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The crest of the wave

Surf kayaker Dan Crandall rises to the top of the class

By Suzanne Hurt - Special To The Bee

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Dan Crandall rides a wave toward the judges at the Santa Cruz Kayak Surf Festival this month. Crandall runs several kayak-related businesses in the Coloma area. Sacramento Bee/Kevin German

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SANTA CRUZ -- Dan Crandall spotted a wave developing on the horizon off Steamer Lane.

He wanted that wave. And he didn't have to fight off board surfers to get it.

The world-class surf break belonged to him and three other kayak surfers during a preliminary heat in the Santa

Cruz Kayak Surf Festival, held earlier this month.

The competition gave them a rare chance to kayak "The Lane," one of the spots where the sport of surf kayaking has steadily evolved. The annual event is the only time Steamers isn't covered with board surfers.

Crandall paddled his high-performance surf kayak hard, farther out into the ocean and onto the wave's face. Turning, he launched off the lip and turned into the breaking white foam in a roundhouse cutback.

He carved back up the moving wall of water, slashed off the lip and roller-coastered, running high and low on the wave. At maximum velocity, he dropped past a breaking section and rode straight toward the cliff.

Still accelerating, Crandall carved around the cliff within 10 feet of the rock. So focused on the ride was he, he didn't hear the screaming spectators and the water crashing behind until he spun his kayak off the fading wave.

That ride helped him advance to the expert semifinals in a contest where competitors are scored on their best three waves. But more than once, he said it's not about scoring, or even the contest.

"It's all about getting a few good rides," said Crandall, who grew up a few miles from Steamer Lane and now lives in the El Dorado County town of Lotus.

Surf kayaking (also called kayak surfing) is a form of paddle surfing -- a hybrid sport blending river kayaking equipment and skills with the environment and ocean-reading abilities used by wave riders. Boats are far shorter than sea kayaks, and techniques more closely resemble those used to ride stationary river waves.

The sport has been practiced for at least 40 years on different coasts. Yet the community remains small in comparison to the explosion of board surfers.

The Santa Cruz Kayak Surf Festival, held this year on March 16-18, is the largest annual surf kayaking competition in the world. More than 100 competitors came from Britain, Brazil and both U.S. coasts to ride waves and hang with surf kayakers of all levels.

In a class by himself

Crandall, 48, is the current world champion in International Class Master's and a two-time national champion in International Class and High Performance Open. Come October when he competes in the World Surf Kayaking Championships in Spain, he will be in a class by himself: the only person to compete in every world competition and be a member of the U.S. team every year. (The U.S. Team is now split into West and East teams; his West team is the current world champion.)

British competitors call him "Viking" because of his curly copper hair and beard and a strong upper body that doesn't chill easily. His power and fearlessness on big waves have earned him the respect of other kayakers.

"He's aggressive and powerful in the waves. And he's stylish. That's the trick -- to combine aggression with style," said Sean Morley, the West Coast representative for Valley Surf Kayaks.

Crandall doesn't even mind storms as long as there are good waves.

"I can have fun on any waves, even small ones. But where I really get the most into it and get the most all-around challenge is where I get to surf really big waves that have good shape and lots of power. All your synapses have to be firing to go out and surf that stuff," he said.

A pitch-black indoctrination

He started surf kayaking in 1989 -- one of a few who didn't come to it through another sport. Crandall learned to roll (a maneuver to upright oneself in a kayak) in a Santa Cruz pool. He got into the surf the next day with Dennis Judson, then his scuba diving shop boss.

That week, Santa Cruz was crawling with board surfers who were there to compete in the O'Neill Cold Water Classic board surfing competition, which in 1989 was just two years old.

One night while most of the board surfers were away from the waves, Crandall and Judson stole out onto Steamer Lane and kayak surfed.

"It's pitch-black. I'm going, I'm out here night surfing. I can't see him (Judson), and he can't see me. If I get in trouble, he can't really help me," recalled Crandall, who also remembered thinking "This is great!"

Before long, Crandall took his kayaking skills and started running rivers, too. Within six months of first learning to kayak, he got certified as a kayaking instructor through the American Canoe Association.

