

SB 7/7/94

Canoe steering calls for skill — and luck

By Jack Wyatt

Special to the Star-Bulletin

Whether canoe paddling or board surfing, nothing beats riding that perfect wave.

Outrigger Canoe Club steersman Billy Philpotts snagged his ideal ocean swell while guiding his freshman men's crew to victory in Monday's Walter J. Macfarlane Regatta off Waikiki.

"I turned the seaward flag just seconds ahead of the pack," Philpotts said. "After catching the swell with a quarter-mile to go we surfed away for an easy win."

Outrigger topped upstart Lanikai by a comfortable 41 seconds in the one-mile race.

In big-wave regattas, gold medals go to crews that catch swells first and ride them the longest.

"It's the difference between winning the race and losing it," said Hui Nalu's coach, Sam "Steamboat" Mokuahi, of the wave-riding advantage.

"Outrigger's freshmen crew rode their swell all the way to the beach, while their competition, paddling in other lanes, couldn't find a ripple," he said.

The mark of a good canoe steersman is his or her ability to search out a wave and react quickly. Skill and a lot of luck play a part.

"The best steersmen have a feel for the ocean," said Hui Nalu's Kala Kukea. "Top surfers, winning paddleboard racers — all have that touch."

A steersman's role grows with the event's distance.

"In the race from Molokai to Oahu, the steersman's role is huge," Kukea said.

The Honolulu fire captain explained that the steersman must read the ocean and get the most out of what's available.

"Never allow the boat to slow. Make use of every ripple," he said.

In last fall's Bankoh Molokai Hoe, Hawaii's Tom Conner demonstrated the importance of the steersman.

Conner, the only Hawaii paddler on Faaa Canoe Club's otherwise all-Tahitian crew, guided the visitors to a first-place crossing in course-record time.

"Our crew was strong and well-prepared," said Faaa coach John Gabilou, "but it was Tom's ability to surf each wave that brought us in a winner."

While some steersmen prefer a mod-

a paddle designed specifically for steering.

It features a straight shaft with a deep, teardrop-shaped blade.

"The steering paddle must be made strong," said Coach Nappy Napoleon of Anuenue Canoe Club. "It takes great power to steer a crew-laden canoe in big surf over long distances."

Napoleon, who grew up paddling and surfing Waikiki waves, is considered one of Hawaii's most knowledgeable steersman.

"Steering is not a skill that one can learn quickly," Napoleon said. "It takes years of practice. It also takes a feel for the waves."

Jim Foti, 27, and his brother John, 31, of Lanikai Canoe Club have that touch.

"Big waves? At times, Lanikai has more surf than we can handle," said Jim Foti, who guided his club to a Macfarlane win in the senior men's race.

Said paddler John Foti: "Our lane wasn't all that good. There was hardly a bump."

But Lanikai found its wave, surging home a winner by topping Hui Nalu by 28 big seconds. Lanikai, a local favorite in the Molokai Hoe this fall, is unbeaten in senior racing over the past two seasons.

Outrigger's Kisi Haine, one of the few women steering Macfarlane races, put to rest the myth that only men can handle waves.

Outrigger women, with Haine at the helm, won both the sophomore and senior events on Monday.

"Outrigger wasn't at a disadvantage," said Honolulu boat designer Joe Quigg. "Kisi can steer a canoe better than most men."

The Macfarlane meet allows clubs the option of using either men or women at the helm.

"Women can catch and surf waves along with the best of men," Haine said. "Where women are lacking is paddling strength. That surfaces mostly in flat water."

Haine, a local volleyball standout, is a veteran of eight Molokai-to-Oahu women's races.

Is canoe steering a skill that can be learned by a paddling crewman?

"Growing up on the beach, surfing and paddling, definitely helps," said Michael Tongg, a Waikiki Surf Club steersman and the president of the Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association.

"But with practice and study, almost anyone, given time, should be able to