

THE MAKING OF A RECORD 1975

by Tom Conner

"THE CANOE"

The date is August 1975. The place is Hilo Bay and our koa canoe LEILANI has just carried the Senior Men to victory in the State Championships. Since undergoing repairs and modifications in 1974, the LEILANI has been entered in thirteen senior races and has won eleven of them. Needless to say, the senior crew has grown very attached to the LEILANI.

Despite its impressive performance in senior races, the LEILANI has a string of misfortune in long distance racing. In 1966 she was almost demolished in the Molokai Channel. It continues . . . KONA 1974 — Shortly after the start a seat mysteriously breaks loose from its braces. MOLOKAI 1974 — Shortly after the start several long cracks appear in the bottom and we are continually bailing to keep her afloat. LANIKAI 1975 — The LEILANI handles very sluggishly and we finish third. When we disassemble her after the race we find that a cleat which holds the iako in place has broken loose from the hull.

With only one week remaining until the Kona race on Labor Day, there is very little time to repair the LEILANI. I have to decide whether to take a chance and use the LEILANI or to switch canoes in mid-season and use the KAKINA. As I ponder my decision, my thoughts turn to past Molokai races. I wonder if the KAKINA is strong enough. As I count back the years I suddenly realize that for seven straight years, 1967-1973, the KAKINA negotiated the Molokai Channel without a scratch. In 1967 she won; in 1968 she set a record in winning that still stands. My decision is made; with a little work and some tuning, the KAKINA can win again.

I hastily make two new iako's out of hau and we ship the KAKINA to Kona.

The girls' crew uses the KAKINA to race on Saturday and they finish second. That afternoon I take the seats out, reposition them, and try to find a balanced rig that will work for the Seniors. We experiment with

KAKINA for over an hour before I am satisfied that she is running properly. I am confident that the canoe will perform well on Sunday, but I can detect doubt among other members of the crew. All doubts are dispelled the next morning. The KAKINA leaves the starting line like a rocket and we win going away. Next MOLOKAI.

"THE PEOPLE"

I did not particularly relish the job of coaching the Molokai crew but I wanted to win this race so badly that I was willing to do just about anything to bring Outrigger across first. From the beginning there was controversy. The nine man crew is selected without any tryouts and instantly I have a dozen enemies. We train with only six men per night, no substitutions. As the workouts get longer the tempers get shorter. I could see the tension on everyone's faces but I couldn't deviate from the schedule; we have to get in condition. Every week brings a new crisis as the mental strain starts to take its toll. I start to wonder if it is all worth it. I wonder why I ever decided to be the coach. I was miserable; we were all miserable. Suddenly, without warning, the walls fall in on the Molokai effort. One of our strongest seniors wants to quit the crew. Emotionally and mentally we had just hit Death Valley. I call the whole crew together and we have a long talk. Somehow we manage to clear up the problem and the crew is back together again.

The talk got us motivated and every-

one got a huge mental lift. Everyone except me; I swore to myself that I would never coach again.

"THE RACE"

October 10th . . . It's the last week of training and the spirits are very high. I'm very satisfied with the crew's attitude. They are just as hungry as I am. The KAKINA is in top shape. Wayne Faulkner and I have spent countless hours in the garage giving her a new red finish and both manu's are gleaming. Not leaving anything to chance, I make five new seats and another new iako. Mark gets a few more dollars from the Board of Directors and I order a brand new racing canvas for KAKINA. Everything is ready, every last detail has been taken care of, all equipment and schedules have been checked and double-checked. Nothing can possibly go wrong.

October 17th . . . Brant and I miss our airplane to Molokai . . . ! Fortunately we have Jim Jones along with us and he volunteers to fly us to Molokai in his 1916 Sopwith Camel. Jim flies us low over the channel and Brant and I check out the conditions. We smile at each other; the trades are blowing strong and there is an ocean of whitecaps below us. The KAKINA, a real downhill racer, loves a following sea.

October 18th . . . We pick up the rest of the crew at Hoolehua Airport and ferry them to the Hotel Molokai where we have set up our headquarters. I don't say very much to the rest of the gang; everyone has his own thoughts and is mentally getting



Winning KAKINA crew sprints to record-breaking finish. Photo by Jack Titchen, used, courtesy Honolulu Star-Bulletin.

psyched up in his own way. I do, however, talk a lot with Mark. We've been through it all before, together, and he knows what's happening. For Mark, Freddy, and me, this race means a lot. In 1968 we set the record in the KAKINA and today we start to get that old feeling as we look at KAKINA perched on the beach and at the ocean outside Hale O Lono, which, by now, has whipped up to a near gale.

