

Vancouver duo first females to compete in Great Pacific Race to Honolulu

Training is crucial in open-ocean rowing

BY CHRISTOF MARTI, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 16, 2014



Rebecca Berger and Leanne Zrum will compete in the Great Pacific Race this June.

Photograph by: Coastal Contacts

Two Vancouver women are set this June to become the first Canadian and first female pair to row across the vast Pacific Ocean; 3,900 kilometres from Monterey, Calif., to Honolulu, Hawaii.

Rebecca Berger and Leanne Zrum will compete in the first Great Pacific Race, along with 12 other crews.

What would prompt someone to make a wave-tossed vessel of less than seven metres home for two months?

"I always wanted an adventure on the ocean," Berger replies. Born in Windsor, Ont., and raised in Vancouver, the seed for her row across an ocean may have first been sowed in London. While representing Great Britain in the Dragon Boat World Championship — winning gold and breaking a world record — she met Olympic rower Ali Gill, who suggested she try rowing.

Back in Vancouver, Berger jumped at the chance to enter the Great Pacific Race soon after it was announced. Then she had to find a partner.

"Finding a partner was much like online dating," she says. She mentioned the race to Leanne Zrum while at her local gym, and Zrum immediately joined the challenge.

Zrum is an accomplished Dragon Boater and long-distance outrigger canoe racer with gold medals in numerous World Championships.

I first met the pair during a five-day cruise and learn sailing course through the Gulf Islands. Berger and Zrum have to go through a rigorous training scheme involving seamanship, navigation, safety at sea and first-aid training, which is essential to make an open-ocean passage as safe as possible. Despite the advances in technology, GPS and satellite communication, once the two rowers are 1,000 miles from shore, they can only rely on themselves, the gear and their training.

No Coast Guard helicopter can fly that far offshore, no rescue boat can reach them. In fact, once out of the sight of land they are likely not going to see any other boats until the shore of Hawaii comes into sight. The only help in an emergency may be in the form of a large cargo ship, and that could be days away.

While we are sipping on a beer and watching a beautiful sunset aboard their boat, Honey Badger, I couldn't help thinking that this is a such a small boat and we are sitting less than one foot above the water. When I picture waves of up to four metres looming high above the tiny craft, I was happy to be tied up to a dock in False Creek.

Having sailed to Maui and back to Vancouver on a 15-metre sailboat with a crew of eight, I have enormous respect for their endeavour.

"You need to put a great deal of passion into this," Berger says. "The race started the second you signed up; it becomes a lifestyle".

While physical strength and training is important, mental toughness and training will be vital. It is so important that the two have weekly coaching sessions with Roger Friesen, a professor of sport psychology at the University of the Fraser Valley, to prepare them for the mental challenge of their ocean crossing.

They expect to row 50 to 90 kilometres a day. That is like rowing from Vancouver to the Gulf Islands and back once or twice a day. And they will be doing this non-stop for maybe two months. Wind and currents are supposed to help. But unlike sailors, who can adjust the sails when the wind changes, Berger and Zrum will just have to dig in their oars a bit deeper.

To learn more about their adventure visit their website www.rowthepacific.ca/

We all wish the two rowers much success and a safe passage!

Christof Marti is the owner of Simply Sailing School in Vancouver (simplysailing.ca) and is a both director on the Board of BC Sailing and the Vancouver Rowing Club. Trained as an engineer and with an MBA in finance, Christof is also a qualified sailing instructor and a certified Yachtmaster. He will be filing reports from B.C.'s coastal waters over the season.

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