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[PADDLING]



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Team New Zealand/Hawaii, the defending champions in Sunday's 41-mile Molokai Hoe outrigger canoe race, practiced off Kailua Beach yesterday.

Loners own Molokai Hoe

By Brandon Lee
Special to the Star-Bulletin

No coach, nary an entire team practice until a couple of weeks before race time. Two paddlers living in New Zealand, seven others in Hawaii, with one of them finding out less than a month ago he was a part of the crew.

Doesn't sound like a winning recipe -- even to the members of Team New Zealand/Hawaii, who have used the formula successfully over the last five years. Yet the mix-and-match crew enters Sunday's 51st annual Hinano Molokai Hoe as the defending champion, confident that it can win again.

The Molokai Hoe, considered the world championship of men's long-distance outrigger canoe paddling, is a 41-mile race from Molokai to Oahu across the unpredictable Kaiwi Channel.

"In reality, it shouldn't work" said New Zealander Rob Kaiwai, of his team's composition and approach. The 45-year-old is New Zealand/Hawaii's elder statesman and has been with the crew since its inception in 1998. He just arrived on Oahu a week ago after not paddling with his teammates since a competition in Australia last June.

"We are a little bit freakish -- and I mean that in a good sense," he added. "But I don't recommend it."

More than 100 crews from Hawaii, the U.S. mainland, Japan, Cook Islands, Germany, Australia, Hong Kong, Tahiti, Tonga, New Zealand, Italy, Hungary and Canada are expected to compete in the Molokai Hoe. The race begins at 7:30 a.m. at Hale O Lono Harbor and finishes at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki.

One key distinction of New Zealand/Hawaii is its members primarily practice on their own. Even though seven of its paddlers now reside in Hawaii (two moved from New Zealand), team practices are not regularly scheduled and they don't have an official coach.

"This allows us the flexibility to carry on with the balance of our lives," Bill Pratt, 34, said. "We can do our training, work, tend to our child -- we have flexibility. It's one of the reasons why I and some of the others can still do (the Molokai Hoe)."

A big reason why New Zealand/Hawaii is able to overcome the obvious hurdles of timing, chemistry and communication associated with its approach is the crew is comprised completely of elite paddlers. They may be freakish, but they aren't flukes; they took third and then second twice in the three years before last year's win.

These are nine guys who, despite living generally very separate lives, are completely dedicated to their sport and winning. They are great friends who have known each other for years -- despite the miles of land and water between them.

"Basically, you got to have trust," said Karel Tresnak Jr., the youngest of the bunch at 21, an expert steersman and former three-time world champion solo-canoe paddler. "Nobody is pushing you, so there could be a tendency to flake out. But that doesn't happen with this crew, and that pushes me to do even more (on his own)."

"You expect the others to train," he added. "We're all elite paddlers, all names, kind of an all-star crew now."

Tresnak helped steer Lanikai to the 2000 Molokai Hoe championship. But he went away to college last year and did not want to take a seat away from someone who had been practicing regularly with his former club. So he joined New Zealand/Hawaii, and helped to barely nose Lanikai for the win last year in the closest finish in race history.

Besides Kailua's Tresnak, New Zealand/Hawaii is comprised of Kiwis Kaiwai, Eugene Marsh, Maui Kjeldsen and Andrew Penny, and Hawaii paddlers Pratt, Raven Aipa, Kealii Paiaina and Thibert Lussiaa. Kjeldsen and Penny now live in Hawaii.

Lussiaa is the only newcomer this year, finding out just three weeks ago he would be a replacement for Kiwi Bo Herbert, who stayed in New Zealand for personal reasons. After his job prevented him from practicing regularly with his former club Kai Opuu, Lussiaa began racing recently with New Zealand/Hawaii as a fill-in during four tune-ups for the Molokai Hoe.

New Zealand/Hawaii won the most recent tune-up, the 32-mile Henry Ayau International last month.

"To be able to race with the world champions is an honor," Lussiaa, 31, said. "I will just go along for the ride and enjoy the journey, no matter what the outcome."

New Zealand/Hawaii expects tough competition again from Lanikai, as well as Kai Opuu and Outrigger. As for crews based outside of Hawaii, Ikaika and Mooloolabah of Australia and Rai of Tahiti are top contenders.

The defending champs are hoping this week's tradewinds will have stirred up the channel come Sunday, to better utilize their surfing skills.

But whether the ocean provides waves or is flat, this unique group likes their chances. They were comfortable being the hunters before last year, and now are comfortable as the hunted.

"We have depth in our nine guys, range in expertise," Pratt said. "We're exceptional at different skills, trying to arrive at a synergy where the sum is even greater than the equal of the parts."

Molokai Hoe

What: 51st annual Hinano Molokai Hoe, outrigger canoe race

When: Sunday. Race starts at 7:30 a.m. with first finishers expected around 12:30 p.m.

Where: 41-mile crossing of the Kaiwi Channel starting at Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, and

finishing at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki

Who: More than 100 teams expected from Hawaii, U.S. mainland, Japan, Cook Islands, Germany, Australia, Hong Kong, Tahiti, Tonga, New Zealand, Italy, Hungary and Canada

How: Koa and fiberglass canoes will be used with nine-person crews, six men paddling at a time rotating with open-ocean changes. Divisions are Open, Masters 35 years-and-older, Masters 45-older and Masters 55-older.