The water outside the harbor is so rough that we bring KAKINA back into the harbor after a short practice. Our starting crew is in the canoe and the banks of the harbor are lined with anxious paddlers from other clubs who are trying to get a glimpse of the competition. As we pass the wharf, the six of us bend the paddles a little harder and the KAKINA leaps forward. Brant and I smile at each other. We don't have to say anything to the rest of the crew; the KAKINA has just spoken.

October 19th . . . D-Day

Confidence . . . it's everywhere. Dawn breaks early at Hale O Lono and we have an outside lane, next to our stiffest competition, Waikiki Surf Club. There are twenty-nine canoes in the water but our attention is only on the MALIA, a very fast-starting canoe, almost as fast as the KAKINA.

When the gun sounds, KAKINA and MALIA blast off the line. It takes us about five minutes to shake free from Waikiki Surf and, after we pass, they drop quickly behind. I think to myself: this is going to be a lot easier than I thought.

"THE TAHITIANS"

I suddenly become aware of three other canoes that are quickly pulling away from us. I realize that they are the Tahitian entries and I am not too worried; as soon as we get into the rough water they will drop behind. *Tactical error Number One . . . Never underestimate the competition!*

It takes us a full two hours to catch the lead Tahitian canoe and another two hours to get where you could say we had a lead on them. All the while the KAKINA is doing what she is supposed to do: diving, planing, surfing, pushing her stubby bow towards Oahu. Still, the Tahitians keep dog-



First place *wahine* crew, June 11, 1948. Steersman, Johnny Hollinger; crew (l/r) Anita Berg (Whiting); Pat Honl; Helen Haxton (Bode); Pat Barker; Carol Muirhead (Makinney). Photo courtesy Anita Whiting.

ging us. It's time to do something different. Freddy is resting while Brant is steering the canoe; I am also resting. I call for the Boston Whaler and take Freddy with me. Freddy and I agree to stay in the canoe until we have placed the Tahitians behind us. We make the change and Fred goes to work. The rest of the crew gets inspired and we start to move again. When Fred and I get out, we have built up another hundred yards on the Tahitians.

"OAHU"

By the time we get off of Kahala, we have built up a comfortable lead of a half mile on the Tahitian crew. Our crew should be at ease now but we are still running scared. We know how fast the Tahitians can move in calm water and we continue to pour it on.

We have now been in a controlled sprint for five hours and fatigue is starting to set in. We start to make more frequent substitutions as we get near Diamond Head. Cline Mann and some of the others have been talking about a record. By this time my mind is so hazy that I can barely comprehend what they are saying. We make a change off Diamond Head; Paul gets out of the canoe and I get in. As we come around Diamond Head, spectator boats are everywhere. I think I hear people yelling my name but I don't look up. Marshall is behind me and I talk to him, saying nonsensical things. Except for Marshall, I have no idea who else is in the canoe. Suddenly, I see Brant in the water and he comes into five

seat. By now we are in front of the Club and I hear more familiar voices. All of us are trying to look sharp, but inside we are hurting. All I can think of is that the finish better happen pretty soon. We finally make the outside turn towards the finish line at the Moana Hotel and a blast of Manoa trades hits me in the face. This revives me somewhat and we start our final sprint to the beach. As luck would have it, we do not catch one wave. We hit the beach and pandemonium breaks loose. I hug everybody in the canoe; Timmy and I grab each other, we are both crying. When I regain my composure, a reporter starts asking a lot of questions and someone sticks a TV camera in my face. The questions continue and I make up some answers, trying my best to sound like John McKay. I take a long look around me and everything is beautiful . . . Maybe coaching is not so bad after all.

To Mark, Brant, Paul, Timmy, Fred, Mike, Marshall, Donny . . . Mahalo for making it all happen. Five hours, 39 minutes, seven seconds.

Wanted: Current addresses for three Outrigger members. The Business Office has no address for H. Jon Applegate, James Haynes III, and Virginia Hewitt. If you see or correspond with or know the whereabouts of any of this threesome, please ask them to get in touch with the OCC.
