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[CANOE PADDLING]



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A photo finish in yesterday's Molokai Hoe left Lanikai in second place and steersman Jim Foti exhausted and dejected.

New Zealand/Hawaii nudges defending champ Lanikai

The Molokai Hoe win is dedicated to paddler Bo Herbert's late wife, who passed away in a June accident

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The 50th Anniversary Bank of Hawaii Hinano Molokai Hoe covered 41 miles yesterday, yet less than 41 inches from the finish line the outcome was still very much in doubt.

For the closest finish in race history, Team New Zealand/ Hawaii just nosed out defending champion Lanikai to capture its first title in what is considered the world championship of men's outrigger canoe racing. After finishing third and then second twice the last three years, the team comprised of five paddlers from New Zealand and four from Hawaii broke through for a victory in the Molokai-to-Oahu race with a winning time of five hours, two minutes, 57 seconds.

Lanikai made a hard charge for the finish line, but came up barely short for second at 5:02:59. Both crews challenged but did not break the overall race record (4:50:31) that Lanikai set in winning last year.

"We kind of lost some ground there on the inside, we didn't want to bail water," said New Zealand/Hawaii's stroker, Kealii Paiana. The team's canvas cover had been giving it trouble throughout the race, according to Paiana, allowing water to get in, making the boat heavier.

"We kind of evened up, and it was just bump for bump, stroke for stroke, and somehow we just pulled a nose ahead."

The race started at 7:23 yesterday morning at Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, with 107 teams, including 16 from the mainland and 10 foreign-based crews. The teams challenged serious waves with 15- to 20-foot faces crossing the Kaiwi Channel, with waves still in the 8- to 12-foot range as they rounded Portlock at Hawaii Kai.

Despite switching the lead position a couple times in the race, with gaps between them approximately a quarter- to half-mile on occasion, New Zealand/ Hawaii and Lanikai rounded the buoy off the Hilton Hawaiian Village pier for the homestretch virtually even. New Zealand/ Hawaii had the lead at the outset, while Lanikai was the front-runner across most of the channel. New Zealand retook the lead as the two hit Hanauma Bay off Koko Head, but Lanikai was able to make up some ground in the surf off Waikiki.

"When a race finishes that tight, it can go either way," Lanikai's Mike Judd said. "It's kind of like a basketball game, tied at 72, with one shot left. Whichever team has the ball in the end and can make the hoop is going to win."

"We were in the lead for probably the majority of the way, but they caught up to us at Hanauma Bay and put a big bite into us off Diamond Head. Sure it's nice to win, but it could be a lot worse."

Critical to New Zealand/ Hawaii's success was steersman Karel Tresnak Jr., who helped steer Lanikai to the title last year. Tresnak is attending college at the University of Colorado, and said he felt it would have been inappropriate to join his former Lanikai teammates again this year without regularly having practiced with them.

Unlike Lanikai's crew, which is basically together year-round, New Zealand/Hawaii's full complement of paddlers don't regularly practice together because of the obvious geographic constraints involved. Tresnak jumped at the opportunity to join the paddlers who had been knocking on the doorstep the past few years, and it paid off for all of them.

"I never thought it would come down to that," Tresnak said of the photo finish. "I think the guys just committed this year. We ended up coming ahead, just barely though.

"The boys just put their heads down (at the end) and said, 'Hell with this, we're going to take this one.' I'm really happy for the guys and to help them do this makes me feel good."

Besides Hawaii locals Paiaina and Tresnak, the members of the winning crew were: New Zealanders Bo Herbert, Rob Kaiwai, Maui Kjeldsen, Eugene Marsh and Andrew Penny, and Hawaii paddlers Raven Aipa and Bill Pratt.

The win was particularly emotional for Herbert, who lost his wife Chrissy to a paddling accident in June. Herbert leaned toward not paddling with the team, until the last moment when his teammates finally convinced him racing would have been what his partner of nearly two decades would have wanted him to do. The entire team dedicated yesterday's race to Chrissy.

"Originally, I pulled out because when I was due to fly out was our 20th anniversary," Herbert said. "Physically I was fit, but emotionally, I knew I wouldn't be up for it. But I decided to make the comeback late and I've got to thank the guys for letting me do that. And today, I felt like she was riding my back the whole way."

PADDLING

Hinano Moloka'i Hoe

Yesterday Open

1. Team New Zealand/Hawaii -- Bill Pratt, Maui Kjeldsen, Andrew Penny, Kealii Paiaina, Raven Aipa, Robert Kaiwai, Lawrence "Bo" Gerbert, Wugene "Woogie" Marsh, Karel Tresnak Jr.;

2. Lanikai Canoe Club -- Michael Judd, Michael Pederson, John Foti, James Foti, Kalani Irvine, Ikaika Harbottle, Kekoa Bruhn, Kai Bartlett, Lucien Ouellette;

3. Pirae Va'a -- Hans Salmon, Willy Tapi, Tuura Mairau, Wilfred Ahmin, Heitara Tehahe, Tamatoa Wong, Maipiua Taputu, Jean Claude Huuti, Francois Tihoni.
