Extreme Sports

Hawaiian-Style

By Romelle Broas Guittap

Speed. Height. Danger. These are some of the elements of extreme sports.

Snowboarding, skateboarding, and street luge are some popular extreme sports today. But have you ever heard of anything more extreme than sliding down the slopes of a volcano, belly side down, with your face only a few inches from the ground?

This is called hölua (hoh-LOO-(h)ah), or rock sledding. It has been a favorite pastime of the Hawaiians for more than a millennium. Not too many people are familiar with hölua. Most people often associate Hawaii with its more popular sport, surfing, which is one of the oldest continuously practiced sports around. You probably haven't heard of hölua because the Christian missionaries outlawed it in the 1800s. They declared it too dangerous. The last höiua-racing event was recorded in 1825.

The 2,000-year-old Hawaiian sport required the use of a specialized sled called a papahōlua (PAH-pah-hoh-LOO-(h)ah). The 12- to 14-foot-long sled was made of a hard, polished, red wood. Two long sticks were set 6 inches apart in the front, and 2-1/2 inches apart in the back. Ten or more pieces of wood tied horizontally across with coconut fiber held the sticks together. The sled, which looked like a narrow ladder, could weigh between 30 to 60 pounds. The heavier the sled, the faster the speed.

Sledding took place on volcano slopes, mountains, or hills. Sometimes, the hills were man-made. It took hundreds or thousands of workers to build a slide. First, the surface was packed with dirt and stones. Next, the path was layered with cut grass. Then kukui nut oil was spread on the grass to make it slippery. The steep slides could be up to a mile long.

Now imagine yourself high on the mountaintop gripping the long wooden sled upright by your sides. It'll probably stand more than two to three times your height. Imagine running with the heavy sled gripped in your hands. You'd have to be strong and fit to accomplish this. As you are running, you lean over, chest first, falling flat onto the sled. Your heart is racing as you speed down hundreds of yards to the bottom of the mountain at 50 to 70 miles per hour. The wind blinds you as you try to balance your sled over the bumpy course. A few inches from your face is the threat of the rocky terrain.
This type of amusement was only for a king or high-ranking chief. Hölua required skill to keep balanced and bravery to maneuver the entire length of the course without injury. During ancient times, the Hawaiians only wore a malo (MAH-loh), which is a cloth wrapped between the legs and then around the waist. When participants wore only a Hawaiian malo and no helmet, the sport was extremely dangerous. No wonder the Christian missionaries banned it!

Why did the Hawaiians play this sport?

Hölua was an important part of the Hawaiian culture. The Hawaiians enjoyed challenging each other and proving their athletic ability. But hōlua was not just a recreational sport. It served a spiritual purpose. Two thousand years ago, the Hawaiians sledged down the volcano slopes as self-sacrifice to honor Pele (PEH-leh), the goddess of fire. The Hawaiians risked their lives in an attempt to successfully ride the waves of Pele as part of a religious ritual.

Risking your life for fun or honor sounds crazy. To the Hawaiians, it was a way of life. Hölua definitely involves a great deal of danger. The sport requires breathtaking heights and life-threatening speeds. That's taking hōlua to extremes. So, when you watch a skateboarding, snowboarding, or street luge event, remember one of Hawaii's oldest extreme sports--hōlua.

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