

# PADDLERS with disabilities paddle people

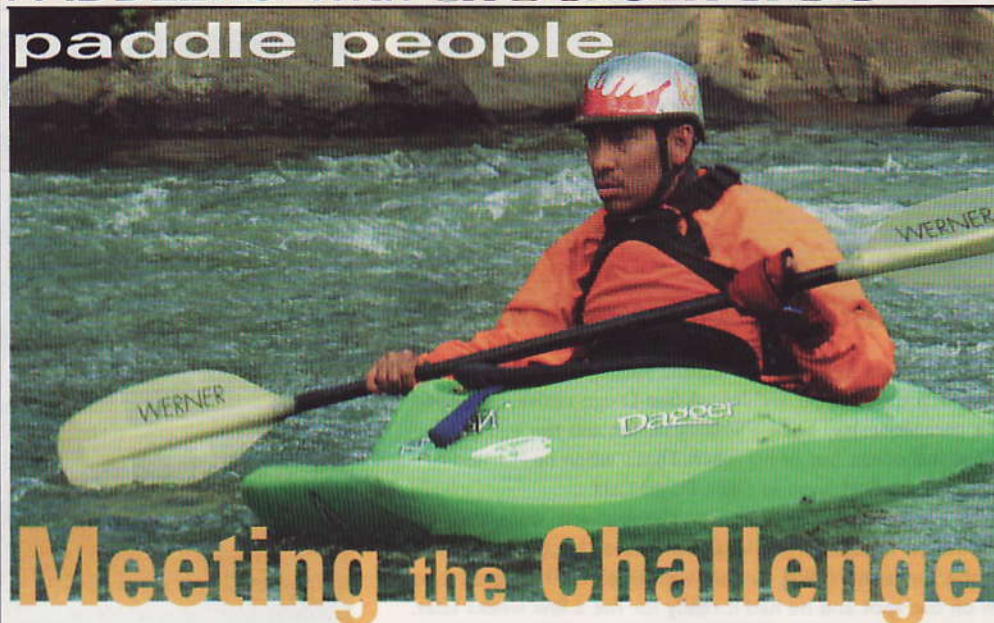


photo by Melissa Bearns

## Meeting the Challenge

Former extreme kayaker James Fredericks finds peace on the river after a paralyzing accident

by Melissa Bearns

**James** Fredericks once described himself to me as a "head first kind of guy," then grinned because that's how he broke his neck. In December 2000, he was surfing at Sunset Cliffs in San Diego, dove into water that was too shallow and hit a rock. He broke four cervical vertebrae and ended up partially paralyzed from the neck down.

The damage to his spinal cord didn't paralyze him 100 percent, so after more than a year of physical therapy and rehab, he gained partial movement in his arms and relearned to walk short distances with balance support.

Fast-forward to August 2003, three years after the accident.

The sun is already dropping toward the snowcapped Sisters Mountains near Bend, Ore., and a long shadow from the top of the irrigation canal falls over Fredericks as he wades up the eddy. He chooses each step carefully, his 5-foot-7-inch frame leaning on the body board floating in front of him to balance against each wave and twist of current. The sun glints off the red and silver sparkles of his helmet as he stands at the top of the eddy, his eyes focused intently on the line leading into the green wave, studying the angles, the current and the constantly surging flow. He's playing and practicing for paddling, strengthening his muscles, relearning balance and grace.

When I met Fredericks, 37, he didn't tell me that before the accident he was a top

whitewater kayaker, styling Class V and running 70-foot waterfalls. He doesn't talk about running 45-foot Celestial Falls on the White River in Oregon at flood stage or about taking first place in the Nike Masters Games in 1998 when it was held at Souse Hole on the Deschutes River near his home in Bend. He won't mention his first descents, his second descent of 67-foot Koosah Falls on the McKenzie River, or that he's been on the cover of magazines and paddling books. But if you ask, he might tell you about relearning to paddle. His dark brown eyes light up as he talks about his first kayak trip after the accident, Harpum Flats to Surf City on the Lower Deschutes in the summer of 2003. That summer he also ran the Middle White Salmon in Washington (BZ Corner to Husum Falls, a Class III-IV) and practiced flat spins on the Mom's Pies play stretch of Oregon's McKenzie.

"I have a really goal-oriented personality," Fredericks says. "I look for ways to be able to do something rather than reasons to avoid it. My first run on the river I thought, 'This is what it's like to be a beginner paddler all over again.'"

Fredericks says he used to be so physically active, if he missed even one day he'd feel guilty. So while watching a tape of ESPN's extreme sports competition "Survival of Fittest" from the year he won it, I had to ask, "Isn't it hard for you to watch this?"

"No," he replied. "I'm not a very emotional person. What happened, happened." End of conversation.

John Hise has been one of James' recent paddling partners. They worked together at Alder Creek Kayak Shop in Bend. He's seen Fredericks paddle cleanly through Class III

rapids and fished him out of the water after he flipped on a Class II. "Some people just don't understand," Hise says. "It might not be right for all people who've sustained such a serious injury. But in Fredericks' case, given his superb prior athletic abilities and his vast knowledge of paddlesports, plus his incredible determination, I'm more than willing to help him. He knows the risks, and his love for the river is stronger than what has him bound to a wheelchair."

Once an instinctive roller, Fredericks is trying to master it again. If he flips, his companions either T-rescue him or roll him up manually. So far he's only swum on one trip when he was boating with less experienced people. But even when the pros

Fredericks sporting a Cordura mitten on his left hand to help control his paddle.

are along, the added pressure and responsibility can make a trip with him stressful. Kim and

Christina Russell, ages 15 and 17, have been on two trips with him. Kim describes the moments when he's upside down as "nerve-racking." "You have so much concern for his well-being," Christina adds. "Every time he's flipped on trips, you just want to get him back up really fast."

He's as careful about picking his line as he is about picking his boating partners. "Mentally I'm not intimidated, but because I don't have as much muscular control over my lower body, it makes everything really tippy and unstable," he says. "I know and understand the dynamics of water and that affects my decision about how to position myself in the river. But at Wapinitia (on the Lower Deschutes) I was just amazed at how powerful the river was. I just couldn't compensate enough."

Fredericks has less control over his left arm than his right and can't open and close his hand well. His brother, Tom, works as a professional seamster, repairing kiteboarding kites when he's not paddling. He made a strap using Cordura and Velcro so James can attach his left hand to the paddle.

Some of the best times with Fredericks are when he's sitting in the eddy coaching less experienced paddlers. He helped Kim Russell learn a backdeck roll and friend Tim Widmer says it was Fredericks who first helped him learn a flat spin. "He's a big part of why I love paddling so much," says Widmer. "He's always been my mentor because he taught me it's about being on the river and loving the experience."

Whatever the difficulty, you'll still find him on the water, loving every minute of it. "James just kind of proves to all of us that there are no limits," says his brother, Tom. "He's shown me that if I hurt myself in some debilitating way, that life isn't over, that it just brings more challenges. He's out there proving it can be done."