

Visiting Crews Favored Again in Moloka'i Ho'e

By Jack Wyatt
Special to the Star-Bulletin

It has been a dozen years since a local club, other than Outrigger Canoe Club, has won the annual 40.8-mile Molokai-to-Oahu men's canoe race.

And, says Healani Canoe Club Coach Gary "Sword" Murakami, unless Hawaii's restrictive recruitment policies are changed and an "open division" is formed, an Island team may never again win the race.

The Bankoh Moloka'i Ho'e—the popular paddle from Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai to Waiiki's Fort DeRussy Beach—is set for Sunday beginning at 7:30 a.m. A record 53 teams are entered. Race favorites include the Illinois Brigade, Tahiti and Off Shore (Calif.). Last year those three finished the race first, second and third, respectively.

MURAKAMI EXPLAINED that to participate in the race is one thing but for a small local club to field a competitive team and expect to win against visiting handpicked crews is virtually impossible.

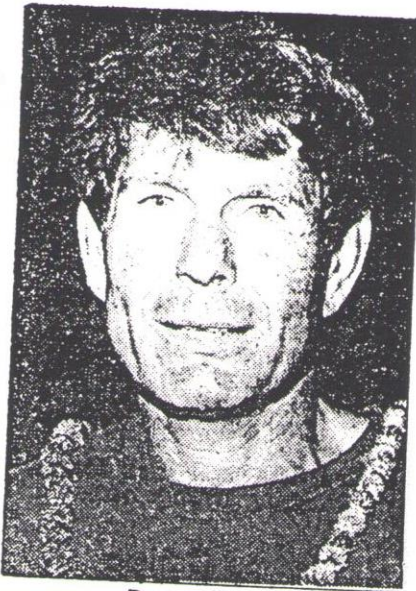
"Mainland clubs go to great lengths to recruit top paddlers," Murakami said, "and as a result they end up with crews of all-stars."

Local racing association rules restrict clubs, in the most part, from recruiting paddlers outside their respective organizations. "No way are we able to compete favorably against them," Murakami said of visiting crews.

Interestingly, defending champ Illinois Brigade has no paddlers from Illinois.

"Of our nine paddlers," Brigade coordinator Don Alberda said, "five or six are among the best marathon canoeists in the country. We're ready for a fast race."

Explained race official Fred Hemmings: "As the race stands now two sets of rules come into play—one for visiting teams and



Don Alberda

their freedom of paddler selection—and the other for Hawaii clubs with its crew-recruitment restrictions."

THE MOLOKA'I HO'E, says Hemmings, encourages international and Mainland competition but he adds that every club, including Hawaii's smallest, should have a chance at winning.

Visitor talent? Bruce Barton, 29, a key Illinois Brigade stroker, is a two-time Olympic kayaker (1976 and '80) and 12-time national marathon canoe champ.

"Placing first last year was indeed a thrill," the Michigan native said.

Barton's younger brother, Greg, is a member of the Off Shore crew. "Greg is experienced. He'll do well," Bruce Barton said. Indeed! Greg Barton, a U.S. Olympic kayaker at Los Angeles, placed third 1,000-meter race and became the first American kayaker in 12 years to medal.

FOR ITS RECENT Molokai women's race win, Off Shore recruited a pair of Swedish Olympic kayakers, including Agneta Andersson, winner of two gold

and a silver medal at Los Angeles. "Both girls proved super strong paddlers," Off Shore coach Billy Whitford said of his prize recruits.

Tahiti's first team represents the best handpicked crew of paddlers in French Polynesia and, according to Outrigger Canoe Club's Keone Downing, they're going to be awful tough to beat on Sunday.

Tahiti No. 1, one of eight Tahitian crews entered, have trained together for a year. This summer the paddlers won the 5,000-meter race at the World Sprints Championships; the 85-kilometer race around Moorea, Tahiti; and the Newport-to-Catalina Race off California.

MICHAEL TONGG, PRESIDENT of the umbrella Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association, explained that the HCRA has looked into the visiting crew situation for the past two years.

"I understand that to compete on an international level Hawaii clubs must be free to select the best paddlers regardless of club affiliation," he said, "but changes (in rules) are complicated and come slow."

Tongg promised to address the all-star problem once again.

Joan Malama, who heads the Oahu branch of the HCRA, notes that changes in local recruiting rules are difficult to get through because of Hawaii's many associations and clubs. "Getting everyone to agree as to what's best is a virtual impossibility," she said.

If seas are calm, say race experts, look for a visitor romp on Sunday.