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Crossing comes at a price

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The experience of racing in an outrigger canoe across the Kaiwi Channel is priceless, but participating in a Moloka'i-to-O'ahu race can be pricey.

Canoe paddling might be perceived as a low-budget sport, but paddlers in Hawai'i can prove otherwise.

The Healani Canoe Club will pay more than \$20,000 to participate in the two Moloka'i-to-O'ahu races this year. Healani entered three women's crews (30 paddlers) in the Na Wahine O Ke Kai race Sept. 25, and will have three men's crews (27 paddlers) in the Moloka'i Hoe on Sunday.

"This is the Super Bowl of our sport," said Meesh West, coach of the Healani men's program. "So it's something you have to do. You just hope the costs don't keep going up every year."

Expenses include airfare from O'ahu to Moloka'i, entry fee to participate in the race, rental fee for an escort boat to follow each canoe across the channel, and one-night accommodations on Moloka'i.

Recent increases in gas prices have only added to the costs. At this week's Moloka'i Hoe, Healani will pay around \$70 per paddler for a one-way ticket to Moloka'i, and then around \$780 per escort boat.

There is also a \$450 entry fee for each nine-man crew, although that includes the shipping of the canoes to Moloka'i.

"All these little things you don't think about start to add up," Healani head coach Kea Pa'iaina said. "That's why we work hard all year, not just practicing, but fundraising."

For the Moloka'i Hoe alone, it will cost each Healani paddler around \$350 to participate. Money-raising events by the club will help offset some of the costs.

"It's kind of sad that you have to ask the paddlers to raise that much money to do a sport that they love," Healani vice president Pua Pa'iaina said. "But if you have the paddlers who want to do it, it's hard to say no. It's a struggle for a club like us, but we find ways."

Some of the bigger clubs around the state have corporate sponsors to help cover costs.

At Healani — a relatively small club based at the Ala Wai Canal — the paddlers were asked to sell Zippy's chili tickets this year.



Healani, a small club without corporate sponsorships, has to do a lot of fundraising to enter races such as Sunday's Moloka'i Hoe.

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Accommodations: Lodging, transportation and meals on Moloka'i \$9,450

Entry fee: Three women's crews and three men's crews \$2,700

Airfare: 57 paddlers and six coaches \$4,347

Rental fee: Six escort boats \$4,450

Total \$20,947

An approximate breakdown of some of the expenses for the Healani Canoe Club to participate in the Na Wahine O Ke Kai and Moloka'i Hoe races:

COSTLY CROSSING

"We're not fortunate enough to have a big sponsor," Kea Pa'iaina said. "So we're fundraising all year, basically."

Tad Yamashita said the year-round sales pitch can take a toll.

"I don't want to say it's embarrassing, because we all have to do it to help the club," he said. "But it gets kind of hard to ask the same people to buy stuff from you three or four times a year."

During the summer regatta season, Healani got paid "a couple hundred per week" to help set up and then break down the officials' tents and equipment.

"We were the first ones there early in the morning, and the last ones to leave," Kea Pa'iaina said.

Che Sabol, a paddler in the Healani men's program, said: "We work hard to do the fundraisers because we know otherwise it'll all have to come out of our own pockets."

Adding to the club costs, Healani participates in virtually every "warm-up" race in the weeks prior to the Moloka'i races. Each of those races charges an entry fee and requires the renting of escort boats.

"It's basically a couple thousand dollars for every race we want to do," said Kea Pa'iaina, who is also a paddler in the Healani men's program.

At the Henry Ayau Memorial Race last month, Healani's fundraising pot could not cover all the expenses, so each paddler was asked to contribute an extra \$75.

"That's for one day of racing — and we weren't close to winning," Kea Pa'iaina said. "I cringe sometimes when I think about it."

Some Healani paddlers opted not to participate in the Queen Lili'uokalani race in Kona because of airfare and hotel costs.

"You have to prioritize sometimes, especially the guys with families," Sabol said. "But we're all friends and we're all passionate about this sport, so that's why we do it."

Even though the sport does not offer monetary prizes, the paddlers say the payoff is worth the payment.

"It's not just about crossing the channel," Pua Pa'iaina said. "It's about bonding with your teammates and doing this special race. That's what makes it worth it."

Healani men's paddler Joven Asuncion added: "When you're doing all the fundraising leading up to the race, that's tough. But once you get to Moloka'i and see what it's like to be a part of this race, you're glad you went through all of that."