

Rowers of Oceans: Angela Madsen: Riding the Waves to Personal Victory

By David Block

When Angela Madsen of Long Beach, California underwent back surgery in September 1993, her plan was to walk and surf again the following year.

She first injured her back while playing basketball for the Marines in 1980, and 13 years later, due to spinal degeneration and aging, surgery was unavoidable. But to her horror, the VA orthopedist botched the operation, leaving her a paraplegic for life.

Madsen was supposed to have a spinal fusion of two levels of lumbar spine.

The 48-year-old Madsen remembered: "They were to be installing bone graft from my hip replacements of the discs and Herrington rods with pedicle screws. The hardware was ordered for the two levels and was ready, but the doctors mistakenly started at the wrong level making it necessary to fuse an additional level. They had to go to the bone bank for more bone graft for the additional level. This also changed the hardware. The procedure that was to take 4 hours took 10 and ½ hours. When they were installing the hardware, they reportedly installed the rods and crossbars out of numeric sequence and had to take it all apart and start over. They installed the bone grafts improperly and left all three side-wedged with the upper one protruding outward, impinging on the descending aorta. Sometime during the procedure, they also compromised my spinal cord by either drilling or placing one of the screws through the dural sac and into the spinal cord." This left her in constant pain.

Worse, when she went for rehab, the Chief of the Spinal Cord injury unit at the VA made sure that she received no help because, as Madsen put it, they told her that her physical condition was a "waste of human life."

Her reaction: "I didn't really say anything to him. I'm not one of those people who get all flustered up right away. I got mad internally. The VA has so much power over you that vengeance isn't even an option. It's better to think about where you're at in your life and where you need to go. If you want to get somewhere, you can't hold that all in and consider all that. You have to let that go and move on."

Getting the VA to fork over disability benefits was no easy feat. Madsen said, "They expunged evidence out of my medical records, and tried to deny that they did anything wrong, which made it so I couldn't get my benefits for a long time." However, Paralyzed Veterans of American assisted her in forcing the VA to pay her disability benefits.

Sports allowed Madsen to release her anger toward the VA doctors.

"I was always good at sports, so I thought I'd try to compete."

In June 1995, Madsen competed for the first time in sanctioned sports for people with disabilities, the 15th National Veterans Wheelchair Games (Atlanta, GA June 13-17). She won three gold medals in swimming - the 100-meter freestyle, 100-meter backstroke and 100-meter breaststroke - along with winning gold in the Slalom Course, and one in billiards.

"I wasn't expecting to win any medals," said Madsen. She soon became a regular at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

Helping Others Row

In 2000, Madsen launched the California Adaptive Rowing Program.

"Rowing is an awesome sport for people with disabilities," said Madsen. "It's liberating because you can compete out of your wheelchair. You can easily compete against other adapted rowers." She elaborated that competing against fully able-bodied rowers was another story. "You might look the same as able bodied rowers when you're out on the water, because you're not in a wheelchair and no one is staring at you, but people who can walk can also use their legs in their sliding seats. You're not going to generate as much power with each stroke if you can't use your legs, like able-bodied people do."

While Madsen thought it a great idea to form the California Adaptive Rowing Program, the Long Beach Rowing Association did not.

"They had all kinds of reservations," said Madsen. When the association said that it would be hard to insure people with disabilities, Madsen countered that her rowers were already covered. "Then they told me that my group would be in the way of their crew practices, so I told them that we'd use the water when the crew teams weren't there."

The Long Beach Rowing Association finally consented, and when they saw how well the adapted rowers handled themselves in the water, their trepidation turned to optimism.

Crossing the Atlantic

Madsen and paraplegic Franck Festor of France teamed up to compete in The 2007 Atlantic Rowing Race, sponsored by The Woodvale Challenge. It began on December 2, 2007 at La Gormera in the Canary Islands. On February 7, 2008, Madsen and Festor arrived at Antigua in the West Indies to finish 10th overall, 66 days, 23 hours and 24 minutes.

All of their competitors were fully able-bodied. To compare their finishing times to the teams that they beat and to those that finished ahead of them, go to the link, http://www.atlanticrowingrace2007.co.uk/news_releases/newsdetail.php?id=168

Neither the Madsen/Festor duo's disabilities, nor their language barrier affected their performance in the water, yet they had the same problems as their fully able-bodied competitors: Winds, currents, weather and seasickness.

This spring Madsen will lead a crew of eight people across the Indian Ocean. Her plan is to finish in less than 50 days.

Festor will not be part of her crew. "His wife won't let him," said Madsen. "She told him that if he ever took part in another ocean race, she would leave him, so now he's mountain climbing."

You can follow Madsen on line. She explained: "We will have satellite tracking beacons on the boat, so everyone can follow online at www.PirateRow.com and can send us messages. We hope to have a pretty good following. We will experience horrible rashes, sores, blisters, arthritic pain, fatigue, and maybe even personal conflicts." She added that she wouldn't be surprised to encounter big waves, big sharks, and big storms, coupled with the fear of possibly failing to cross the Indian Ocean. "We will experience the bonding of people from all over the world coming together to do a job, much like a military unit, beautiful sunrises and sunsets, marine life, fish, whales, and dolphins. There will be no monetary prize, just a cold beverage and a hug from family and friends, old and new to see you in and support you at the finish line."