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CANOES

Canoe paddling is in their blood

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Team Pa'a members include, from left, Manny Kulukualani, Justin Banfield, Alfred Van Gieson and Raven Aipa. "I thought it would be nice to have a crew that was represented by the people who originated the sport," Kulukualani said of the nearly all-Hawaiian crew.

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MOLOKA'I HOE

WHAT: 41-mile outrigger canoe race for men.

WHERE: Start at Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i, finish at Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki.

WHEN: Sunday, 7:30 a.m. start; first finishers expected around 12:45 p.m.

WHO: Around 100 crews from around the world competing in various divisions (open, masters 40-older, masters 50-older, masters 55-older, koa canoe).

FORMAT: Crews in the open, masters 40-older,

In an effort to solidify its Hawaiian roots, Team Pa'a is hoping for a solid performance in Sunday's Moloka'i Hoe.

Team Pa'a — the Hawaiian word for solid — is a mix of paddlers from around the state.

Their bond is their blood. Eight of the nine paddlers in the crew have some Hawaiian ancestry.

"I thought it would be nice to have a crew that was represented by the people who originated the sport," said Manny Kulukulualani, who organized the team. "It's a complete tribute to our ancestors."

The Moloka'i Hoe — which has been held every year since 1952 — is considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe racing for men's teams. Around 100 crews are expected to participate in this year's 41-mile race from Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i, to Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki.

Kulukulualani said he was inspired to create an all-Hawaiian team two years ago at a paddling event in New Zealand.

"It was actually the Tahitians who asked where all the Hawaiians were," Kulukulualani said. "I looked around and saw that the New Zealand crews had a lot of Maoris, and the Tahitian crews were represented by all Tahitians. Then I looked at our crews and saw different (ethnic) races.

"There's nothing wrong with that. But at the same time, it made me realize that this is a Hawaiian cultural sport and we needed more representation from Hawaiians."

Kulukulualani's original goal was to create a nine-man team of Hawaiian-ancestry paddlers. He came up one paddler short, but said "the mission is still the same."

Joining Kulukulualani on the Pa'a crew for Sunday's race are Raven Aipa, Justin Banfield, Ikaika Hauanio, Tyson Kubo, Kea Pa'iaina, Bill Pratt, Alfred Van Gieson and Tapa Worthington.

"When Manny explained to me why he wanted to do this, I thought it was an awesome idea," Van Gieson said. "It made me realize this is something we need to do, or should do."

Most of them are considered elite paddlers, so Pa'a is expected to be one of the top contenders on Sunday.

However, the paddlers are all from different clubs, including Hauanio from the Big Island, Kubo from Maui, and Banfield from California. Because of that, their practice times have been limited.

"We're kind of making it work the best we can, but it's a mystery every time we get in (the canoe)," Van Gieson said. "I guess the good thing is a lot of these guys are elite paddlers, so they know what it takes."

Banfield was born and raised in San Francisco, but he is one-quarter Hawaiian from his mother's side of the family. His first practices with the team were last weekend.

"I'm honored to be a part of it," he said. "But I'm going to have to adjust to the pace. There's a lot of high-level paddlers here."

masters 50-older and koa canoe divisions can rotate nine paddlers into the six seats of the canoe throughout the race; masters 55-older crews can rotate 12 paddlers.



Crew members from Team Pa'a and Hui Lanakila get in a practice session on the Ala Wai Canal for Sunday's Moloka'i Hoe.

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At the Henry Ayau Memorial Race last month, Team Pa'a placed second to Lanikai.

"I just wish we had more time to train together," Pa'iaina said. "Talent-wise, I think we're there. But training together makes a difference and we haven't really been able to do that."

Pa'iaina is a former football player at Kamehameha Schools, so he is used to the concept of competing alongside fellow Hawaiians. However, he said he has felt a surge of pride this week that he never felt before.

"I was actually planning to paddle for my club (Healani) this year," he said. "But when I heard what the idea was about, I really wanted to be a part of it. I wish we could have got all nine (Hawaiian) guys, but it's still something special to be a part of."

Kulukulualani said he chose elite paddlers for the crew to try and make a run at the lead pack.

"We easily could have found nine Hawaiian guys just to cross and have a good time," he said. "But I wanted to find guys who could compete with the best. If we're going to represent our race and our culture, I wanted to do it the best way possible."