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PADDLING



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Lanikai Canoe Club celebrated after winning the 41-mile Molokai Hoe yesterday in 5 hours, 17 minutes.

Lanikai repeats as Molokai Hoe champion

By Brandon Lee
Special to the Star-Bulletin

The Lanikai Canoe Club's championship paddling machine is far from broken. It doesn't need any fixing, or a tune-up race, either.

Beach Boys coach and steersman dies

About 45 minutes into yesterday's race, the Waikiki Beach Boys' open crew pulled out when steersman and coach Owen Cenal suffered an apparent heart attack. Doctors and emergency personnel attended to Cenal, who was taken to Queen's Hospital, where he was later pronounced dead.

This is the first fatality in the history of the Molokai Hoe, according to race director Hannie Anderson, and "it is unfortunate, very hard to accept, even though we were prepared for it. Our condolences and prayers go out to the

With exactly the same crew it won with last year, the Windward Oahu-based club powered through for an even more convincing victory yesterday in the 54th annual Molokai Hoe, a 41-mile race from Molokai to Oahu across the Kaiwi Channel that is considered the world championship of men's long-distance outrigger canoe paddling.

Lanikai finished in 5 hours and 17 minutes flat to score its second run of back-to-back championships and sixth overall win in club history, and best an international field of 106 other crews.

Tui Tonga (5:26:52) of the Big Island finished second, almost 10 minutes behind Lanikai, which nearly doubled its margin of victory from 2004.

"This one is super special," said steersman Jim Foti, who was also on the 1995-96 and 2000 Lanikai championship teams. "We were just on fire. We did our homework, we did our homework, we did our homework -- and then we knew all the answers on the test. This is the first time I've won this race leading from start to finish."

The race started at Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai and finished at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki. Though Lanikai never challenged the overall race record (4:50:31) it established in 2000, the club simply continued to build its advantage as the race progressed.

The other eight members of the winning crew are: Jim's brother, John; Kai Bartlett; Peter Binney; brothers Kaai and Kekoa Bruhn; Mike Judd; Dave Daniels and Mike Pedersen. Six paddled at a time, with rotations made with open-ocean changes.

The entire group hadn't paddled together since last year's Molokai win, but the familiar recipe still struck the rest of the competition hard in the gut and didn't allow a chance to recover.

"It almost felt surreal. Coming in to Diamond Head, I looked at my brother and said, 'Am I really living this?' " said Kaai Bruhn, a crew newcomer in 2004. "I thought last year was priceless. But if last year was like having your first-born, this was like having your first son -- both special, but in different ways. ... It was a perfect race. Every guy did his role, no mistakes."

Indeed, there was more competition for second than first place yesterday, as perennial contender Outrigger of Waikiki finished third (5:28:27), only about a minute and a half behind Tui Tonga. Rai of Tahiti, the 2002 champion, was the first non-Hawaii crew to finish, placing fourth (5:30:54), and two-time winners Team New Zealand/Hawaii (5:33:46) rounded out the top five.

Another Tahitian crew, Taharaa Olympic, finished sixth (5:38:49). Lanikai's second crew finished seventh in 5:42:43, showing just how good the paddlers pushing the top nine were.

"I feel like we did an awesome job," Tui Tonga's Lyle Palakiko said. "We didn't expect to finish way up here, but we went out there and just hammered, stuck to our game plan. Outrigger, Lanikai, Team New Zealand/Hawaii -- these are all top-notch paddlers."

Choppy conditions prevailed in the channel, with rides of only about 3 seconds available on open-ocean waves that were difficult to catch. A receding tide pushing the paddlers away from their destination made the crossing even more difficult.

But Lanikai used its experience and talent to pick a more northerly line to Oahu's southeastern tip and grind through the prolonged rough spots.

"It was a tough race from Mother Nature," Lanikai's Bartlett said.