

AGAINST



Early going: (from left)
Bruno Hansen at the helm
of Alula, Zac Tapeç and
skipper Spike Kane in the
Race to Alaska (R2AK)

ALL ODDS

Being paralyzed from the chest down didn't stop Spike Kane and Zac Tapeç from tackling one of the toughest boat races in the world

If it is true that adversity introduces man to himself, Michael Kane, 54, must know himself rather well. In a former life, Kane, who still goes by his childhood nickname, Spike, was a bike messenger, an outdoor instructor, a kayaker and a boatbuilder who loved to work with wood. On May 11, 2005, at the intersection of Spokane Street and 4th Avenue in South Seattle, the trajectory of that life was altered forever. Kane, on his Ducati, had a green light. The other guy in his SUV blew a red one. "I hit him on the side, slid under his car and was dragged along. My chest was crushed by the tank of the bike," Kane says in his Merseyside accent, without a hint of emotion.

He claims he never lost consciousness, but has no memory of what followed. His next recollection is lying in the ICU at Harbor View Medical Center with his sister from Scotland at his bedside. That was 11 days later, and he slowly had to fill in the gaps. Upon learning from doctors that spinal injuries and nerve damage at the first thoracic and the fifth cervical vertebrae would leave him paralyzed from the armpits down, his reply was: "OK doc, now what's the bad news?" Cynicism or not, it was the first step on the road to recovery.

Fast forward to June 2016, Point Hudson marina in Port Townsend, Washington. The place was chock-a-bloc full with raceboats, from standup paddleboards to oceangoing mono- and multihulls, all getting ready for the Race to Alaska (R2AK), a 750-mile affair across the Juan de Fuca Strait and through the Inside Passage to Ketchikan. Permitted modes of propulsion are wind and/or muscle power. Tied up on the first dock was *Alula*, an F27 Formula trimaran that looked like many others in this race, except that three wheelchairs were parked alongside. They belonged to Kane and his mates, Zac Tapeç from Hawaii, another quadriplegic who was injured in a diving accident, and Bruno Hansen from South Africa, an experienced sailor who had suffered a broken back, but had more mobility and strength, because he had use of his upper body.

Three paralyzed guys racing to Alaska? On a stock trimaran? In a competition with an attrition rate of nearly 60 per-

cent? Was it hubris or insanity? People were awed and incredulous. Adaptive sailors are not a novelty act, but they mostly race among themselves in special boats at special regattas. These guys wanted none of that, although they did agree to take along some embedded cameramen who were not allowed to help with sailing, but shot a stirring documentary, called *Hard Ship*.

Light winds and tough going early on put the team way behind, and things truly took a turn for the worse when Hansen, their strong guy, left the boat in Campbell River to go to New York and raise funds for a pair of exoskeletal bionic legs, so he might walk again. It was the low point of the journey, brought on by the unholy combination of an ambitious timetable, challenging conditions, conflicting schedules and misaligned commitments. It left *Alula*, Zac and Spike "crippled in more ways than one," as Kane explained out on camera.

SOLO SAILOR IN A WHEELCHAIR

"Sailing with crew, as I did in the R2AK, actually was a step up, because most of the time I singlehand *Alula*," Spike explains over a vegetarian lunch, before heading to Seattle's Sandpoint Sailing Center to take a Hobie Wave for a spin on Lake Washington.

"When I sail alone, I am very conservative. I work in slow motion and think ahead about every maneuver. Having relevant sailing experience



Kane sailing the custom yawl *Uwila*, 300 miles off Cape Blanco in the Pacific



Adaptive athlete: After sailing, Spike Kane relaxes on the beach of SAIL Sandpoint in Seattle, WA



Alula en route—the handicapped crew sails under gennaker only at the windy start of the R2AK

and knowledge of the venue, also is critical,” he adds, recounting some of the places he’s visited, including Juan de Fuca Strait — “the meanest stretch of water there is” — Tofino on the west coast of Vancouver Island, and of course, Desolation Sound.

Kane also loves to surf, prone or on a wave ski, and is only mildly concerned about the company of great white sharks that sometimes patrol the Southern California beaches he frequents. In fact, surfing is how he met Tapeç and Hansen. He also doesn’t mind going in the drink when flipping the Hobie, as had happened a few days before our meeting. In typical Spike fashion he makes it sound like it’s not a big deal, although it really is, because this is a man who can’t swim and inhabits a body that no longer regulates temperature or blood pressure the way it should. The condition is called Autonomic Dysreflexia and leads to potentially lethal hypertension when the body is under duress.

