

No One 'Course' of Action for Molokai Race

By Cindy Luis
Star-Bulletin Writer

THE courses plotted are as varied as the swells of the Kaiwi Channel the canoes are trying to conquer. There is only one rule: Take the lead however you can and hold it to the finish line.

From Charles Titcomb's "more northerly" route taken in winning the first Molokai-to-Oahu race in 1952 to last year's "head towards Diamond Head" course followed by Illinois Brigade's Serge Corbin, the steersmen of the record 53 teams entered in Sunday's 35th Bankoh Molokai Ho'e will seek out the path of least resistance over the 40.8 miles en route to the Ft. DeRussy finish line.

What worked last year won't necessarily work this year. The conditions change, the wind changes it could be a following sea or a raging one. No one knows for sure until setting off from Hale O Lono Sunday morning.

"Steersman Titcomb, whose strategy was questioned earlier when his two rivals chose a southerly direction, explained that he had been told the currents were better on that course. Asked if he had been given some advice which led to his masterful performance, he replied, "a little."—1952.

BABE Bell, who paddled the channel 28 straight years between 1958 and 1983, says "It depends on the crew you have. If I had a tough crew, I always took the shortest route. Just horse it straight across to Diamond Head.

"If you aren't in the lead and you see the leaders drifting north, you adjust and go with them."

Outrigger's Brant Ackerman, a veteran of channel crossings since 1970, always did research before steering across Kaiwi Channel.

"I did research about the current patterns, talked to oceanographers, fishermen and others I respected who know the area," said Ackerman, whose work commitments have made him miss the race for the second year in a row. "The race that stuck in my mind is 1975, when we beat the Tahitians and set a course record. The seas were moderate and we held a straight 'rumb line,' a curved course, point-to-point.

"But I've done both extremes, gone deep south and straight north. All courses have won."

"Blue Makua said they set the course straight to Diamond Head Waikiki Surf Club led all the way"—1960.

"Blue Makua outfoxed us," one of the members of the well-conditioned Lanikai crew said. "He



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THE SURVIVORS—Some members of Waikiki Surf Club's 1966 crew, which won what was considered the roughest Molokai-to-Oahu canoe race ever. They are, from left to right: Nick Beck, Val Ching, Wally Froiseth, Mike Tongg, Nappy Napoleon and Richard Henning.

couldn't shake us at both boats were even until we approached Koko Head. Makua then caught one current and the Lanikai crew another. That was it."—1961.

NAPPY Napoleon, embarking on an unprecedented 29th consecutive crossing, said, "We always went that way because that's the way Blue wanted to go." Napoleon, now coach of Anuenue, was a stroke and a steersman for Surf Club during

its winning streak from 1958-1963.

"We go the straight way now, but you always have to be thinking about making the adjustments."

"Of course, the course itself has changed over the years," said Joe Gilman, steersman for 1957 winner Kai Oni. "Then, when you started at Kawakiu, you always went high up to Makapuu since you started farther up. Now with the start at Hale O Lono, you start farther down."

"Al Lemes said he relied on the old theory—a straight line is the shortest distance between two points—and headed the Outrigger canoe straight for Koko Head.—1965.

"**T**HE currents will change but the general playing field is the same," said Outrigger's Fred Hemmings. "The challenge is always there because on any given day there is change in the conditions, the wind, the swells."

Hemmings has four victories in eight crossings with OCC: '67, '68, '75 and '84, the last when OCC's masters won their division and finished third overall.

"In '67, it was a calm as could be and we took a straight line," he said. "The conventional thinking was on a rougher day, with normal tradewinds, to angle and head for Makapuu. The incoming tide theory has you coming in close and catching the current that runs around Oahu.

"Now the general theory is to come straight, adjusting your course. It's better to stray too far north and be able to run back with the ocean than to go too far south and buck it all the way back."

"All down the line the weather played havoc with the canoes and their bearings. All I could do was follow the swell," said Lanikai steersman Paul Gay.—1974.

"**M**Y steering has changed in the sense that when I first came across (1971), I didn't have the experience," said Hui Nalu's Kala Kukea. "Now I'm more in tune with trying to surf across. It comes from the experience in the kayaking I've done.

"Surfing gives you some help but you've got to have a good boat to start with. And we're attacking the race differently. It's more like a long sprint; we used to train like it was a marathon."

"From what I've seen in recent years, technique is nothing," said Bell, now retired from paddling. "Technique and style is all right but it's the well-conditioned crew that's going to win.

"Offshore has proved it before. They paddle ugly, but what sense is looking good if you can't win."

And most clubs will say you can't win without a good steersman.

"The Mainland clubs have won on physical superiority, but if the channel is rough, the Hawaii clubs can show our skill," said Bell. "Our skill is in steering so our guys want it to be rough."