

Guild is pushing Hawaii kayaks

By Cindy Luis

Star-Bulletin

Just as those sleek racing kayaks can speed down the Ala Wai Canal, Hawaii has quickly sped into the spotlight as a top area for talent in the sport.

It is Walter Guild's mission to keep it that way.

"We have come so into our own in terms of talent and recognition that we have been given our own region," said the regional representative for the U.S. Canoe/Kayak Team. "Just within the last year, this recognition has come. Previously, we were considered part of the western region."

That jump to becoming an independent came about after surprisingly strong showings by Hawaii paddlers at the Olympics and junior nationals. Traci Phillips and Mike Harbold competed in Seoul with Phillips the highest American female finisher; 17 juniors went back to North Carolina and came away with nearly 100 medals, almost 85 percent of the total awarded.

"They couldn't ignore us after that," said Guild, a former University of Hawaii football player and longtime Outrigger Canoe Club paddler. "The long-range plan now is to establish Hawaii as a center of excellence, just like San Diego and Colorado Springs.

"Billy Whitford, the only developmental coach in the U.S., is one of four national USCKT coaches. And he's here. Basically what the U.S. Olympic Committee is telling us is, 'Hawaii, you are our future.'"

The respect that the Molokai to Oahu outrigger canoe races has commanded from the international paddling community in the past few years also has helped Hawaii become designated as a canoe/kayak hub. This fits into the state's theme of becoming a sports center in the Pacific region, something being worked on by the Hawaii International Sports Foundation.

"We are supposed to become a sports center, something the governor was pushing when the America's Cup came up a few years ago," said Guild. "That ball seems to have dropped and it shouldn't. We're getting calls from athletes all over the world who want to train here and we have no facilities.

"Two years ago, the Keehi Lagoon project was being looked at



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Walter Guild: Trying to keep Hawaii atop kayak world.

but still nothing has been done, not even when we hosted the World Sprint Championships (last summer). There's always a lot of talk but what the people in charge have to realize is that this water sports facility is an investment in our kids' future as well as an investment in Hawaii's economy. We need vision, planning and follow through, not just talk."

Guild, who recently returned from the USCKT board of directors meeting, wants to continue the exposure for the sport, making people aware that "our success could disappear as quickly as it arrived. I see myself as sort of a messenger for the sport," he added. "Right now, the USCKT is funding our program and the national Olympic body is funding Billy's stay. But after his two years are up (this September), that funding dries up. We're looking to the public and private sectors for funding to keep this alive."

Among Guild's plans are fundraisers to create a budget to sustain the program from year to year. Another is to establish a center for the sport, to include outrigger canoes, and perhaps force a decision by the city on who should be the main users of the Ala Wai Boathouse.

"I guess what I don't understand is why the boathouse, which is next to water, has to accommodate activities that don't need to be near the water," Guild questioned. "Softball and dance classes can be held almost anywhere but you need water for kayaks."

Guild outlined his other goals:

■ Introduce high school students to the boats, get them familiar with the sport;

■ Develop a feeder program, introducing younger kids to surf skis that would help them adapt later to the flatwater kayak;

■ Have a preliminary program that continues to feed the elite Hawaii kayak/canoe team. This talent ultimately graduates to the U.S. senior teams.

■ Administratively, introduce events to the public. The first step has already been taken by the television exposure during the Steinlager Canoe/Kayak Championships last fall.

"We have had a gift given to our kids and Hawaii has stumbled into being the leader in this area," said Guild. "We are being recognized nationally and internationally. We're being told, 'Hey, you folks have something here.'"

"It will be a crime to let it die now."