transpac, which he called "the Mount Everest of sailing," in part for its ability to provide a level playing field among sailors of all abilities.

"We want a sport that we can compete and be active with other people without disabilities," Miyares said. "We don't want to be treated different or go into a segregated sport based on your disability or having a disability. We want to play and have fun and party with everybody else. Mainstreaming: That's mainly our goal."

B'Quest, a Tripp 40 outfitted to accommodate sailors with various types of disabilities, heads off the Transpac starting line in July 2005, the second trip to Hawaii for the boat and her crew of Challenged America sailors.



Sailing is that sport. It offers a variety of opportunities for persons with all forms and levels of disability. Today an estimated 20 million North Americans use assistive devices such as canes, prosthetic devices and hearing aids. Another roughly 4 million are visually impaired or blind, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. And as the population grays, those numbers will increase.

"We're just regular people who happen to have disabilities," said crewmember Scott Meide, who said he was "standing in the wrong place at the wrong time" in Vietnam when he lost his arm and suffered other injuries. "We have to struggle a little bit more than some people do, but it's a matter of coping. I think that disabled people are largely just plain misunderstood."

But that misunderstanding hasn't been entirely one-sided.

"We felt it was them against us: The able-bodied could do something we couldn't do and weren't allowing us to do it," said Hettiger, another Vietnam veteran, whose back was broken in a car accident.

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Hettiger, who co-founded Challenged America with Miyares, revealed that initially, his intent was a bit of comeuppance.

"We'll show them!"

"We bought our own boat, learned how to sail, got a little bored just sailing around the

bay, wanted to go racing, so we moved up to a bigger boat. Learned how to sail faster and faster, got a bigger boat ..."

Along the way, Hettiger had an epiphany. The broader sailing community wanted to help. Contributions from local businesses and individuals brought in roughly \$100,000 for each of the Transpac campaigns, while volunteers pitched in to get the boat and equipment ready for the rugged 2,216-mile crossing.

"We've raised funds \$50 a time," Miyares said. It was a tedious task considering the organizations' \$250,000

annual budget. Private donors satisfy the largest piece of the pie, while corporate funding makes up about 10 percent. Challenged America receives no federal funding and very little grant money. Board members and participants help fill the widening gap.

The organization, which Miyares says is unique in that it turns away no one, has been feeling the crunch. Natural disasters and other charitable causes have diluted public giving; obscure changes to the tax laws have hindered boat donations.

But the program will go on, and foremost on the list is the Transpac.

Initially, Challenged America looked at the capabilities and capacities of the applicants to pick their Transpac team, Hettiger said. But soon they decided to make the boat accommodate their disabilities, not vice versa, and use it as a platform to try out new equipment and procedures.

That meant modifying *B'Quest*, a Tripp 40 donated by Californians Brian and Suzanne Hull, with a paddle-type elevator in the companionway and special seats for paraplegics and quadriplegics.

Again the community stepped in. San Diego State University students worked with the crew to engineer secure cockpit seating.

"The seats developed by the students performed flawlessly," said Sam Gloor, a paraplegic who raced on the 2003 team. "Some of the crew simply could not have been effective without them."

But there were some things no one else could help with.

"We were more concerned about our personal needs," Miyares said. "We couldn't find examples of people with our disabilities doing the race." With a plethora of special circumstances—catheters, fusions, dietary restrictions and the like—they had a steep learning curve.

"During the first Transpac I was seasick 11 of the 13 days due to medications that make me more susceptible to it," Miyares said. Others needed more water, or more time to get ready on watches. Using the head was a project for others. "But we learned things we think will make it easier for the next generation of sailors with disabilities."

And, said Meide, who was on both the 2003 and 2005 Transpac teams, he hoped they would be inspired. "I know there are some people who just sit at home and cry in their beer but you just have to get up and push. That's just the way life is. If someone can see me or hear me talking, and that inspires them, even just one person, that's wonderful."