Now, his life is kayaking. He runs three companies, all located just steps away from the American River near Lotus: Current Adventures Kayak School and Trips, offering guided trips and instruction for surf, whitewater and sea kayaking; The River Store, selling whitewater and surf kayaking boats and other gear; and the Web site www.kayaking.com.

But he still spends time in Santa Cruz. One of the few surf kayaking instructors on the West Coast, Crandall teaches the importance of surf etiquette and building strong paddling skills before going out on the waves. In 1991, he brought Mega brand kayaks back from Britain -- creating a demand here for strong composite surf kayaks and a move away from the plastic river kayaks many had been using.

He surf kayaks ocean waves in winter and paddles whitewater in spring, summer and fall. (Crandall's now heading into what many expect to be the best whitewater kayak season in 10 years.)

He's just as well-known for being supportive to his fellow kayakers. At the festival in Santa Cruz a few weeks ago, kayak surfers from white-haired experts to awkward teens said he's generous in sharing skills, knowledge and equipment.

"In this sport, Dan is a prince. A prince and a gentleman, and a fierce competitor," said Randy Phillips, a Southern California surf kayaker from Lompoc.

Supports young kayakers

The prince of surf kayaking seems friendly and genuine, with a deep laugh and a positive outlook. When not competing at the March event, Crandall chilled on West Cliff with family and friends. They watched heats during the competition and gave support to other kayakers. Crandall also coached two "juniors" and rounded up boats for them. He loaned a Mega kayak to Alex Blum, 17, of Berkeley, whose own boat was damaged the day before.

Blum got in trouble again and Crandall's loaner ended up hitting the rocks. Blum carried the boat through the crowd toward Crandall's van.

"There's my boat. Oh, it doesn't look good. I can see from here: It's broken across the front," Crandall said. "My \$2,500 boat just became my \$2,500 planter box. Yep, that one's gonna hurt."

Crandall and Blum discussed it, and ended up agreeing that Blum would work off payment for the damaged boat as a kayak instructor this summer -- a solution that pleased Blum.

Russ Buskirk, 52, a U.S. East Surf Kayak team member from Charleston, S.C., said Crandall gave him epoxy to fix a toggle and leash that ripped off his boat.

"He's legendary. He's good, and he's just a really nice guy," Buskirk said.

At the start of every Santa Cruz surf kayak festival, Crandall's parents, Bettie and Jim Crandall, host a barbecue in nearby Aptos to welcome everyone. They've housed and fed countless kayakers. Wearing big shades, Bettie Crandall, 72, watched her son's final heat in this year's festival while seated in a director's chair high above the action.

"Way to go, Daniel!" his mom boomed.

"Get back out there!" screamed Colleen McKinnon, Crandall's longtime partner.

Willingly backs off

As the clock ticked down, Crandall caught a big wave and did a hard cutback into the pocket, where green face meets breaking white foam at the optimal place to catch a wave.

Kenny "The Snake" King of Mill Valley worked his way across the bottom of the foam pile -- where kayakers aren't scored -- and came right up underneath Crandall and into the pocket.

Some top-ranking competitors jump on waves to force other people off so they won't score as highly, which is considered fair competition.

But not Crandall.

Though he had rights to the wave's main peak because he was on the best spot first, he pulled off the wave to avoid running over King.

Crandall doesn't make an issue out of maneuvers like that. To him, it comes down to the surfing.

"At the end of the day, I'd rather give somebody a wave in most cases than do anything that can be perceived of as stealing," he said. "It really doesn't end up being what they score you. It's how much fun you have."

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Crandall tackles ocean waves in winter and whitewater rivers in other seasons. He is the only person to have competed in every World Surf Kayaking Championships. Sacramento Bee/Kevin German



Dan Crandall tries to outrun a wave during practice at Steamer Lane for the Santa Cruz surf kayaking competition. Crandall grew up in the Santa Cruz area and has been kayak surfing since 1989. "In this sport, Dan is a prince," says competitor Randy Phillips. Sacramento Bee/Kevin German



Crandall unhooks his surf kayak from the top of his van before a long day of competition in Santa Cruz. Sacramento Bee/Kevin German

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