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Challenge across the Kaiwi

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The Lanikai Canoe Club, defending champion of the race, has been training off Lanikai Beach.

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MEN ONLY, ACROSS 41 MILES

WHAT: 41-mile outrigger canoe race for men, from Hale O Lono Harbor on Moloka'i to Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach.

WHEN: Tomorrow, 7:30 a.m. start; first finishers expected around 12:30 p.m.

WHO: Approximately 100 crews competing in various divisions (open, masters 40-older, masters 50-older, masters 55-older, and koa canoe).



It doesn't seem logical that a race that covers 41 miles and takes around five hours to complete is viewed as a sprint.

But that's how the champion paddlers from the Lanikai Canoe Club describe the Moloka'i Hoe. It's also how they prepare for the race across the Kaiwi Channel.

The 55th annual Moloka'i Hoe is scheduled for tomorrow. The race from Hale O Lono Harbor on Moloka'i to Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki is considered the world championship of long-distance canoe paddling.

"Just the name — Moloka'i Hoe — people hear that and they immediately know what you're talking about," Lanikai paddler Mike Pedersen said. "It's like this is the race that identifies our sport."

About 100 teams and 1,000 paddlers are expected to compete. Most are from Hawai'i, but there are also entries from California, Washington, Florida, Australia, Italy, Japan, Tahiti and Fiji.

"When you cross that (Kaiwi) channel for the first time, it's like the greatest feeling," paddler Kekoa Bruhn said. "And it is a great feeling for everybody because it is an accomplishment just to finish."

"Even if you're in 30th (place), you're going all out to beat that team that's right behind you and you feel like that's a big thing. But to be honest, there truly is nothing like the feeling of finishing first."

For the past decade, that feeling belonged predominantly to Lanikai, which has five first-place and four second-place finishes.

Tommy Conner, coach of the two-time defending champion Lanikai men's program, said the race is more comparable to a series of sprints for the paddlers than to a marathon.

"You might have a guy in (the canoe) for 10, 15 or 20 minutes, and then you put in a replacement," he said. "It's not like you're in the canoe for hours and hours. You go hard for your 15 or 20 minutes, then come out and rest, and then go back and do it again. That's what you train for."

Each team is allowed to rotate nine paddlers into the six seats of the canoe. While six are paddling in the canoe, three follow in an escort boat. Relief changes are made throughout the course.

The sprint mentality is reflected in Lanikai's training. When it comes to preparing for the Moloka'i Hoe, there is no secret to the Lanikai success.

"Classic, traditional paddling," is how paddler Mike Judd described the team's practices. "There are no tricks or anything like that. We show up for practice, get in the (canoe)..., paddle, and then get out."

Since 1995, the club from Windward O'ahu has maintained its dynasty through old-fashioned methods of training.

"On this level, you need to be in shape before the season even starts," said Conner, who has been a paddler on 11 Moloka'i Hoe championship crews. "Once the season starts (in August), our practice time is dedicated to paddling. To me, if you're getting ready for a (paddling) race, 10 miles of paddling is far more valuable than 10 miles of running."

The competitors of the Lanikai Canoe Club train in the unpredictable and often rough ocean conditions off Windward O'ahu — and credit that for part of their success through the years in the Moloka'i Hoe. The rest is practice, practice, practice. And more practice.

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There are nine men on each canoe team, rotating out so that six are paddling and three resting.

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Some canoe clubs like to incorporate running and weightlifting into the practice hours. At Lanikai, the men practice four days a week, and all the practice time is spent in the canoe.

Yet it is not as simple as it sounds.

Conner likes to keep the Lanikai paddlers motivated by creating competition within the club.

There are 34 paddlers in the men's program at Lanikai this year. Only nine will be chosen as the "first crew" for tomorrow's Moloka'i Hoe. The rest will be competing to make the second and third crews.

"The guys from the bottom are trying to push to the top, and that pushes the guys on top to go a little higher," Lanikai paddler John Foti said. "There's no question, the inner-competition works. You know you have to be at your best every day, or there's a chance you're dropping to second or third crew."

Conner also likes to test the paddlers in various conditions. Most days, they work on sprints, back-and-forth along Lanikai Beach. Other days, they'll do a long paddle along the Windward O'ahu coast.

It helps that the ocean conditions are often unpredictable off Windward O'ahu.

"There's always some kind of turbulence on this side of the island," paddler Bruhn said. "Nothing like Moloka'i, but at least it gets us ready."

Conner also likes to mix the 34 paddlers on the roster into various combinations each day.

"Basically, the practices are preparing us for anything when it comes to Moloka'i," paddler Aaron Creps said. "But the intensity of Moloka'i is something you can't really practice for.

"The Moloka'i Hoe is a different beast from every other race. You practice hard and hope for the best, but on that race day, anything can happen."