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[CANOE PADDLING]



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With one of the twin islands behind, Lanikai's crew cruises during a light workout in preparation for the Molokai-to-Oahu race.

Lanikai returns Pirae's favor for Molokai Hoe

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Imagine you are a defending champion and record holding Indy Car driver about to compete in the "Big Daddy" of your profession, the Indianapolis 500. Would you let your stiffest competitor freely pick one of your very best racecars to compete against you?

Well, the racecourse is not an oval, nor is it on land, but this is essentially what the Lanikai Canoe Club has done entering Sunday's 50th Anniversary Bank of Hawaii Hinano Tahiti Molokai Hoe.

Lanikai is the defending titleholder and a four-time winner at the Molokai Hoe, considered the world championship of men's outrigger canoe racing. Last year, Lanikai crossed the 41-mile course from Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai to the beach fronting the Hilton Hawaiian Village in a record four hours, 50 minutes, 31 seconds, breaking the record it set in 1995.

Recently, the Windward Oahu club purchased a new Mirage canoe, considered the best available. And last week, it allowed Pirae -- the top club in Tahiti the last several years and one of the strongest contenders in the Molokai Hoe after placing fourth in 2000 -- to borrow it to race Sunday.

Molokai to Oahu

What: 50th Anniversary Bank of Hawaii Hinano Tahiti Molokai Hoe

When: Sunday. Starts at 7:30 a.m., with first finisher expected around 12:30 p.m.

Where: 41 miles across the Kaiwi Channel from Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, to Hilton Hawaiian Village, Waikiki.

Who: 100-plus teams from Hawaii, the mainland, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, New Zealand and Tahiti expected to compete.

How: Nine-person crews with six in the canoe at one time, rotations made through open-ocean changes. Divisions include fiberglass and koa, with open and masters classifications for both.

"It could be taken that way," said Lanikai's Ikaika Harbottle, when asked if this was a risky move. "The equipment makes a difference, but it comes down to the paddlers. We want to have a race where everybody has good equipment, and then see who is the true winner."

So you know its members haven't suddenly gone crazy, Lanikai will be racing in an identical Mirage model. It's a little older, but it's the canoe the crew used to set the record last year.

Also, Lanikai loaning its new Mirage to Pirae is actually payback. In a move unprecedented before June, Pirae's members let Lanikai borrow a canoe of its choice from their fleet to compete in the He'e Moana race in Tahiti.

Lanikai crewmembers rigged and outfitted both Mirages identically, at the same time, before Pirae made its choice.

"It's honorable, it's up and up," steersman Jim Foti said. "We would have been stoked to paddle in a new canoe. But the one we won in last year has a little mana for us, and I think they knew that in choosing the new one."

Seven of nine paddlers are back from last year's record-setting championship crew. Besides Harbottle and Jim Foti, they are: Kai Bartlett, Kekoa Bruhn, Jim's brother John Foti, Mike Judd and Mike Pedersen. Joining them in the nine-man rotation are veteran Kalani Irvine, who took last year off, and newcomer Lucien Ouellette.

"Everybody is at least as good as they were last year," Jim Foti said. "I don't think we're any slower than last year. If somebody beats us, it's because they got faster."

Other than Pirae, the strong contenders expected among the 100-plus teams set to compete are the runner-up the last two years, Team New Zealand/Hawaii, as well as Kai Opuia of the Big Island and two-time winner Outrigger Australia.

Team New Zealand/Hawaii should be helped by the addition of a Lanikai defector, steersman Karel Tresnak Jr. Outrigger Australia has not participated in the race since it last won in 1997.

This year's conditions are not expected to be particularly conducive for Lanikai, or for another record. Lanikai is known as a "surf" crew, and the waves crossing the Kaiwi Channel aren't forecasted to be as big as in 2000. Also, the tide will be going low during this year's race, causing the water to push the canoes out rather than in like last year.

"The weather is looking calm, so that favors the other teams more than us," said Pedersen, Lanikai's primary stroker. "It takes all nine guys to do well, with no mistakes. Then you need to be a little lucky with the course you choose."

And unlike with its canoes, it's a guarantee that Lanikai won't be sharing any of its intended course lines before the race.