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Winners abound

World Sprints provide special aloha for all paddlers

By KEVIN JAKAHI
Tribune-Herald Staff Writer

There were smiles and winners everywhere when a special class of paddlers hit the water at the Va'a International Federation Hilo World Sprints on Saturday.

For the first time, paddlers with physical disabilities competed in the World Sprints during an exhibition event at Hilo Bayfront.

"It was wonderful," said Wahiawa's Francean McClain, who has muscular dystrophy. "It was aloha incorporated. I liked all the love, ohana and enthusiasm. When everyone paddles in sync, it feels so good."

McClain was on the Hawaii V-12 (double-hull) crew, which made a late surge to win the 500-meter exhibition, beating runner-up Italy, the U.S., and Canada.

All of the paddlers were awarded medals after the race, which was a big step in making outrigger canoe paddling a certified sport at the Paralympic Games.

"We're here to promote outrigger canoe racing as a sport for the Paralympic Games," said Jan Whitaker, an official with the U.S. Canoe Association. "In order to qualify a sport into the Paralympics, there needs to be three continents participating and today we had three continents."

Like the Olympics, the Paralympic Games are held every four years and two weeks later at the same site. The Hilo World Sprints could be a springboard for canoe paddling when the next Paralympics Games are held in 2008 in Beijing.

"Everyone was warmly received," Whitaker said. "The key thing is they demonstrated their ability as paddlers to be included in something this wonderful, and to be in the birthplace of paddling is fitting."

Paddlers with all different types of physical disabilities competed, but they all shared the same big smile after the race.



Team Hawaii poses for a portrait moments after their first-place finish in Saturday's Special Exhibition 500-M race of double-hulled canoes, an inaugural event for the 2004 IVF Hilo World Sprints Championships at Hilo Bay. Four teams, each comprised of six able-bodied and six disabled paddlers, took part. Disabled paddlers include Sussanah Rice, left, in wheelchair; Michael Cheeks, standing second from left; Dawna Zane holding Wowo the dog; Adam Sanders of Keaukaha C.C., center; and Francine McCauley. Not shown is disabled paddler Keone Turalde of Puna C.C. head coach is Aka Hemmings, standing left; assistant coach is Michi Wong, standing right. William Ing/Tribune-Herald

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"I love it," Canada's Angie Meyer, 27, who has cerebral palsy. "I feel free on the water. I've been paddling for four weeks and it feels excellent. I like being out on the water and trying something new."

Italy's Tania Bettiol, 17, shares Meyer's love of the water. Bettiol, a paraplegic because of a car accident, also lists swimming and archery as her other favorite sports.

"It felt great," Bettiol said. "There are no words to describe how I'm feeling. It was exciting. It was my first important race. I just started lately in the sport.

"I like the water and want to try all sports that involve water. I loved paddling immediately."

Compared to Meyer and Bettiol, Volcano's Adam Sanders, 14, is a veteran at canoe paddling. The Connections public charter school student has paddled with the Keaukaha Canoe Club for two years.

Sander has Osteogenesis Imperfecta or commonly known as "brittle bone" disorder" - a genetic disorder characterized by bones that break easily, often from little or no apparent cause - but he steered his double-hull canoe like an old pro, helping the Hawaii crew finish first.

"It felt great," Sanders said. "It was a lot of fun. It was a rush being with the team."

Sanders got into the sport when he heard about it in school. He doesn't know what career path he's headed for, but he wants to stay active in the water.

"My teacher told me there was an opening on the team for a bunch of kids," he said. "I don't know what I want to do. But I like photography and I'll definitely keep paddling."

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