

Different strokes set for Molokai Hoe



Advertiser photo by Charles Okamura

Lass, 61, the second-oldest paddler in this Sunday's Molokai Hoe, holds his 4½-month-old son, Canon. Lass will compete for the Outrigger Masters in the 40.8-mile race.

By Stephen Tsai
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Which comes first: the canoe lesson or the canoe race?

The former is the answer — barely — in regards to Sunday's Bankoh Molokai Hoe, the 40.8-mile Molokai-to-Oahu men's outrigger canoe race.

Of the 49 crews entered, at least five will be racing for the first time in outrigger canoes.

One of those rookie crews, the Royal Canoe Club of England, held its first full practice last weekend. The Atlantic Division, with eight of its nine members from the East Coast, paddled together for the first time yesterday. There also are two teams from Canada.

Of the newcomers, the Arkansas Outrigger Club appears to have the most experience. The crew bought a boat from Oahu's Outrigger Canoe Club in April, and has been practicing weekly on the Arkansas River.

But team member Bill Sowell said, "It's not like we have an opportunity to go out and race against other outrigger canoes in Arkansas."

England? East Coast? Arkansas? What is this, scab paddling?

"Actually, it shows how popular Polynesian canoe racing has become," said State Rep. Fred Hemmings, an Outrigger Canoe Club member. "The sport has gained in popularity for a number of years in Hawaii. The next logical step is for it to go international."

Perhaps the biggest boost to



Bob Bennett
"Balance is a problem."

the sport came two years ago when the Illinois Brigade earned an astonishing victory in the Molokai race.

"Those are the guys we have competed against in national marathon canoe races," Sowell said. "We felt if they could come over here and do well, we'd stand a pretty good chance of doing well."

Illinois Brigade also influenced Atlantic Division. Three of Atlantic Division's paddlers were on the Illinois Brigade team a year ago and, this year, they decided to form their own crew. Progress has been rapid.

"This team is coming together," coach Bob Bennett said.



Bill Sowell
"Timing is everything."

"We can make the canoe go in a straight line. We can put our paddles in the water, hopefully, at the same time."

The Royal Canoe Club became involved after its coach, Chris Harrod, saw a television documentary on outrigger canoes. Harrod came to Hawaii six weeks ago to borrow a boat, then assembled a team that is composed of five paddlers from England and four from California.

"We're here to enjoy ourselves," Harrod said. "We have no illusions of winning."

That's not to say the newcomers lack talent. All are made up of successful marathon paddlers from kayaking and two-man ca-

noe racing. But the difference between racing small boats and six-seat outrigger canoes is noticeable.

"Our problem was getting six people who are not used to paddling together on a six-man team to work together," Sowell said. "Canoeing is the type of sport where timing is everything. You have to have everybody paddling at the same pace. That's the difference between winning and losing."

Said Bennett: "Balance is a problem. We were playing with the boat (in practice), learning how to bring the ama out of the water. We were getting pretty good at it, but then we bounce too far and learned how to hull."

The biggest adjustment is substituting paddlers. When done correctly, the changes are poetry in slow motion. A substitute jumps from the escort boat into the water ahead of the canoe. The substitute then dives into the boat while the paddler he replaces jumps out — the sequence taking a matter of seconds.

"We've still got bruises on our legs from learning how to do it," Arkansas' Steve Lynn said.

Said Bennett: "Getting in and out of the boat is a unique experience. We told the guys to practice by going to their local swimming pools and try to get out without the ladder. And to pretend the pool is going 8 mph. That's the experience they've gotten, jumping in and out of a pool."