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Japan club hopes to make waves at Moloka'i Hoe

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The Outrigger Canoe Club of Japan could make the biggest impact of all the teams entered in Sunday's Hinano Moloka'i Hoe.

And they're not even going to win the race.

OCC of Japan is one of eight foreign entries among the more than 100 crews in Sunday's race. The 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.

"We would like to be in the top 20 or top 15, hopefully," said Taku Araki, the team captain. "We know we are not the fastest, but we also know that we are racing for the Japanese people, and we have much pride in that."

Their participation — their mere existence — has already proved to be beneficial for both Hawai'i and Japan.

The OCC of Japan was created in 1999 by Araki and Jake Mizuno, a successful Hawai'i businessman and paddler.

"I met Taku at a kayak race in 1999 and he talked about starting a canoe club in Japan," Mizuno said. "Two weeks later we started on it."

In three years, membership has grown from fewer than 10 to around 40. The club has also purchased three Hawaiian outrigger racing canoes — the only such canoes in all of Japan.

"People are getting interested in the outrigger canoe in Japan," Araki said. "Only four years ago, nobody knew about it."

Earlier this year, the club hosted its first canoe regatta in Japan. Araki's dream is to stage a long-distance race in one of Japan's ocean channels.

"We have so much room to grow," he said.

For now, they are content to improve their performance in the Moloka'i Hoe. This year will be their fourth consecutive appearance. Last year was their best showing — 26th overall out of 107 entries.



Outrigger Canoe Club of Japan paddles in waters off Maunalua Bay in Hawai'i Kai. Team captain Taku Araki hopes for a "top 20 or top 15" finish at the Moloka'i Hoe.

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"I think top 25 is realistic (on Sunday)," said Mizuno, who will paddle with the crew. "These guys are all experienced in the water. They know how to compete and they train year round."

Indeed, the club held grueling tryouts in the months leading up to this race.

"We meet at the beach at 4 in the morning, when it is very cold in Japan, and train on surfskis," Araki said. "Then we run and swim. On the weekends, we paddle in the (six-person) canoe."

The seven Japanese paddlers on this year's crew are Araki, Eichi Ishii, Motoki Isogai, Masakazu Ito, Tsuyoshi Sawada, Yasuhumi Sukanuma and Yusuke Suzuki. Four of them are lifeguards; the others are either former lifeguards or competitive swimmers.

Completing the nine-man crew are Hui Nalu paddlers Mizuno and Nainoa Thompson.

Thompson, the master navigator for the voyaging canoe Hokule'a, will steer the canoe.

"We'll be the smallest crew out there," Mizuno said. "Our average weight is around 140, I think. But there's good teamwork and having Nainoa steering helps a lot."

Still, a top 20 finish would be impressive considering that several of the Japanese paddlers could technically be classified as novices.

"Sometimes it seems easy because we already knew how to paddle a little bit," Suzuki said. "But we still have to learn how to make it perfect; we need to learn to time (the strokes) together better."

As they have improved, so have their sponsorships. The club raised enough money this year to purchase a new fiberglass canoe that it will race for the first time on Sunday.

They named it "Shonan," after the beach where their club is based near Tokyo. As incentive to return every year, the club will leave the canoe in Hawai'i under Mizuno's care.

Regardless of how the team performs on Sunday, their story will be told back home. Two photographers from Japan — one print and one video — are following the club's activities this week.

"This team could actually help the state of Hawai'i," Mizuno noted. "They're going back home to share something that's rarely seen. Hopefully, that will bring more people from Japan here."

It's already working.

For the first time, some of the Japanese paddlers will bring their families to Hawai'i for the race.

"The (Kaiwi) Channel is the highest level for this sport," said Ito, who is participating in the Moloka'i Hoe for the first time. "The people in Japan who know about this sport all want to come here and experience the challenge."

