

Molokai-Oahu canoe race: the Indy 500 of paddling

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When A.E. "Toots" Minvielle suggested the idea of a Molokai-to-Oahu canoe race, people thought he was crazy. He didn't even get the backing of the directors of his club.

But in 1952, the Aloha Week committee took him up on the idea, so Toots rounded up three entrants, including one from the powerful Waikiki Surf Club, and it was anchored away.

A canoe club from Molokai (Kukui O Lanikauala) won the inaugural race with a borrowed canoe and only one week of practice, upsetting heavy-favorite Waikiki Surf.

From that day on, the Molokai-to-Oahu long-distance canoe has burgeoned from that initial three-canoe all-Hawaii race to a normal 30-plus canoe international affair.

The race this year, one of the highlights of Aloha Week, will start at 7:30 Sunday morning from the Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai and end at Fort DeRussy in Waikiki. The winner should reach home base at around 1 or 1:30 p.m.

Most feel the race is the most heralded and hairy long-distance canoe race in the world.

"This race is what horse racing is to Kentucky, what car racing is to Indianapolis, what the marathon is to Boston," said the 75-year-old Minvielle, who suggested the race because regular canoe regattas were "nothing exciting."

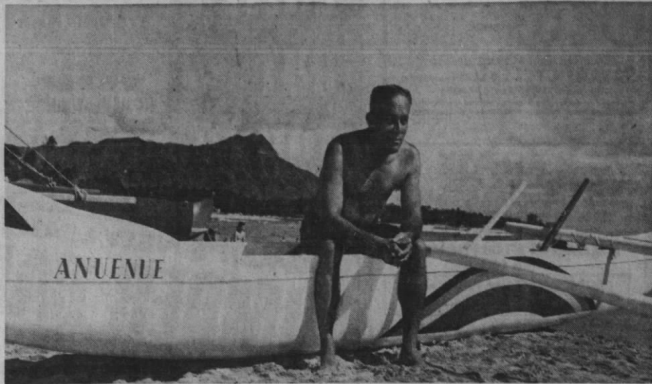
"It's man against the ocean and it's a great psychological satisfaction to cross the channel in a small canoe," said Minvielle, who still gets excited about the race although he's not involved in it anymore.

Chris Faria, who is being honored in this race for 15 years of service, said the race "is the most challenging of all canoe races because of the unpredictability of the Molokai Channel."

To reach such respectability, the race has had to survive many obstacles and, like a child growing through the different stages of life, has withstood the test of time.

But as it matured, the Molokai-to-Oahu race began to run into problems — such as a boycott one year, political involvement another — and growing pains, including seven course changes and a squabble over canoe design.

Toots, along with the late Vance Fawcett and their cohorts who fos-



Toots Minvielle, Molokai-to-Oahu race organizer, with canoe in the 1950s.

tered the idea of the race, never meant it to be that way. Then came the international competitors as first Tahiti, then Japan, then Canada decided to send entries. The race, in its juvenile stages, was a simple-but-fun affair across the channel, Waikiki Surf Club, which was embarrassed in the inaugural race, more than avenged that loss by dominating the event for years after its inception.

The club, behind long-time and widely acclaimed steersman Blue Makua Sr., ripped off six straight wins in races across the channel from 1958-63. The club still wins — but now only occasionally.

It was in 1963 also that the race first recognized the non-koan canoe, although fiberglass was used as early as 1960.

There was a time in 1973, however, when the future of the race dangled over the heads of the Aloha Week committee like the Sword of Damocles.

Aloha Week Inc. wanted to change the rules of the race to add, among other things, a six-paddler division — something the Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association didn't want. After efforts to resolve the rule

changes fell through, the HCRA boycotted the race, pulled out all its entrants, which provided most of the competition, and decided to hold its own race a week before the Aloha Week race.

Those problems, however, were resolved the following year, with the event returning to Aloha Week sponsorship.

