

Like shoveling dirt in quake

By CURTIS MURAYAMA

Advertiser Sports Writer

Imagine trying to shovel dirt during an earthquake.

Imagine doing it for six hours.

Although the motion is not the same, the effort is. And that's what most of the entrants who conquered the unpredictable Molokai Channel went through in Sunday's Molokai-to-Oahu race.

The Blazing Paddles, a group of natives from California, stunned everyone, including the Aloha Week awards committee garbed in ancient Hawaiian attire.

Local club Lanikai finished second.

Most of the Blazing Paddlers left Sunday night, hoping to make it back in time for classes at UCLA. Those classes were probably something like advanced crewing.

The 27th annual event was held in unusual conditions for the Channel — calm and clear. There have been

times when visibility was like that experienced by the Titanic.

The Channel usually determines the fate of most entrants — some finish, some don't. One year 12 crew entered, six finished. Once you're in it, there's no turning back.

Paddling is not easy in swells that can swallow the tiny six-man canoes. Some first-time paddlers get intimidated by the gargantuan waves.

Why do paddlers attempt to cross a channel that has the power to disintegrate canoes with one gigantic chomp?

"The challenge," said Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association official Jim Castro, who took part in the event in 1954.

"You're curious to find out what's it like to be out here. It's an experience you gotta experience. It's thrilling."

Hui Wa'a & Surfing Association official John Kapua also remembers his experience in the Molokai-to-

Oahu race.

"I was stupid," he said, shaking his head. "We had no substitutions then. Once was enough."

For some, it's just a matter of finishing. For others, the race is more a matter of competing . . . and winning.

The contrast was brightly painted by Outrigger, a perennial powerhouse in the race, and Halawa, the last club to finish in Sunday's 41-mile race.

"It's something we've been doing for 15 years and we excel in it," said Outrigger coach and paddler Tom Conner, whose team followed the wrong leader and finished fourth overall.

"It's a sport that you can put your total energy in . . . it's clean, you're in the outdoors. At first, I was terribly excited (he still is). I feel it's the most thrilling thing I've ever done."

Halawa, on the other hand, reached shore just as the Blazing Paddlers were on stage to be recognized by

Chris Faria, who was later honored for 15 years of canoe participation.

Although no one paid attention to Halawa except for a few close friends and the race's results committee members, who gave them a small smattering applause, the paddlers didn't care.

"It's a dream come true for us," said Halawa coach Tom Kekahuna. "Most of these guys have been together for just a couple months."

"We just came to finish," said one member. "And it's the best feeling in the world."

"We felt like we wanted to paddle back," added another while another joked that "we're in a class of our own."

The canoe race, which meshed like clockwork under the guidance of Chairman John D. Kaupiko Jr. and his staff of HCRA and Hui Wa'a workers, should continue to be what the Hawaii marathon is to running — simply a challenge to all, either against others or to himself.