

Paddlers 'Channel' Energies Towards Moloka'i Crossing

By Jack Wyatt

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The Kauai Channel is wider, the Alenuihaha Channel (between Hawaii and Maui) is said to be rougher, and the English Channel is far more famous. But to the nearly 400 Island and visiting paddlers competing in Sunday's Moloka'i Ho'e—the annual men's outrigger canoe race between Moloka'i and Oahu—the Kaiwi Channel, better known as the Moloka'i Channel—is the ultimate test of them all.

"This is the event that paddlers have been waiting all year for," said race official Kai'wa Meyer. More than 40 outrigger canoe crews, from Canada, Tahiti, California, Illinois and five Hawaiian Islands, have entered the 40.8-mile race, which begins at 7:30 a.m. from Moloka'i's Hale O Lono Harbor. The first canoe is expected to arrive at the Ft. DeRussy Beach finish about 1 p.m.

"This race has it all," Meyer added. Among the fleet is an Indian crew, aptly named Geronimo, from British Columbia; a crew of Olympic kayak paddlers and oarsmen from Southern California, a hand-picked team from Tahiti and a crew from ocean-less Illinois.

Over the past 31 years, various starting and finishing sites have been used, with course records varying with each distance. The current course record was set in 1981 by Offshore Canoe Club of California, when that crew of all-stars covered the 40.8 miles in five hours, 25 minutes and seven seconds. "They must have had perfect conditions," said race chairman Mel Kalahiki. Last year over the same course, Offshore repeated its win but arrived 43 minutes off its own record.

CALIFORNIA'S offshore and Haua canoe clubs and Tahiti's Ntutere Ihilani, among the visitors, and Outrigger, Hui Nalu,

Lanikai and Lokahi canoe clubs, among Island teams, are rated the crews to beat. Two divisions—traditional koa and fiberglass—are scored. Offshore, Imua, Hanalei (Kauai), Kai Opua (Hawaii), and Healani (Oahu) canoe clubs have covered all bases, entering canoes in each division.

Moloka'i Ho'e has come far since a few years ago when crews camped in tents on the beach and partied all night before the race. "Some crews were in no shape to launch their canoes let alone race across the channel," recalled paddler Matt Anderson. Canoes were launched through the rough Kawakui Beach surf. "Canoes were swamping even before the race began," Anderson said. Pre-race Moloka'i beach parties are still fondly remembered.

With Bank of Hawaii as the primary sponsor (\$12,500), plus cash donations in smaller amounts from other Island firms, the complexion of the Moloka'i Ho'e has changed. "The canoes are now launched at Hale O Lono Harbor where the water is calm," said Anderson. Most crews stay in Moloka'i hotels or in private homes the night before the race.

"In sponsoring the Moloka'i Ho'e," says Bank of Hawaii's Milton Holt, "we felt this was in tune with the community. Not only is it a healthy endeavor for Island paddlers but the race provides good competition for Pacific Rim countries as well."

To remind paddlers where the buck stops, the bank plans a large logo-decorated balloon marking the channel entrance to the Waikiki Beach finish.

Free entertainment at the Ft. DeRussy finish, featuring the Makaha Sons of Niihau, the Nuuanu Brothers, Chinky Mahoe & Hula Halau, Kealoha Kalama and Gabe Kila and the Nanakuli Sons, will keep the spectators entertained beginning at 11:30 a.m. The public is invited.