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Iron-man paddler Kalani Coito: "By the end, I was seeing three Diamond Heads."

# Of iron men and wooden canoes

By Andy Yamaguchi

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It was the summer of '73, and most everyone who knew Kalani Coito thought he was very brave, or very crazy, or both.

Coito and five other paddlers had decided to do the Molokai-to-Oahu canoe race "iron man" — that is, make the 40-mile voyage with six men and no substitutes.

Like two-way football players, iron-man Molokai crews were and are an endangered species. The race lasts a grueling 5½-7 hours, so Molokai Ho'e rules permit three reserve paddlers to follow in an escort boat, and unlimited substitutions.

But, well, Coito and Co. thought they'd be different.

"Sam Steamboat was the race chairman that year (for the Hui Wa'a and Surfing Association's version of the race), and he wanted to make it exciting," Coito said. "So he said, 'Let's go with six men.'

"All the clubs backed off, but we went ahead. During our training, a lot of people laughed at us. I thought, 'Hey, I'm gonna finish and have the last laugh.'

"That's what pulled me through. That, and a vision of this big steak I was going to have at the end."

Coito had his laugh, his steak and more. The



## molokai ho'e

Waikiki Beach Boys' crew of Coito, Samson Mokuahi, Bernie Ching, Leroy Ah Choy, Wayne Benson and Tommy Suisui finished a remarkable fourth place in 7 hours, 1 minute, 55 seconds.

They trailed the winner, Hanalei, by 23 minutes, 49 seconds.

No one has made an iron-man crossing of Kaiwi Channel since, according to Mel Kalahiki, executive chairman of Sunday's 32nd Molokai Ho'e Oahu.

Forty crews from Hawaii, Tahiti, Canada, California and Illinois are scheduled to leave Hale O Lono Harbor at 7:30 a.m. The winner is expected to reach Fort DeRussy Beach about 1 p.m.

Outrigger Canoe Club of Hawaii and Off Shore of Newport Beach, Calif., are among the favorites. Off Shore has won the last two races.

An iron-man crossing requires tremendous stamina — each man has to do about 21,000 strokes — but Coito said it was not too difficult.

"We didn't have too much trouble," said Coito, 34, assistant beach captain at the Royal Hawaiian. "It was my first Molokai race; it was really exciting.

"Guys on our escort boat would jump in the water with bags of water, honey and peaches. We'd grab 'em as we went by.

"On one handoff, this whale popped up. I remember the look on that guy's face; he was just about walking on the water. Leroy said, 'Hey, don't worry, it's only a whale.'

"You get hypnotized out there. Every motion of the water would cause glitters. After one hour, 45 minutes I was hypnotized. By the end, I was seeing three Diamond Heads.

"The amazing thing was that Leroy, our steersman, talked the whole way. I mean, really pushed. He even called people names just to keep our minds up. If he didn't do it, we would have fatigued real early and probably wouldn't have made it."

Would Coito do it again? "Oh, yeah, if I could get the people. I think it's easier with six people because the canoe doesn't lose momentum with changes.

"A lot of it is your mind. What your mind conceives, your body achieves."