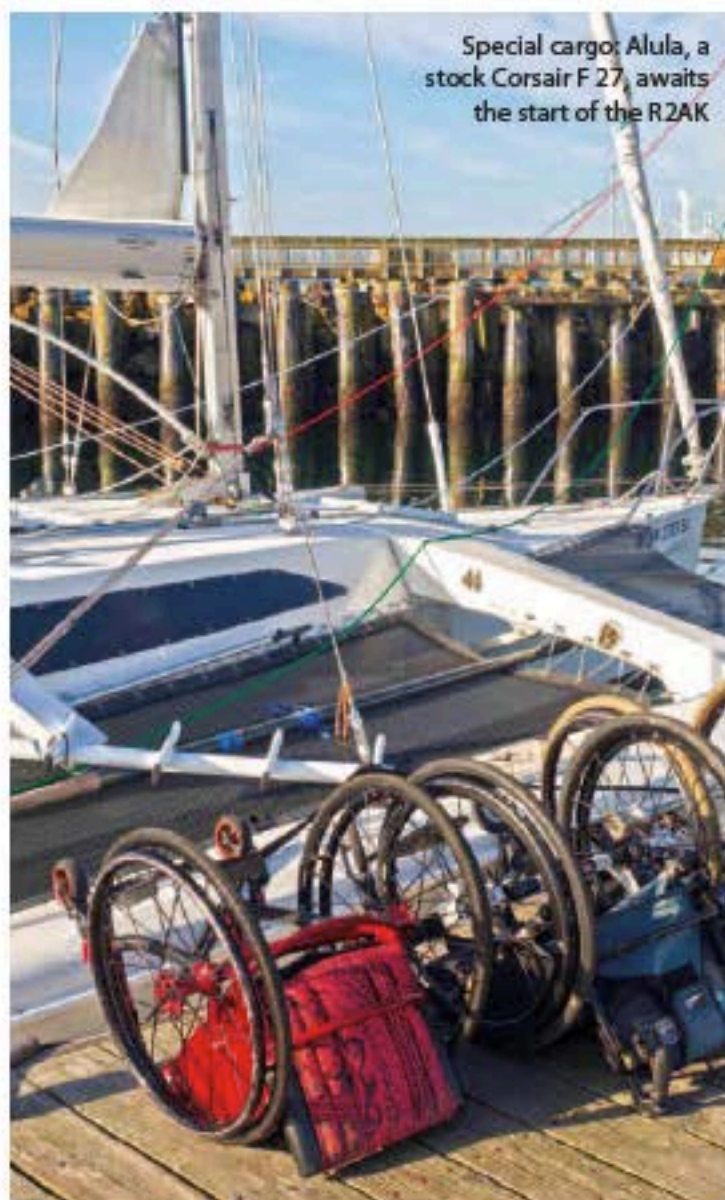
The motorcycle accident might have robbed Kane of his mobility, his house and his job as a boatbuilder, but it couldn’t take sailing away from him. In rehab he raced a radio-controlled 12-Meter yacht model “to keep my hands moving.” Now he goes cruising in the islands and along the rugged coast of British Columbia. “That’s my church,” he says in the video of the place where he got his start when he came to the United States in 1988 from the UK to teach at the YMCA Camp Orkila on Orcas Island. Soon he was running his own kayak business in Fisherman’s Bay on Lopez Island and sailing an engineless 22ft gaff sloop, thus becoming intimate with the challenging conditions in these waters. In the early 1990s he got a degree in marine carpentry from Seattle Community College, which landed

him at Dunato’s, a fine little boatyard on Lake Union that was founded by Croatian immigrants.

Kane is of Irish ancestry, but grew up in blue-collar in Liverpool, the seventh of eight children. The Leeds and Liverpool Canal was his test venue for rafts he fashioned from detritus, including old shipping crates or car roofs he sawed off wrecked vehicles that were left at the dump. His father, Thomas, worked the docks; his mother, Teresa, tended bar. They might not have been wealthy, but there was always love and laughter and a quartet of older sisters who took turns watching him. He also learned sailing from his younger brother, Stephen. Together they clandestinely checked out Mirror dinghies from the Scout base when no one was watching and capsized them for fun.

“To us, owning a sailboat was a pipe dream,” Spike says, which makes him especially proud to be the owner of a fast yacht like *Alula*. She’s stable, has a decent cockpit where he can prop himself up, and the large trampolines make it relatively easy to get around for someone who has to drag his body along with one arm. He installed a Leisure Furl for the main and two separate systems to trip and hoist the two anchors from the cockpit. Sure, there is the 10hp Yamaha outboard with hydraulic tilt, but beyond that, nothing out of the ordinary, really. It’s a setup that gives him a reasonable chance to deal with developing emergencies despite his limited mobility.

None of that, however, prepared Kane for the emergency of losing a crewmember. “Finishing the race with three disabled bodies was my primary goal. It was an epic failure for me as a skipper,” Kane would later lament. It was also an especially bitter pill given the controversy that



Special cargo: *Alula*, a stock Corsair F 27, awaits the start of the R2AK



resulted when he withheld the information about his crew's spinal injuries until filling out the medical questionnaire.

