

The 8th Annual Reef Madness Extreme Sea Kayak Race July 2013

by Nancy Soares on July 15, 2013

by Ed Anderson

(Editor's note: Ed Anderson has been addicted to kayaking since being introduced by Tsunami Ranger Michael Powers in 2004. In addition to working in executive protection, he is an avid kayak surfer, professional guide and instructor, and barbecue devotee.)



Ed Anderson gets tough with the racers at the briefing session prior to the race. Copyright Charles Russo, Half Moon Bay Review

The line of the swell was almost indistinguishable in the deeper water from all of the others gently rolling across the ocean. As it approached the shore it rose just the tiniest bit higher than the energy in front of and behind it. In the shallow water just off shore it assumed a more menacing form, going from gentle swell to a rapidly growing wave. The green wall was clearly taller than any of the waves that preceded it and it was storming in just feet off my bow. Although I had not paddled the ocean in well over six months in any conditions, let alone the challenging ones on which I was now set to embark, I knew with absolute clarity that I was sitting perfectly in the impact zone. Trapped and scared, I resorted to the only action that came to mind: "Break you bitch!" I doubt the desperate scream had any influence but, in a moment of grace, the crest pitched over the top and the wave broke right in front of my bow. I paddled furiously. The force of the wave may have been driving me backwards but I was upright and breathing. Another Reef Madness had begun!



The race begins.

Reef Madness was born out of the Tsunami Rangers' annual Sea Gypsy race, the last of which was in 2005. Both events center around challenging open ocean kayaking – picture surf zone launches and landings, rock garden navigation, and big wave tactics – and finish with serious partying by the survivors. It has become something of a tradition to start in front of the home of Michael “The Madman of Miramar Beach” Powers, paddle north to Ross’s Cove, and return. At Pillar Point paddlers may choose to paddle over the reef and through the famously temperamental Slot, or go around the outside of the reef and pass The Boneyard, where more than one paddler has had the cold-hand-of-fear-grabbing-your-guts feeling of possibly being caught inside when a big wave moves through the Mavericks bowl. While no one has done it yet, paddlers are also advised that they could also just pop into the harbor bar, grab a drink, and head back.



Kenny Howell wins again!

For the first time during the actual event, I chose to cut paddling distance by going through The Slot. The swell that day was a modest 5.6' at 10 seconds and, despite the scary launch, I was confident The Slot would be accommodating. I had been trailing local paddler Pat Tierney most of the way to the reef and it was only there that I managed to squeak by him. I was not about to give up my hard-earned lead at the northern edge of the reef, so I did a cursory scan of the horizon and paddled confidently out The Slot. Once I was fully committed I realized I had screwed up: rolling in was a swell clearly larger than anything I had seen during my approach. I knew I was in very real danger of getting hammered and having my remains tossed into the rocky wall and reef to my rear. Behind me I heard Pat offer a two-word prayer, the first word being "Oh." (My exclamation was only one word and not fit for print.)



Ed safely inside the infamous Slot. Copyright Charles Russo, Half Moon Bay Review

We both dug hard, fast, and deep. I looked in horror as my boat climbed the ever-steepening wall and the wave top started to go white and break. I could not think over the sounds of my breathing and heart beating. To my utter shock, I saw my bow punch over the top and hover in the air while the wave broke midway under my kayak. The vertical drop over the backside was spine-jarring but I grinned ear to ear as I turned back to Pat with a victorious “Woo-hoo!” He did not look so relaxed, yelling, “We aren’t over it yet!” I turned seaward again and my heart sank at the sight of another wave just as big bearing down on us. We repeated the panicked paddle-for-one’s-life routine, again dropping over the back as the wave thundered underneath us. Now in the deeper water we were relatively safe. Just outside of the kill box we met lead paddler Kenny Howell already on his return leg. He laughingly said to Pat, “You look like you saw a ghost!”



Tsunami Ranger Michael Powers and his Norwegian paddling partner Sidsel came in third!

A reasonably intelligent person might incorporate the above experience into his or her decision-making process and paddle around the reef and The Slot on the return. Sadly, it has been well established that I am nowhere near reasonably intelligent. On my return I saw BASKer Allan Marshall carefully taking his time outside The Slot, assessing the incoming sets, and then gracefully executing his entry into the reef. Buoyed by his success, I casually scanned the ocean and determined it was fairly benign. I threw two or three glances back at the horizon as I approached The Slot so that I was at least going through the motions of exercising due diligence. Once I was firmly committed to my approach I took one more look over my right shoulder and did not see the horizon. Instead I saw a wall of green that was well over my head and building bigger fast. I knew I was caught, I knew I had not done a practice roll since last summer, and I could not remember my last combat roll. As I faced the inevitable beat-down, two lessons came back to me from my LAPD firearms instructor: 1) We over-train because our best performance in combat will be half as good as our worst performance in practice; and 2) Fast is slow, smooth is fast.



Tsunami Ranger Steve King coming in.

The wave lifted my stern and I paddled purposefully towards the reef. I managed to surf straight for at least two solid seconds before being broached right. I leaned into the wave to brace but found it too tall and vertical. I was, in a word, screwed. The wave slammed me leftwards, furiously thrashing me and trying to steal my paddle once I was under water. I tried with only mixed success to stay tucked as I was very conscious of all the rocks in the area. After what seemed like 45 or 50 minutes under the water, I felt the hydraulics ease a bit and I swept slowly as I envisioned the perfect sweep roll. In only a moment I had the dual surprises of 1) being upright and calm in very lively conditions; and 2) the executor of a textbook back deck roll. I did not contemplate why in the Zen of the moment I decided on one roll technique and executed another. I focused rather on getting my backside through the last bit of The Slot and onto the safety of the reef.



Tsunami Ranger Captain Jim Kakuk surfs in smoothly.

The trek back from the reef to Miramar was uneventful and I landed back at the beach to the warm greetings of my fellow paddlers and spectators. The hard part over, feasting, dancing, and general revelry were to be had!



The racers pose on Michael’s boat ramp.

Heartfelt thanks to the folks who came to watch the carnage, the paddlers who participated, Michael and Nani for again hosting, Junko for adding an air of professionalism so desperately

needed in her capacity as registrar and timekeeper, the Tsunami Rangers for scouting the way, and of course Eric Soares, who inspired it all!