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Our Honolulu

Moloka'i Hoe marks its 50th

By Bob Krauss
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Today Our Honolulu celebrates the 50th anniversary of a classic, homegrown sporting event, Moloka'i Hoe, a marathon outrigger canoe race that will pump more than \$1 million into our slumping economy.

The list of entries reads like the Olympics:

Two teams from Australia, two from Canada, one from Hong Kong, one from Japan, three from Tahiti and one from New Zealand. California is sending nine teams, Connecticut and Illinois one each, Maryland two.

Thirty-eight teams will paddle for O'ahu, 13 for Hawai'i, 11 for Maui and six for Kaua'i.

"Four canoes entered the first race 50 years ago," said attorney Mike Tongg, race director. "Waikiki Canoe Club led all the way until the lashings on their ama (outrigger float) came loose. Moloka'i won. This year, we have 103 entries. Bank of Hawaii is the sponsor."

I told him the first time I covered the race for The Advertiser must have been about 1953 or '54: "Everybody slept on the beach the night before. I sat at a picnic table with the brothers Kahanamoku — Duke, Sam and Loui. They made me eat a raw 'opelu head.

"The next morning, Earl Akana took me out to an escort boat through the surf in an outboard. Scared the hell out of me."

Tongg laughed. "It's changed a lot since then. Some of the paddlers still sleep on the beach, but most of them stay in hotels or private homes. Everything is booked to the max."

Other things about the race have changed, he said. The Tahitians wiped everybody out with their fast stroke and sleek canoe when they came in 1976.

"They whipped our butt," said Tongg. "That year, it was unusually calm. They're used to flat water because they paddle inside the reef. In rough water, our canoes surf better."

The Tahitian canoe led to controversy and specifications for racing hull design. Today, Tahitians borrow Hawaiian canoes for the race. This year, Gascon Floss, the president of French Polynesia, will be on hand to cheer them on.

Their own interisland, three-day canoe race competes for international prestige with Moloka'i Hoe.

In 1966, Moloka'i Hoe resulted in disaster. Waves up to 20 feet in the Moloka'i Channel broke a koa canoe in half. Pieces washed up on Sandy Beach.

Tongg has paddled through much of it, beginning in 1962. Also a veteran Hokule'a voyager, he's surfed on Waikiki Beach since he was nine. Tongg's, a surfing break off toward Diamond Head, is named after him and his brother.

His father, Rudy Tongg (also founder of Aloha Airlines), owned the Waikiki Tavern on Kuhio Beach and provided a home underneath for the Waikiki Surf Club. Since then, his son has spent much of his time paddling and coaching canoe clubs to promote the sport.

"My dad did for the paddlers what I'm doing," he said.