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CANOEING

Team NZ/Hawai'i favored at Hinano Moloka'i Hoe

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All eyes will be on Team New Zealand/Hawai'i during Sunday's Hinano Moloka'i Hoe.

That's quite fitting since it has been the most-watched club over the past year.

After winning last year's Moloka'i Hoe, Team NZ/H was featured in a television commercial for Steinlager beer.

"All our sponsors stepped up," said Team NZ/H paddler Bill Pratt. "Winning last year's race opened up so many doors."

Indeed, the Moloka'i Hoe — a 41-mile race from Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i, to Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki — is considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe paddling. More than 100 teams from around the world are expected to compete.

In the most exciting finish in the 50-year history of the event, Team NZ/H out-sprinted Lanikai to the finish line to win by two seconds.

"It's been eating away at us since that day," said Lanikai paddler/coach Mike Judd.

The Steinlager commercial, not to mention the recent success of Team NZ/H, certainly has not helped Lanikai and other clubs forget about last year's race.

"We feel the weight of that bull's eye on our backs," Pratt said.

True, Team NZ/H is considered the pre-race favorite this year. The biggest justification for that came three weeks ago when Team NZ/H won the Henry Ayau International Race by an impressive five minutes. All of the state's top teams entered that race.

"That put us a little at ease," Pratt said. "I don't think we feel as much pressure now."

What's more, eight of the nine members from last year's winning crew are returning: Pratt, Raven Aipa, Kea Pa'iaina and Karel Tresnak Jr. from O'ahu; Rob Kaiwai, Maui Kjeldsen, Eugene Marsh and Andrew Penny from New Zealand.

The new member is Thibert Lussiaa from the Big Island. He is one of the state's top solo paddlers.

"There are so many good teams out there," Pratt said. "We are by no means the only favorite. It's the team that makes the fewest mistakes that will win. The field is so strong now, you can't afford any mistakes."

Among the other top contenders from Hawai'i are Lanikai, Outrigger, Kai 'Opua and Hui Nalu.

Outrigger, Lanikai and Kai 'Opua have each won a major race in the last two months.



Hinano Moloka'i Hoe

- What: 41-mile outrigger canoe race for men.
- When: Sunday, 7:30 a.m. start; first finishers expected around 12:30 p.m.
- Where: Start at Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i; finish at Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki.
- Who: More than 100 teams from around the world in various divisions (open, 35-and-older, 45-and-older, 55-and-older, koa canoe).
- Format: Six-person canoes; teams can rotate nine paddlers (55-and-older crews can rotate 12 paddlers).

Ra'i from Tahiti, and Ikaika from Australia are the only confirmed elite international entries. But as Outrigger coach Kala Judd put it: "Any team from Tahiti or Australia could be considered a contender whether we know about them or not."

Because of its unique blend of paddlers, Team NZ/H did not practice together until this week, when the New Zealand paddlers arrived.

In contrast, the core of the Lanikai crew has been paddling together for a decade. Seven of the nine paddlers on its current crew were on the winning 2000 crew that set a Moloka'i Hoe record of 4:50:31.

"What we're banking on is our brotherhood," Mike Judd said. "We're paddling to win it for the club, not ourselves. If you paddle for Lanikai, you're a part of something special. If we don't lose sight of that, we'll have a good crossing."

Outrigger already had a good crossing, albeit the hard way.

In an effort to build camaraderie and confidence, Outrigger crossed the Kaiwi Channel from Hawai'i Kai to Hale O Lono during a weekend practice three weeks ago. That route is considered more difficult than the Moloka'i-to-O'ahu course.

"We had to wait for the perfect day," Kala Judd said. "And it still felt like we were paddling uphill and with wind in our face."

It took them more than five hours to complete, but "it was a great feeling once we did it," Kala Judd said.

But in a familiar saying that seems to surround every Moloka'i Hoe, Kala Judd added: "You just never know what's going to happen across the channel. That's what makes it fun."