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Contenders plentiful in Moloka'i Hoe contest

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The word that canoe paddlers most often use to describe the Hawaii Modular Space Moloka'i Hoe is unpredictable.

This year is no exception.

There is no shortage of contenders for Sunday's race across the Kaiwi Channel. The 41-mile race from Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i, to Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki, is considered the world championship of long-distance team canoe paddling.

"Competition-wise, it seems to get better and better every year," said Bill Pratt, a member of the Team New Zealand/Hawai'i crew that won last year's race. "And this year, all the top international crews are here so that makes it even more daunting."

What's more, conditions are also expected to be tricky. The tide is supposed to be favorable, but winds and waves may not be there to provide help.

More than 100 crews are expected to enter, and at least a dozen have a legitimate shot at winning.

Among the elite:

- **Team New Zealand/Hawai'i** won the Moloka'i Hoe in 2001 and last year.

Eight of the nine paddlers from last year return. The new member is steersman Aaron Napo-leon, son of legendary paddler Joseph "Nappy" Napoleon.

"Aaron is an exceptional talent," Pratt said. "We're confident in his abilities."

The crew features five paddlers from Hawai'i and four from New Zealand. Because of that unique mix, they rarely practice together.

"We don't have a second crew to pick up paddlers from and we don't have a coach," Pratt said. "So we really rely on each other. Even though we don't practice together, we have a bond that seems to work."

- **Outrigger Canoe Club** was the top Hawai'i team during the "warm-up" races leading to the Moloka'i Hoe.

They also have a new steersman — Karel Tresnak Jr., who was on Team New Zealand/Hawai'i last year.

Outrigger, which owns a record 16 Moloka'i Hoe championships, has placed either first or second in every race it has entered this year.

Hawaii Modular Space 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:** Approximately 100 men's crews from around the world competing in various divisions (open, masters 40-older, masters 50-and-older, masters 55-older, and koa canoe)

- **Format:** Each team will paddle a six-person outrigger canoe; teams can rotate 9 paddlers in the six seats throughout the race; teams in the masters 55-older division can rotate 12 paddlers.

"I think it's been more than any of us could have expected," Tresnak said. "It's definitely made us feel like we have a shot in every race."

- **Lanikai** is an annual contender, and set the course record of 4 hours, 50 minutes, 31 seconds, in 2000.

Lanikai has placed in the top three of every race it has entered this year.

- **Rai** won the Moloka'i Hoe in 2002, and is one of three contenders from Tahiti.

If the Kaiwi Channel is calm, the powerful Tahitians should be in the lead pack.

"We try to practice in the surf when there is surf," said Rai paddler Milton Laughlin. "But most of our practice is in the flat."

- **Maitai Shell** is the top seed from Tahiti, and is in the Moloka'i Hoe for the first time since 1998.

"They were beating everybody (in Tahiti) by four to five minutes," Laughlin said. "They are very strong."

Many of the Maitai Shell paddlers were part of the Tahiti team that dominated the World Sprints canoe races at Hilo in August.

- **Fareara** is the No. 2 seed from Tahiti.

They won the prestigious Hawaiki Nui Va'a — Tahiti's biggest race — last year, thus earning a trip to Moloka'i from the Tahiti government.

"I think the best teams in Tahiti are realizing the Moloka'i is the race to be in," Laughlin said. "It's hard to get here because of the expense, but we all want to be here."

- **Outrigger-Australia** is the top team from Down Under.

At the Hamilton Cup race in Australia in June, Outrigger-Australia beat several of the world's best teams.

At least two other top teams from Australia are expected to enter.

Darkhorse contenders from Hawai'i include Hawaiian from Maui, Wailea from Maui, and Kai 'Opua from the Big Island.

Top teams from California and Canada could also challenge for the victory.

Each team will consist of nine paddlers, although only six can paddle at any given time. The relief paddlers follow in an escort boat.

The minimum ages for the masters divisions were raised this year. There will be three masters divisions: 40-and-older, 50-and-older, and 55-and-older.