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The ocean is their kingdom

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One of the newest canoe clubs in Hawai'i is called Tui Tonga.

On Sunday, it hopes to become Tui Moloka'i Hoe.

Tui Tonga — which means "King of Tonga" — is considered one of the top contenders for Sunday's Moloka'i Hoe.

The 41-mile race from Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i, to Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki, is considered the world championship of long-distance canoe paddling for men's teams.

"We started this club with a mission to try and help the kids in the community," Tui Tonga paddler Lyle Palakiko said. "The paddling part is important, too, but we want to be known for more than just that."

The club — which is based in Kailua, Kona — is the brainchild of Kafoa Hala Latu, who was born in Tonga and moved to the Big Island in 1991.

"When I moved here, a lot of the Tongans were looked down on," Hala Latu said. "Some of them were dealing drugs and causing trouble. I wanted to change that; do something positive for not only the Tongan kids, but all the kids in the community."

About three years ago, Hala Latu started the process of creating Tui Tonga Canoe Club. This year, it became an official club in the Moku O Hawai'i Outrigger Canoe Racing Association.

Hala Latu, who owns the Down to Earth masonry business on the Big Island, bought the club's first fiberglass canoe with his own money.

"It was about \$14,000," he said. "But I believed in this program and I wanted it to work, so that's why I was willing to use my own money."

The core of the club is the open men's program. Many of them transferred from Kai 'Opua Canoe Club, which is also based in Kona.

"Kafoa was with us for a couple of years at Kai 'Opua, but he didn't recruit us," Palakiko said. "Some things happened (at Kai 'Opua), and so when we heard about Kafoa's idea, we expressed interest in helping him out."

Hala Latu is the president of Tui Tonga, but also a member of the men's "first crew." He said he chose the name Tui Tonga a few years ago because the king of Tonga at that time was well-known for promoting good health and fitness.

The club has promoted paddling in the Kona area by hosting clinics, and



Tui Tonga finished second in last year's Moloka'i Hoe, considered the world championship of long-distance canoe paddling for men's teams.

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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 crews from around the world competing in various divisions (open, masters 40-older, masters 50-older, masters 55-older, and koa canoe).

FORMAT: Open, masters 40 and masters 50 crews can rotate 9 paddlers into the six seats of the canoe throughout the race; masters 55 crews can rotate 12 paddlers.

starting a youth program that is expected to compete in Big Island regattas next year.

"My great grandfather was one of the people who started Kai 'Opua Canoe Club, so it was very difficult for me to leave," Palakiko said. "But when my family found out what Kafoa's plan was for the kids, it made it easy for me to support him."

Palakiko is also a member of the men's first crew and now the director of the Tui Tonga youth program.

"I got so much help from the guys to make this club work," Hala Latu said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have time to paddle."

By the way, the paddling part of the club is pretty good, too. Tui Tonga placed second to Lanikai during last year's Moloka'i Hoe, the best showing ever for a Big Island club.

"Second place was kind of like first to us," men's coach Beanie Heen said. "But that raised the level of the whole club. They all came out and worked harder. We're shooting for a good finish again."

Because the ocean is mostly calm off Kona, the Tui Tonga men have been traveling around the Big Island for the past few months in search of rough-water training.

"It takes a lot of dedication," Heen said. "We're driving around for hours just to get to some of these places."

Most weekends, the club has been training off Keokea on the north end of the Big Island.

"The surf in those areas is similar to what we see in the (Kaiwi Channel)," steersman Bruce Ayau said. "We're not like some other clubs that have surf in their backyard. We have to go out and find it. But it's worth it because we're much better in the surf now."

Tui Tonga is a powerful crew, ranging from the 170-pound Ikaika Hauanio to the 230-pound Hala Latu.

"We're more like a rugby team," Ayau said. "Our size helps us when we're going against the current, but being a heavy crew also holds us down sometimes."

Interestingly, Hala Latu is the only paddler on the team who is of Tongan ancestry.

"This club is not just for Tongans," Hala Latu said. "We're all in this together."