



The Brigade is back — headed by Mike Fries (right). Kurt Doberstein isn't competing in this year's race.

Advertiser photo by Greg Yamamoto

Different strokes seem to work for the Brigade's different folks

By Andy Yamaguchi
Advertiser Staff Writer

They're back — the guys with the funny name, funny paddles and funny paddling motion.

Nobody's laughing anymore.

The Illinois Brigade, a group of world-class canoeists from the Great Lakes region, will try to defend their title in Sunday's 35th Molokai Hoe, the men's Molokai-to-Oahu canoe race.

The race is a 40.8-mile endurance test from Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai's south shore to Fort DeRussy Beach at Waikiki.

"They stunned the paddling world," said Fred Hemmings, longtime local paddler and race organizer. "Who would think a bunch of kayakers from the Midwest could jump in a Hawaiian canoe and beat us at our own game?"

They did, despite not assembling as a team, or sitting in an outrigger canoe, or seeing salt water 'n' surf until eight days before the race.

None of them are from Illinois; the name stuck when a Chicago airline pilot first assembled the Brigade five years ago.

What they are, are nine finely tuned athletes who between them have won 47 national championships in U.S.

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tion.

One of them, Bruce Barton of Homer, Mich., made the U.S. Olympic team in 1976 and '80 in one-man kayaks, reaching the semifinals in '76.

Is that all it takes? Does the Brigade's conditioning and sheer paddling skill cancel, just like that, decades of experience accrued on Kaiwi Channel by Hawaii's crews?

If the channel is relatively calm and blue-water seamanship is not a factor, the answer is yes.

Last year there was nothing to surf, just two- to three-foot chop, Brigade conditions.

"We don't want it too exciting," said Brigade stroke (lead paddler) Mike Fries, an emergency room doctor from Rochester, N.Y. "We want a nice boring environment."

To them, the Molokai race is a sprint. They're used to paddling for as long as eight hours at a stretch in their two-man, 18½-foot craft used in marathon canoeing. For the Molokai

three relief paddlers: a typical rotation is 30 minutes in the canoe, 15 minutes at rest.

The Brigade uses paddles with a straight, eight-inch blade — considerably narrower than the oval or teardrop-shaped paddles predominant in Hawaii and Tahiti.

There is also a discernible difference in their paddling mechanics. Hawaii paddlers generally bend forward at the waist, sink their paddle spoons and take a long stroke; the Brigade appears to use a shorter, quicker stroke incorporating rotation of the shoulders.

"Seems real awkward — they lean out of the boat a lot," said Healani's Gary "Sword" Murakami, whose club has been training alongside the Brigade on the Ala Wai Canal.

But Fries calls outrigger paddling "fundamentally very, very much like marathon canoeing. That's why we do so well."

The Brigade has three new paddlers and Fries said they

But he says they aren't ringers.

"We're all real-life people here," he said. An engineer. A carpenter. A supervisor in a paper mill. Barton works on his family's hog farm, which sells 16,000 head each year.

But put them in a canoe . . .

"Yeah, it hurts to be beat at your own game," Hemmings said. "But look at the history of the race. The Tahitians beat us (in 1976) and it's, 'Oh, Christ, we'd better do something.' So we got better and beat them. Same thing with Off Shore (a California crew that won in '78, '81 and '82).

"Getting beat every now and then is good for us. Makes us come back that much stronger."

Murakami isn't so sure. Unless Hawaii's canoe leadership lifts a ban on "all-star" local crews, he says, "we're never going to win Molokai again."

MOLOKAI NOTES: There is no clear-cut favorite, but a general consensus includes Illinois Brigade: CPP of Tahiti, which won the 30-mile Catalina Race off California; Off Shore and Imua of southern California; and Outrigger of Honolulu. . . . Nappy Napoleon of Anuenue Canoe Club will paddle in his 29th Molokai race, the most of any active paddler. The record is 30 crossings, by Richard "Babe" Bell. . . . Napoleon, 45, will paddle alongside his twin sons, Aaron and Darryn. . . . Wally Froiseth of Waikiki Surf Club was honored for his contributions to canoeing at a pre-race reception Wednesday at the Waikiki Aquarium. There are 53 entries, a record number. Thirty-six are from Hawaii, one from Tahiti.