"I didn't want us to be the race's pet project, and I didn't want us to be judged by our injuries," he said when it came time to explain the move to an understandably rankled race director, Dan Evans, who's in charge of vetting race entrants based on their sailing resumes.

Now, being a man down with 600 miles to go, Kane couldn't find another adaptive sailor crazy or fit enough to take Hansen's spot. Worse yet, shackled to the dock in Campbell River, he had to inform race organizer Jake Beattie about *Alula's* predicament. His contrite message reached Beattie during the prize-giving ceremony in Ketchikan, where the first boats had already finished. Luckily, Morgan Tedrow, a computer engineer from Seattle and Mark Eastham, a retired neurosurgeon from the San Francisco Bay area, had raced on trimarans and were among those in attendance. After some deliberation both agreed to join *Alula*. Volunteer-

ing for another shift was like summiting Everest and going back down to Camp 2 to help two others to the peak. It spoke loudly to the character of the individuals and the spirit of the race.

PUTTING ALULA IN OVERDRIVE

Tedrow joined the boat first and fit right in. "I had some time left and there was no real reason not to do it. I had no boat [of my own], so I could leave right away," he remembers. Zac and Spike were ready and fired up to get another shot at Ketchikan. Despite being loaded down with wheelchairs and lots of gear and extra crew, they pushed harder, which boosted their daily mileage by a factor of three.

But that also took a toll on their bodies. At times the main cabin looked and smelled like a hospital ward, unusual for a boat, but a consequence of Kane and Tapeç having to clean and dress their pressure sores to prevent them from becoming infected. The Webasto heater Kane had installed was a godsend. It helped them stay warm, because their injured bodies need an external heat source to keep their core temperature up when it's cold. Another



Kicking back: Hansen (left) and Tapeç relax after the opening stage that finishes in Victoria, BC



Kane singlehanded a Hobie Wave on Lake Washington

delicate matter is bladder and bowel management on board, which has to happen on a schedule and involves a bag and an in-dwelling catheter, because the nerve damage prevents the body from telling the brain when it is time for a potty break.

In Bella Bella, the second of two waypoints in this race, Tedrow was replaced by Eastham and Andrew Lampard, a cameraman for CNN who grew up sailing in Victoria, BC, spelled Kevin Steen, who'd been with *Alula* for 10 days. Sailing with these two disabled men was an eye-opener for the newcomers, but especially for Eastham, who'd operated on patients like Kane and Tapeç to save their lives and repair their spinal cords to the extent possible. "I'm not an expert in rehab, so these guys proved how well [it] can help people advance," he says. "Watching them move about the boat with a cushion in tow, using arms only while dragging and tossing their legs in a well-practiced motion sequence was incredible."

But no R2AK is complete without a Murphy moment. Theirs came in Hecate Strait, when the rudder kicked up with *Alula* in full surf mode. Kane was fighting the tiller while Eastham was wrestling down the



Shaping spars—Kane was trained to be a wooden boatbuilder at Seattle Central College

screacher. Tapeç, on off-watch, got thrown about in his bunk when the boat rounded up: "There was yelling on deck and Spike came tumbling toward the cabin. I held on and reached for my survival knife, so I had it at hand for myself or someone who might need it." It took some doing, but together Eastham and Kane got the rudder issue worked out. Whew. "You adapt," Kane shrugged it off afterward. "If you

have able-bodied crew, you can push harder than normal. I'd never set the screacher with only three adaptive sailors on board."

THE FINAL CURTAIN

As they approached the finish, Ketchikan was ready. With people urging them on from shore, they put in every ounce of energy that was left in their battered bodies to coax *Alula* across a wind-



Kane has his most important survival tools, a PFD and waterproof VHF

less, leaden sea by oar power. It was excruciating. Kane then ordered Tapeç to take the helm to bring her home, ceding the skipper's privilege to his rookie crew: "I was never more proud of another person than I was of Zac finishing the R2AK," he later explained. "Ask someone to do something they can't possibly fathom, they must trust you 100 percent. No way I was going to let this guy down."

When *Alula* glided into port, a raucous crowd was waiting for them. After 16 days, 10 hours and 10 minutes they reached the finish as the 21st out of 44 starters. Officially they were disqualified because of the crew changes, but that was water under the bridge. When they rang the ceremonial bell at the dock, they signaled to themselves and the world why the word impossible is missing from their vocabulary. Embracing his mother, Jerie, and his sister Joanna at the dock was the emotional bookend to an adventure Tapeç might never have experienced if it wasn't for his injury and meeting Kane. Call it a collateral cure. "Life is pretty precious," is his last line in the video, "so make the most of it."

And captain Kane's summary? "We're ever only going to be racing ourselves," he said. "Our goal was to get from Victoria to Ketchikan [and] we pushed through some challenging conditions. But you know, we deserve to be here." **S**