

Inspire, Educate and Motivate: Paddling to Victory

By Haley Boruszak

One of the best loved activities at this year's Summerfest was outrigger canoeing at Mother's Beach. Outrigger canoeing is a magnificent sport that can be easily adapted to meet the individual needs of people with a wide range of physical disabilities including, but not limited to, spinal cord injury, brain injury, cerebral palsy, amputations, multiple sclerosis and visual impairment.



This year, for the first time ever, a 500 meter exhibition race for paddlers with disabilities will be included in the V12 division of the 2004 IVF (International Outrigger Canoe Federation) Hilo World Sprints, being held in Hawaii during the week of August 9-15, 2004.. Teams competing in this exhibition race will be comprised of three men with disabilities, three women with disabilities, three able-bodied men and three able-bodied women, paddling together in two six-person canoes that have been hulled together to form a Va'a 12 (Va'a is the Hawaiian word for outrigger canoe). This is an important first step on the path to qualify outrigger canoeing as a Paralympic sport.

Before outrigger canoeing can make it to the Paralympics, the sport must be widely practiced on three different continents. This effort is underway, according to Jan Whitaker, adaptive paddling chairman for the United States Canoe Association, who is leading the worldwide Paralympic vision for the sport. "The exhibition race at Hilo World Sprints is significant because it will showcase the ability of paddlers with disabilities and inspire, educate and motivate countries and territories around the world to enter new teams in future races, further promoting the vision of outrigger canoeing as a Paralympic sport."

"Hawaii, mainland USA and Italy have already formed teams that have signed on to compete in the exhibition race and; Canadian coaches, who participated in Summerfest 2004, are working to form a team and secure funding for their participation," says Whitaker. Whitaker's goal is to see outrigger canoeing included in the Paralympics during her lifetime. "The challenge, for paddlers with disabilities, is not getting to the finish line," says Whitaker, paraphrasing one athlete with a disability "The challenge is getting to the starting line. Thanks to the Hilo World Sprints organizing committee, teams of paddlers with disabilities will write a new chapter in the history of sport when they take their place on the starting line in the prestigious world championship for the first time.