

# Canoe race is steeped in history

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During World War II, Waikiki Beach was lined with barbed-wire fencing and armed guards.

Thad Ekstrand, then 21, would dig under the fence, push his redwood balsa surfboard through, crawl under and hit the surf.

But once the fence came down, it didn't take long for Outrigger Canoe Club, then a modest two-story structure next to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, to organize a canoe race.

Now, 65 years later, the Walter J. Macfarlane Regatta — always on the Fourth of July — is one of the most well-known canoe races in Hawai'i, with open steersmen maneuvering six-man outrigger canoes through Waikiki's unpredictable surf.

It's the longest-running canoe-paddling event in the state.

And Outrigger Canoe Club, which won the regatta last year, is still the race's host club.

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"It's a great race," said Ekstrand, now 86, retired and living in Pacific Heights surrounded by memories of his paddling days. "It brings people together."

Ekstrand is the only surviving member of the first senior crew that raced in the inaugural regatta in 1943. (The other members were Jim Fernie, Tom O'Brien, Bob Bush, Tom Arnott and Duke Kahanamoku.)

Back then, the event only featured 13 events. The prestigious senior race was 4 miles long — not 1.5 miles like it is today. The canoes would launch from the Outrigger Canoe Club, circle around an offshore buoy and head back to the beach, racing parallel to the shore.

"It was so thrilling," said Ekstrand, who sat in the fourth seat in the canoe. "It was hard, though. Man, was it hard. ... But we cleaned up."

Ekstrand, who was born in Honolulu and grew up in McCully, had joined Outrigger in 1930 when he was 10. Ka-

Thad Ekstrand, pointing to some of his canoe memorabilia, competed in the inaugural Walter J. Macfarlane Regatta in 1943.

hanamoku, who was friends with Ekstrand's uncle, sponsored him to become a member.

"He really took care of us kids," said Ekstrand, who grew up surfing in Waikiki. "He was a super guy. ... He was a legend already."

Ekstrand, who played volleyball, wasn't much of a paddler then. But with intense coaching from Kahanamoku, he quickly became part of the club's undefeated crew for several years.

From the former Olympian, Ekstrand learned proper paddling technique and how to read waves.

"You didn't talk when Duke was in the canoe," he said, laughing. "He did all the talking."

He didn't stick with paddling. Eight years after that first regatta, he got married — to a woman he knew for only six weeks — and focused on his career, his family and fishing.

## AT A GLANCE

**Event:** 65th annual Walter J. Macfarlane Regatta

**When:** Races start at around 8 a.m. today

**Where:** Waikiki Beach

**Cost:** Free to watch

**Participants:** This annual regatta will feature canoe clubs in the O'ahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association (OHCRA). Paddlers range in age from tweens to seniors.

He and his wife, Pat, have been married for 56 years.

They still walk along Waikiki Beach every Sunday, before eating breakfast at the club, now near Kaimana Beach on Kalākaua Avenue.

The area has changed in the past 65 years, he'll say. The surf

**Sponsoring club:** Outrigger Canoe Club in Waikiki ([www.outriggercanoeclub.com](http://www.outriggercanoeclub.com))

**Conditions:** The National Weather Service is forecasting wave heights near the surf advisory of 8 feet, due to a reinforcing southwest swell expected to arrive midweek. If the waves are too big, the regatta may be canceled.

**Best viewing spots:** Canoe clubs will be setting up tents along the beach in front of the

breaks are packed. Hotels and high-rises litter the landscape. And more and more visitors flock to Waikiki than ever before.

But one thing remains unchanged: today's annual Fourth of July regatta, which still lures thousands of paddlers and spectators curious about one of

Sheraton Moana Surfrider and Outrigger Waikiki on the Beach hotels, so finding a quiet spot to watch may be tricky. Luckily for spectators, the canoes will be traveling toward shore — as opposed to parallel from it — making it easier to catch the action from anywhere along the beach.

**What to bring:** Binoculars, beach chairs or mats, water, sunscreen and snacks.

**For more information:** Visit [www.ohcra.com](http://www.ohcra.com)

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