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Big time adventure is challenge, triumph

By Drew Budd



The team kayaking off the coast of Point Roberts.

A little more than a year ago, East Moriches residents Lon Dolber, 53, his son James, 19, and Richard Antunovich, 56, joined seven other people on a kayaking trip around Vancouver Island off the coast of British Columbia, Canada.

The Dolbers and Antunovich were joined by four other able-bodied people as well as three disabled kayakers and together, the group was trying to find out if a circumnavigation of the 700-mile island in kayaks would be feasible.

The motivation behind the arduous trip was centered around the trio of disabled kayakers who belong to a group called World T.E.A.M., which stands for The Exceptional Athlete Matters. World T.E.A.M. has strong aspirations and objectives. Its mission statement, according to its web site, is to use “the universal power of sports to create soul-stirring experiences by teaming disabled athletes with able-bodied athletes, forming a true team.”

Many of the athletes who are part of World T.E.A.M. are disabled veterans.

Lon Dolber is a part of the board of directors for World T.E.A.M. and raises funds for many of the group’s events through his company, American Portfolios Financial Services, Inc.

Although the team hit many bumps along the way during last year’s trial run—including a strong storm that left the group stranded on a beach for many days—it was decided that

a kayaking trip could be done, but with a few tweaks. Instead of kayaking Vancouver Island, the group would kayak a route from Anacortes, a town 80 miles outside Seattle, Washington, to Vancouver, British Columbia. The group would also grow from 10 to 20 people with five disabled American soldiers and five disabled Canadian soldiers joining 10 able-bodied athletes on the journey.

All the planning became a reality recently, when the group made the trek—covering 85 nautical miles—from Anacortes to Vancouver during the first week in August.

Getting organized

Colin Doherty, who was the guide for last year's trip around Vancouver Island, helped Lon Dolber finalize the route from Anacortes to Vancouver. All of the planning came together in February of 2009. While Dolber and Doherty concentrated on getting the route planned out and the fund raising under way, World T.E.A.M. president Jeff Messner was in charge of getting together the American and Canadian soldiers.

Getting five American soldiers to participate in an event is fairly easy for World T.E.A.M. based on the fact that it has done multiple events already with the U.S. Armed Forces. The Canadian soldiers are tougher to find because of the obvious fact that they're from a different country and World T.E.A.M. has never done an event with them before. Last year's kayaking trip included one disabled Canadian vet, Brett Ricard, and he was instrumental in getting World T.E.A.M. in contact with the Canadian equivalent, Soldier On.

A true challenge

The group was confronted with challenges from the minute the trip began. On August 2, the group left the beach head of Anacortes headed for its first stop on James Island. What was supposed to be a hour and a half, four-mile trip to the island ended up being a four and a half hour trip because of the stronger than expected current.

"I think there was one point where I was paddling for three hours and made no change in my direction except for going backwards," Lon Dolber said.

What the team learned right away was that Puget Sound floods every day and when that happens a slack tide occurs which means there is no current for a small window of time. At 1 p.m. the current starts heading north which is good for the team since that's where they were heading. At around 4 or 5 p.m. however, the current switches and heads south. They had left that first day at 4 p.m. and were stuck the entire time going against the tide. It was a lesson learned. For the rest of the trip they would make sure they would start kayaking around noon.

On the third day of the trip, the team left James Island and went to Pelican Island and from there they headed to Clark Island which was one of the team's favorite parts of the trip.

“The island was totally uninhabited,” Lon Dolber said. “There were a ton of seals, you could walk around the whole island. We were really kind of alone and the guys got to fish.”

The team left Clark Island for Burch Bay where they were met by local families cheering them on. There was a big picnic and the team set up camp for the next day.

From Burch Bay the team went to Point Roberts. Along the way, the team encountered some pretty big waves and some huge rocks that were sticking out of the water but when they got to the point, they were met by another group of families which brought food and drinks.

“The best thing about it was that people you didn’t even know were just helping out which is completely different than people in New York,” James Dolber said. “But there, everyone was willing to help out, give you rides to wherever you wanted to go.”

The team eventually ended up in the Frazier River, which goes upstream the entire time, which made kayaking easier. From the river, the team was able to reach its final destination on Jericho Beach. After packing everything up, the team had a celebratory dinner the night of August 8 and everyone went back home the following day.

The aftermath and the future

From what the Dolbers and Antunovich could see, the soldiers, both American and Canadian, enjoyed the trip and would do it again if asked. Ricard, a Master Corporal and an active member of the Canadian Army who lost his left leg in the line of duty, took part in the beta trip as well and said this year’s trip was a definitely a challenge.

“Some days we’d spend nine hours on the water, and kayak 12 to 18 nautical miles a day. Those were long days,” he said. “Going against the current, it definitely was a challenge for sure.”

Staff Sergeant Jeff Henson, who is an Ammunition Demolition Expert with the U.S. Army, was kayaking with World T.E.A.M. for the first time. Henson has no vision in his left eye and has what’s called fluctuating vision in his right eye which means his vision, at times, will be no greater than 25 percent but he could also be totally blind at times. Even though he said it was one of the toughest things he has ever endured he would love to do it again.

“I would be disappointed if they don’t ask me [to do it again],” he said. “I love things like this, that push my limits and see how far I can go.”

Lon Dolber thinks there are three core aspects to a World T.E.A.M. event; safety, challenges and team unity. The safety was taken care of by two support boats that accompanied the team, including a 23-foot motorboat that had two Coast Guard

Reservists on board. The supply boat carried the team's supplies from camp to camp and help set up the camps each day.

Dolber said that the trip certainly accomplished the goal of creating both challenges and team unity.

"In the beginning there is always, 'who is this soldier? who's that soldier?,' but in the end we all came together as friends and as a team," Lon Dolber said.

Meeting and greeting all of the team members was one of James Dolber's favorite parts of the trip.

"Making friends with new people, that's always good," he said. "At night, everyone would sit around the fire and talk about their political beliefs, that was my favorite part, just hearing what everyone had to say. And no one ever got offended. You just accepted what people had to say, if you didn't agree, you made your point but no one got mad at each other. They were just cool."

Lon Dolber says the kayaking trip will be an annual event for World T.E.A.M. Sports but the kayaking doesn't necessarily have to be done in Vancouver. There were talks about doing a trip next year from New York to Maine though the team really likes the idea of returning to Vancouver.

If there is a kayaking trip next year, there will almost certainly be changes and improvements made. There is one thing that will stay the same however and that's the fact that it will be an extreme challenge that each participant will take head on.