

Oceanman hits the waves

'Mystery events' make endurance test 'a lot of fun'

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Gary Parsons is sitting in his office with the million-dollar view.

He's wearing a pair of red shorts, matching T-shirt and flip-flops adorn his feet. His face arms and legs are a golden brown, even more accentuated by his sandy-blond hair and piercing blue eyes.

It's been a slow day at work, but the cool, overcast morning has given him the chance to catch up on some chores around the Jericho Beach lifeguard hut. That, and promote his baby, the Jericho Oceanman. The one-of-a-kind West Coast adventure race goes Sunday and gives a whole new meaning to hitting the beach.

"All you need is a bathing suit, running shoes and something to paddle," says Parsons, the brainchild behind the Oceanman and a

Vancouver beach lifeguard for the past 25 years. "The race is really an inclusive, non-intimidating fun event for serious athletes who really want to test their mettle or for friends who want to train for an event together. It's great for all levels of athletes because the events can be divided up between teammates. It's fun to do as a group or a real challenge for those who want to compete solo."

Unique to Vancouver, the Oceanman is a two- to three-hour endurance race consisting of a one-kilometre ocean swim, a six-kilometre paddle and an eight-kilometre cross-country trail run along the shore and on the trails of Spanish Banks. The race attracts many of Parsons' lifeguard friends as well as recreational and world-class athletes. Participants fall into categories of solo, relay and corporate teams.

But what differentiates the Oceanman from just any other adventure race are the mystery events. To ensure that all the athletes remain focused on having fun, different disciplines are added between the swim, paddle and run. Past mystery events have included paddling an inflatable air mattress, stacking stones as well as a beachside croquet challenge. New for this year is paddling a stand-up board.

"The mystery events are always a factor because you never know what they are going to be," said defending men's champion Bob Woodman, 43, who finished last year's course in one hour, 43 minutes and 27 seconds. "My first year we had to stack stones during the middle of the run portion, which sounds easy enough -- big stones on the bottom, right? But in the middle of a run when you're not thinking clearly, it can cost you time. It's not always the fastest guy that wins, but the smartest and luckiest.



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun

IN THE SPORT-LIGHT: Gary Parsons navigates the waters off Jericho Beach, where the Oceanman founder will be joined by more than 100 likeminded souls on Sunday for a 15-kilometre triathlon of a different sort.

"The way Gary's designed it is great -- it keeps you guessing all the time," continued the Vernon native, who will be competing in his fifth Oceanman. "I come down because it's a challenge and a lot of fun. I always want to win, but I'm also there to have a lot of fun."

During the paddle portion of the race, competitors use a variety of boats, such as sit-on-top surfers, solo outrigger canoes, sea kayaks and flatwater racing kayaks. What is fastest depends on the wind and waves, so it is a bit of a guessing game.

Several of the city's lifeguards who enter every year use surf skis -- a sit-on-top craft that are fairly quick on a calm sea but also can handle a chop.

"Some crafts are better than others -- it all depends on the weather and the person's experience using it," says Parsons, 47, who competes regularly in the World Outrigger Championships in Hawaii. "But that's why it's called the Oceanman. Part of the challenge is finding out the best way to navigate the challenge."

The event has becoming quite a tradition with spectators, local sponsors and families coming out to cheer on the competitors at one of the most spectacular race locations in the world. The action takes place along the shoreline of the Jericho Sailing Centre with the North Shore mountains and cityscape as a backdrop.

"The course has been designed to be viewer friendly -- most of the action takes place close to shore," says Parsons. "The Jericho Sailing Centre pier offers a great vantage point or you can watch from the restaurant and have a beer. There's music blaring over a sound system and we're constantly announcing who is in the lead. It's quite fun to watch."

Carolyn Daubeny is the defending women's champion with a time of 1:57:40. Harmony Airways was the fastest team last year, finishing in 1:38:30, while Angus Straight was the youngest solo competitor. The 14-year-old Vancouver native crossed the line in an impressive 2:09:41.

"No matter the category, it seems every year there's the same couple of people at the top and some new guys challenging -- which makes it very competitive," says Woodman, who works as an auctioneer. "You never know who the dark horse is going to be. My advantage is my paddling background. Running and paddling aren't something a lot of people do -- most run and bike -- and running and paddling make up the majority of the Oceanman."

Parsons said the idea for the Oceanman came to him about 10 years ago. He had a vision for a unique Vancouver adventure race, on par with similar life-saving events he's competed at in Hawaii and New Zealand.

"It was keeping me up at night," says Parsons, who competed in the Oceanman the first two years, but now concentrates on announcing. "Then one day I just decided to do it. At the start I thought of calling it the Multiman, then decided to just make it the Oceanman and centre it around the ocean and beach."

It's a fitting way to give back to something that has given him so much.

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DID YOU KNOW?

- Boat rentals for the Oceanman are available through Ecomarine at Jericho on the Beach for a reduced rate.

- The largest Oceanman field was in 2005 when 150 competitors participated. There are about 120 people registered for Sunday's race. Entries will be accepted on race day.

- Following the event, organizers, participants and sponsors get together for a good old-fashioned Canadian beach party, complete with salmon barbecue, homemade pie, live music, dancing, awards and prizes.

- The Oceanman relies mainly on support from sponsors such as Blue Crush, The Bakehouse, Maui Jim Sunglasses, Neosport Wetsuits, Windsure Windsurfing School and wouldn't be possible without the cooperation of the Jericho Sailing Centre.

Ian Walker, Vancouver Sun

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