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## **PADDLING**

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Outrigger to face tougher challenge

Most crews stacked with top paddlers

By Dayton Morinaga, ADVERTISER STAFF WRITER

Predicting a winner for Sunday's Bankoh/Hinano **Molokai Hoe** is like predicting the conditions for the Kaiwi Channel.

Some have an idea, but nobody really knows.

"There are about 10 teams - or maybe even more - with a legitimate shot," said Kala Judd, coach of the defending champion Outrigger Canoe Club. "We're not going to discount anybody."

With that in mind, here are the leading contenders:

Outrigger, which paddled to an improbable victory last year. To be sure, seven of the nine paddlers from last year's championship crew are back.

Lanikai, the 1995 and '96 champion, which defeated a strong local field to win the Skippy Kamakawiwoole Canoe Race three weeks ago.

Kai Opuu, which won the prestigious Queen Liliuokalani Race last month and finished a narrow second to Lanikai at the Skippy race.

Team New Zealand, which placed third in the **Molokai Hoe** last year. The crew is comprised of six Olympic-caliber paddlers from New Zealand, local paddlers Bo Eastbrooks and Raven Aipa, and local steersman Todd Bradley.

"We have a strong crew," said Bradley, a former Outrigger steersman. "We just need to work on the little things that hurt us last year."

Tepaetia, which is from Rangiroa and is considered the top entry from the Tahitian Islands.

Hawaii Canoe and Kayak Team, which is a combination of several former Olympic-caliber kayakers from Hawaii (Wyatt Jones, Heath Hemmings, Chris Ball) and Australia.

"If we go on a straight line with, say, the Kiwi guys, we won't beat them," said HCKT's Jake Mizuno. "But if there's some swell and some wind, we'll know exactly what we have to do to get around some of the stronger teams."

Waikiki Beach Boys and Waikiki Surf Club, local clubs which have finished near the top of every race this season.

Mooloolaba of Australia and Team Hawaii, all-star masters crews (paddlers over 35) which should push the younger teams.

In addition, several teams with solid reputations outside of Hawaii will make their debuts. Japan, for example, will enter a team of its top national lifeguards and will be steered by Aaron Napoleon, son of legendary canoe paddler Nappy Napoleon.

Also, Bend Oregon Outrigger will challenge the Kaiwi Channel for the first time after five years of training.

"We know this race is huge," said Bend coach Meg Chun. "That's why we wanted to wait until we had years and years of training before we even gave it a shot."

In any case, the winners - like the conditions - will not be revealed until Sunday.

"We believe we have an outside shot," said Mizuno. "But so do a lot of other teams. That's what makes this race so great."