

Outrigger opens in troubled waters

Top paddlers to miss first two regattas

By Stephen Tsai
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Weird as it might sound, the Outrigger Canoe Club actually has a few problems entering this regatta season.

These go beyond Outrigger's usual head-scratching dilemmas such as how to make more shelf space at its Diamond Head clubhouse for the increasingly large collection of koa trophies.

First, 15 of Outrigger's top male paddlers will miss the Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association's first two regattas, including today's season-opening Healani Regatta at Keahi Lagoon, while they compete in a meet in Australia.

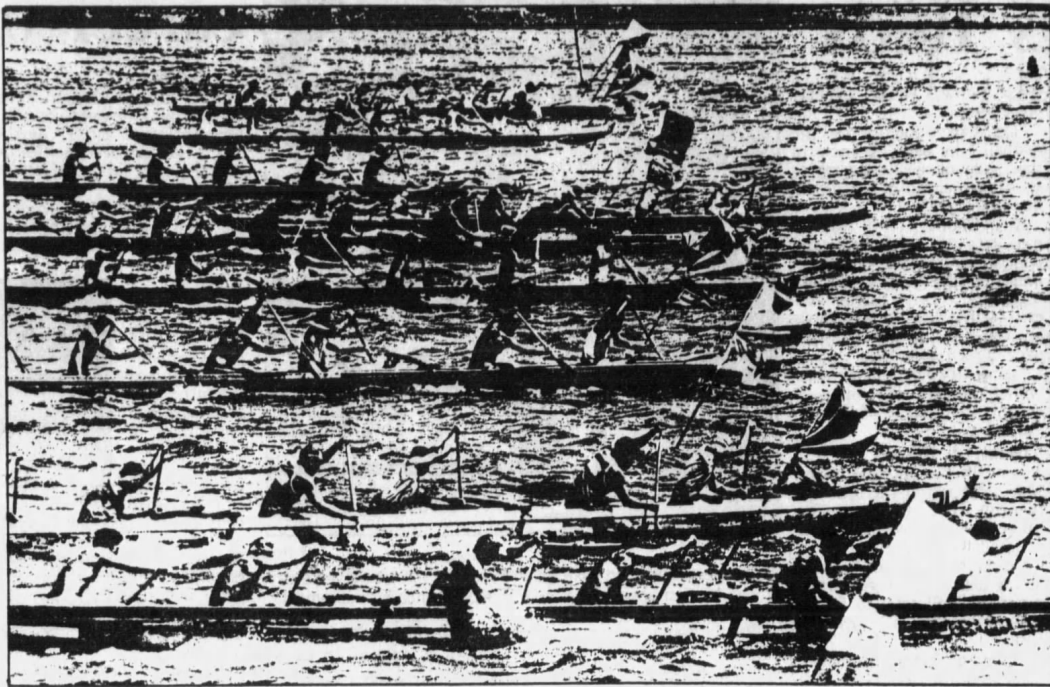
There's little guarantee that some of them will continue paddling this season. The word out is that six paddlers from Outrigger's winning Molokai-to-Oahu crew — Kainoa Downing, Keone Downing, Mark Rigg, Scott Rowles, Marc Haine and Tom Conner, who is arguably the top steersman in the state, are likely to retire following the Australia races.

Although first-year coach John Finney said "it's good to pass the baton to other guys every few years," he added, "we have ways of encouraging people to stay."

The women's program will lose six key paddlers, including four to maternity leave. "It must be the water," Finney mused.

What's more, the defending champion boys' 18 crew has yet to practice because of school commitments, and the club's two-year-old koa boat, Kaaloa — regarded as a speedboat among Exxon Valdez tankers — has a warp and is in dock.

All of which has left more



than a few dry eyes around the circuit.

"Outrigger is never going to be weak," Kailua coach Beanie Heen said.

"It's a smoke screen," Hui Nalu coach Kala Kukea said. "They have a lot of good people coming up."

"I've seen it before. They struggle at the beginning and — boom! — about midseason they start winning."

Indeed, Outrigger's uncanny knack of success in canoe regattas has induced both admiration and envy from opposing clubs.

With its elegant clubhouse and fleet of state-of-the-art practice canoes, Outrigger seemingly has an advantage over other clubs — accusations that have echoed nastily in Outrigger paddlers' sensitive

ears.

"As long as they think we beat them because we have more money, they're making our job easier," Outrigger coach Walter Guild said. "They are focusing in on an area that doesn't make the difference between winning and losing. The difference is in who can paddle the best, train the hardest or think the most. Every club has access to those things."

"We work hard. It's not like we have an engine on our boat and we're sitting there with our hair combed going by the other boats."

"... We started out with some old canoes that were no better or worse than anybody else's. We didn't look in a Sears catalog and send away for good canoes."

Guild said Outrigger crew

coaches sometimes use those accusations as motivation.

"We tell them, 'They don't think you're good paddlers or that you train hard. They think you win because somebody is writing you a check,'" Guild said.

In fact, Outrigger officials claim they have a hard time maintaining their program. Participation is limited to club members, and memberships are awarded by availability of space.

"They don't make exceptions for paddlers," Finney said. "You have to wait your turn (for a membership), whether you're a paddler or a retired army major."

Finney said he has been scrambling to fill out divisions and to remain competitive with the rest of the Big Four: Heal-

ani, Hui Nalu and Kailua.

Hui Nalu received a boost with the return of Nainoa Thompson, one of the top stokers in the state, from a two-year hiatus.

Kailua's enrollment of between 250 and 280 is the largest in the organization. Kailua should fare well in the upper divisions.

DIFFERENT STROKES: Hawaiian Warriors and Aruenuue will merge for the OHORA regatta season. ... Although there already are too many events and too few crews, Hui Wa'a, Oahu's fiberglass boat league, has decided to add a 32nd event, mixed masters. ... Hawaiian Outrigger of Hui Wa'a has perhaps the most intriguing koa boat, Wakalele, which took 13 years to complete. **Sonny Keaweahu** shaped the boat in 1975, and then put it in storage until last year, when the racing specifications changed enough to suit the boat. Keaweahu then altered the boat, extending it from 40 feet in length to 43'.