Jim Halverson was so stirred. He had coincidentally come across the Challenged America booth at a boat show a couple of years ago. Six months later he lost his leg due to a cardiovascular disease, and became part of the program and the 2005 Transpac team.

"I knew I was going to lose my leg and made up my mind it wasn't going to bother me," Halverson said. "I have a fake leg I use on land really well, but when I get on a boat the first thing I do is that leg comes off and goes down below. I scoot around on my butt; it's faster."



The first thing Challenged America sailors do is remove any prosthetic limbs before rigging the boats for the day's racing, above left. The Martin 16, above right, with its lifting ballasted keel and sail controls rigged in front of the seats, provide access to sailors of all abilities. Jim Halverson, at the helm, and crew Greg Scott head toward a mark, top, during the San Diego NOOD regatta in March 2005, which was blessed with hearty wind, facing page top. Scott doesn't let his severe rheumatoid arthritis get in the way of bending on the jib, right. Challenged America sailors gather on the dock, far right.

Another crewmember, Kevin Wixom, was a motorcyclist who lost his leg in an accident. "It happened in an instant," he said. Just as swiftly he decided it was not going to slow him down.

Wixom, in his quest to stay active, turned to sailing.

"These guys were more about sailing to race and be competitive. I was hooked. Forget being disabled: they're just good sailors—they know what they're doing."

Wixom affirmed that having to overcome life's difficulties makes you stronger. "You find parts of yourself you wouldn't have found before. Me personally, I would not choose to lose a limb or become disabled, but there are things I've done and found out about myself I probably never would have if I hadn't gone through that. Strengths of commitment and character, and staying in the game."

And for the severely disabled, Challenged America's programs can be a lifesaver.

A fleet of Martin 16s, Stars and Etchells with a variety of adaptive sip-and-puff controls, joystick, and other devices make it possible to serve the entire community.

Halverson told of a new student who "six months ago could walk as good as anybody." An auto accident had left her a quadriplegic overnight. "A friend brought her down here and put her in one of the Martin 16s ... with in half an hour she was all smiles because she could do something again." For someone trapped in an uncooperative body, the freedom and mobility of sailing is uplifting.

"It's a big ego and confidence builder for the disabled, being on the same playing field and the odds being equal," Miyares said. "We're not at a disadvantage anymore."

"If you love the ocean, sailing, the water



it's your obligation to share," he added, in a plea for support of Challenged America and programs like it.

He gets upset, he said, reading forums about building the sport and efforts to boost junior sailing, when sailing for the disabled has such growth opportunities too. "We've got to advance the sport of sailing for all of us."

"But no one wants to address the disabled," Miyares said. "Clubs will write a check, but they don't want a bunch of peo-

ple in wheelchairs running around. People who are not familiar with us are scared. They claim it's the liability—but since 1978 we've never had an insurance claim or lawsuit. It's a cultural barrier. An attitude.

"If you have a friend or someone you care about with a disability, hand them this story," he continued. "Read this article. There are other people physically and psychologically worse off than they are, and they're having a wonderful time sailing."

Have open arms and reach out, Miyares said. "Don't worry about the person with disabilities. They'll tell you what they need. Let them experience it, and if they're really interested, they'll find out about us, or others like us."

And he encouraged able-bodied sailors to keep pitching in with funding and time. "We need you—now," Miyares said. "Sooner or later you might need us. In time, things happens: a stroke, heart condition, car accident ... all of a sudden you're participating in a program."

"But there is no reason anybody cannot continue their love for sailing because they now have a disability." □

Challenged America serves sailors with all levels of capability from around the world and is located in San Diego, California. Go to www.challengedamerica.com or call (619) 594-8805 for details. For more information on Martin 16s, with or without assistive devices, visit www.martin16.com. Adaptive Adventures has a listing of organizations that provide sailing opportunities for people with disabilities at www.adaptiveadventures.org/links/sailinglinks.html.