

Molokai Hoe losing its koa 56 109

By Cindy Luis

Star-Bulletin writer

Ho'ola.

Lanakila Mau o Ka Lokahi.

Kai Holokai.

Nai'a.

The four survivors of a once all-koa canoe race across the Molokai channel.

Even the venerable 53-year-old *Malia*, the winningest canoe in the 35-year history of the Kaiwi Channel challenge, is sitting out for the first time ever. Sunday's 36th Bankoh Molokai Hoe will see only a quartet of koa canoes out of a fleet of 49 on the starting line off Molokai's Hale o Lono Harbor.

It's tradition versus technology . . . and the trees have lost out to fiberglass.

"It's real sad," said Kailua Canoe Club's Pat Erwin, who will be making his 13th crossing. "I would like to race in our koa but the

crew is pretty competitive and is more comfortable with the glass. The *Lanakila Mau o Ka Lokahi* ('Victory through Harmony and Unity') is a great boat but we haven't had enough time to experiment working together with it."

The *Lanakila*, nearly destroyed last year by a freak wave off Diamond Head, was rebuilt by master canoe builder Wright Bowman to the specifications of the Hawaiian Racing Class mold now used by fiberglass canoe makers. Commonly referred to as a 'rocket boat,' the Racer is more streamlined than the *malia* mold used previously.

Still Kailua's second team will be using its koa. Defending champion Outrigger shipped four canoes to Molokai—one for each of its three teams, another lent to a Tahitian team. All four are fiberglass.

"What has happened is the race

has gotten so competitive that no one wants the deciding factor to be equipment," said Outrigger's Walter Guild. "Every koa is different but the fiberglass boats all have the same specs. By taking away the variable of equipment, winning comes down to who has the best athletes, who can move the hull with the least amount of effort and the greatest efficiency."

Guild, also a canoe builder, said he would have liked to use OCC's koas, the redesigned 50-year-old *Leilani* or the rocket *Kaoloa*, but won't for several reasons. Logistics and cost of shipping boats and possible damage to the koas, each worth \$10,000-plus, are some. Another is psychological.

"Last year, we were running sixth when we got to La'au Point (30 minutes into the race)," he said.

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"I know if we had been in the koa that everyone would have said it was the canoe, saying we had made the wrong choice because we did have the two to choose from on the beach.

"But by being sixth in the glass, we knew that the canoes ahead of us were also glass and that to win, we would just have to paddle harder."

That's an oversimplification, admits Guild. "Winning takes a lot of luck, a good course and a good combination of paddlers working together," he said. "But the standardized glass canoe has made it a race between athletes, not boats."

Outrigger is going for a record-tying 12th Molokai victory. Waikiki Surf Club holds the mark, all dozen wins coming in the *Malia*.

Nappy Napoleon was a member of 10 of those championship Surf Club crews. His unprecedented 30th crossing Sunday will be in the *Ho'ola*.

"I believe in the canoe," said the 46-year-old coach of Anuenue. "*Ho'ola* is a good koa but it's a good boat, period. We've done good in her this season, not just good for a koa boat but good overall.

"We're not using the koa just so we can win the division. (Distance canoe races have categories for koa and fiberglass.) I have always raced (the channel) in koa. If I ever win again, it will be in a koa."

The first time fiberglass canoes were used in the Molokai Hoe was in 1960, unofficially by two mainland crews. Three years later, fiberglass canoes were allowed to officially enter; in 1976, Te Oro Paa became the first non-Hawaii team to win and the first to win overall honors using a glass canoe.

Smooth sailing the forecast

Conditions for Sunday's 40.8-mile Bankoh Molokai Hoe race are predicted as smooth with small swells.

A record finish in the race, which starts off Molokai's Hale o Lono Harbor, would have the first canoe crossing the Ft. DeRussy finish line at 12:48 p.m.

■ Besides Kailua and Anuenue, California's Imua No. 2 and Hui Lanakila will be racing koa canoes.

■ Life magazine will be covering the race.

— Cindy Luis

"You could see it coming, the trend away from koa," said Healani's Gary Murakami, a veteran of 22 races. "When it was a local race, it was easy to restrict it to just koa. But it's become international and fiberglass canoes have made it so. You don't go around lending your koa boat. And anyone who has ever lost a koa canoe knows what I mean."

Murakami was the steersman for Kailua Hawaiian Civic Club when their *Uwila* was lost in heavy seas during the 1966 race.

"Koa canoes are delicacies," said Toots Minville, considered the originator of the Molokai to Oahu race. "They have to be handled delicately. They are not easily replaced.

"It is sad. The tradition of racing the koa may be lost but not the tradition of the race itself. The canoe may not be koa but the tradition behind it is."

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NOTES: Besides Kailua and Anuenue, California's Imua No. 2 and Hui Lanakila will be racing koa canoes . . . Conditions for Sunday's race are predicted as smooth with small swells. A record finish would have the first canoe crossing the Ft. DeRussy finish line at 12:48 p.m. . . . Life magazine will be covering the race . . . Jerome Kalama, not Malama, was honored by officials during Wednesday's reception at the Waikiki Aquarium.