The race went big-time in 1975 when the Tahitians entered the picture in grand fashion, overshadowing the accomplishment of the first women crews to cross the channel. Although they did not claim their fame during the Molokai-to-Oahu race, Healan and "Unipapa," a confederation of women paddlers from Waikiki Surf, Lanika, Kailua and Outrigger Canoe Clubs, deserved recognition.

The Tahitians brought their "awkward" stroke and their fast canoes, including one from Tautira paddled by the Maire Nui club which never had lost a race.

But it suffered its first setback here when Outrigger set a course record of 1:39:07, leaving second place to the South Pacific invaders. The Tahitians allied, claiming they let Outrigger pass early in the race

because they didn't know the route. They came back the next year knowing the route.

In 1976, the Tahitians broke the 24-year reign by Hawaii canoe clubs by paddling away with the race. They captured the first four places and left Hawaii's first finisher, Kailua, three miles behind the frontrunner, Te Oropapa.

The Tahitians' then-unusual style of straight-up, short-stroke paddling got overnight attention from local clubs, revolutionizing the paddling style in Hawaii. Most Hawaii clubs adopted the style, which takes less energy but is just as efficient since the Tahitian style uses less body movement and allows the canoe to remain stable and glide on top of the water. That's the theory, though the Molokai-to-Oahu race crosses a channel which provides more bounce than glide.

Many Hawaii paddlers discredited the Tahitian onslaught in 1978. Paddling is their way of life, said the Hawaii club members. The calm water conditions that year — and the rules committee, which allowed the winning Tahitian crew to use a sleek canoe — favored the Tahitians.

Politics also entered the controver-

sy in 1976 when then-Maui county councilman E. Loy Cluney wanted to move the race from Kaunakakai back to Hale O Lono, the starting point in previous years. He said the town was unable to handle the large crowds that disturb the residents.

But the paddlers pointed to the lack of sanitation facilities at Hale O Lono and the absence of water lines there in trying to keep the start at Kaunakakai. The paddlers won that site battle, but the race returned to Hale O Lono last year and will start there again Sunday. This year those sanitation facilities exist.

Last year a record 60 canoes entered the race and a different course — the sixth in the history of the race — was prescribed. This one went from Hale O Lono to Magic Island.

The rules were tighter, intending to curb the use of v-shape canoe designs which experts claim go faster. One of the victims of that canoe-design rule was Toots Minvielle himself, whose canoe was disqualified before the race.

Outrigger won the rubber match with Tahiti's Maire Nui as the Tahitians balked, saying Outrigger's canoe didn't meet the Hawaiian design specifications.

And a crew from Japan had all it could handle just to finish the grueling race, straggling in behind the pack.

This year, another crew among the 37 entries will be making its first appearance as a Canadian team called the Hyack Festival Club. Next year, there even may be a team from Australia.

There are stricter design rules this time and, according to Faria, "this is the first Molokai-to-Oahu race in which we have designated a Hawaiian design canoe as specified and measured."

This year's race from Hale O Lono Harbor to Fort DeRussy also marks another change in the race course. For one reason or another, the race has changed its start and finish line constantly. In the early years from 1952-55, the route went from Kawakui to Moana Hole (38.66 miles). Then from 1956-62, it went from Kawakui to Hilton Hawaiian Village (39.23 miles). And from 1963-72, it went from Hale O Lono to the Hawaiian Village, just about the same as this year's course (40.91 miles).

In 1973 when HCRA boycotted the Aloha Week race and held its own, the course traveled from Kaunakakai to Kaimana Beach (53.5 miles), while the Aloha Week race went from Hale O Lono to Moana Hole (40.31 miles).

In 1978, the course went from Kaunakakai to Magic Island, a distance of 55.85 miles. Last year, the race went from Hale O Lono to Magic Island (42 miles) but the course again was changed because of dredging at Magic Island.

Ah, yes, there is a record for each different course. . . . Auwe!

For the record, the fastest time recorded was Waikiki Surf's 5:29 in 1960. Of course, there are many asterisks next to that time in the record book because of the different courses, all with different distances. And free substitution was allowed then, something which now is restricted.

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