

Isle File

Paddlers compete in 'Super Bowl'

Sunday's 37th annual Molokai-to-Oahu canoe race promises to be the biggest and best ever, say race officials.

A record 60 crews from such well-known canoe hot spots as Hawaii, California and Tahiti and less well-known sites such as Virginia, New York, Canada and England will race the 40.8 miles from Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai to Fort DeRussy Beach on Oahu. The race starts at 7:30 a.m.

Race officials, who are involved in all aspects of Hawaii's canoeing ohana, are looking forward to a day when their sport is a part of the Olympics. And, they feel, this race is the rallying point for the sport, a race that brings together members of the sport who might otherwise be too fragmented.

"This is the Super Bowl of paddling," said Michael Tongg, president of the Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association. "Everyone wants to win Molokai. You're the champion of the world."

Oahu's Outrigger Canoe Club is the defending champion. OCC has won six of the last nine races and holds the record of 5 hours, 18 minutes, 19 seconds, which it set in 1984.

Among the paddlers this year is California's Norm Bellingham, who won a gold medal in the K-2 event at the Seoul Olympics. Bellingham paddles for the Imua Canoe Club.

Also, the coach of Virginia's Mid Atlantic Canoe Club, Frank Havens, won a gold medal in the C-1 event in the 1952 Olympics.

The first canoe is expected to finish around 1 p.m.

KCCN Radio will have periodic reports on the progress of the race.