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[PADDLING]

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The crew of Lanikai Canoe Club reacted after winning the Hawaii Modular Space Molokai Hoe race yesterday.

Lanikai Canoe Club takes Molokai Hoe

The winning crew finds motivation in being left out of pre-race hype

By Brandon Lee
Special to the Star-Bulletin

Lanikai Canoe Club is a former winner and regular contender at the Hawaii Modular Space Molokai Hoe. But this year, its paddlers felt a bit discounted in the pre-race hype.

Using the perceived slight as motivation yesterday, the Windward Oahu club strongly challenged the overall race record that it

established when last winning four years ago, and ended up taking the 53rd edition of the Molokai Hoe in 4 hours, 54 minutes and 5 seconds.

Their winning time was about 3 1/2 minutes slower than the record (4:50:31), but it was still the third-fastest time in history. And now, Lanikai owns all three of these fastest times (also winning in 4:53:03 in 1995) as well as five total Molokai Hoe championships.

"We didn't get any attention," Lanikai's Kai Bartlett said. "But it was great because it didn't put any pressure on us. But we wanted to show that, 'Hey, we are someone to contend with, we are Lanikai Canoe Club.' We haven't won many (Molokai Hoe races), but the ones we have, we've really come off with them."

Added teammate Jim Foti: "We were laughing about it over on Molokai. But we hadn't shown our cards yet."

The 41-mile race from Molokai to Oahu through the Kaiwi Channel is considered the world championship of six-man outrigger canoe paddling. An international field of 90 crews began the race at Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai, with the finish set at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki.

Finishing second overall, at 4:58:07, was Shell Vaa of Tahiti. Rai (5:02:50), also from Tahiti and the 2002 Molokai Hoe champ, placed third, while Xylo Australia (5:03:52) took fourth. Yet another Tahitian team, Fare Ara (5:05:39), finished fifth, while last year's champion, Team New Zealand♦Hawaii (5:06:24), placed sixth.

"I'm very happy. This is my first experience in the race," Shell Vaa paddler George Cronsteadt said. "I'm very proud to represent Tahiti."



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Lanikai Canoe Club received congratulations from family and friends in Waikiki yesterday after winning the Molokai Hoe.

Added Nina Moux, team treasurer and wife of the owner: "(This race) is easier for the local paddlers; we don't have these kinds of (rough) seas (in Tahiti). We arrived first of the three teams from Tahiti, and we are very happy with this result. We know Lanikai is a very strong paddling team."

Other members in Lanikai's top crew included: John Foti, Peter Binney, Kekoa Bruhn, Kaai Bruhn, Mike Judd, Dave Daniels and Mike Pedersen. Daniels and Kaai Bruhn were the only new additions since Lanikai's 2000 win. Six paddled at a time, rotating with open-ocean changes.

Since its win four years ago, Lanikai placed second to Team NZ♦H by a mere 2 seconds in the closest finish in history in 2001, and was again the runner-up to the same team last year.

Lanikai did not do particularly well in the long-distance races leading up to the Molokai Hoe this year, but yesterday, with all nine competing together for the first time this season, something clicked.

At the outset of the race, all the contenders were battling tightly, said Kekoa Bruhn. "But we started clicking together. That's the best part about us guys: Once we're locked in, we just float, and we just go."

Though the Tahitian teams raced out in the flat water at the start of the course, Lanikai began to use its surfing ability to take control in the 3- to 5-foot waves in the channel and built about a 1/4- to 1/2-mile lead over Shell Vaa.

It was a lead the club would not relinquish as it made a straight line for Diamond Head after rounding Rabbit Island. Shell Vaa eventually tried to gamble off of Oahu's south shore by breaking off the same line and heading inside of Lanikai.

"We just strung together more bumps (waves) than the other guys," Jim Foti said. "Everybody pushed really hard, everyone wanted it."

"This one is extra special," added Kekoa Bruhn, "because my brother (Kaai) paddled with me, and everyone said this is the one when all the top teams were here."

Among the other winners yesterday, Mooloolaba of Australia took the masters 40 division in 5:29:47, good enough for 14th overall. Team Big Island won the masters 55 in 5:53:53, while Na Molokama O Hawaii took the masters 50 in 5:57:41.