

Pacific Northwest meets islands at Molokai Hoe

By Star Bulletin

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Federal Way, Wash. » Nearly 3,000 miles removed from the white sandy beaches and clear, warm oceans of Hawaii, Kikaha O Ke Kai Canoe Club launches its modest fleet of outrigger canoes in the chilly waters of Steel Lake.

As the setting sun peeks through a sheath of cloud cover, the glassy lake — situated in Federal Way, a suburb 25 miles south of downtown Seattle — provides a parallel to the paddlers' distant ohana. Braving the cold under layers of long-sleeved shirts, a collection of paddlers from various walks of life come together to engage in the ancient Hawaiian sport which has caught on around the globe.

The club's hard work and dedication will come to fruition on Sunday as Kikaha O Ke Kai coach Boy Kaluhiokalani Chun Fook brings a collection of paddlers from along the West Coast to the islands to compete in the 57th annual Molokai Hoe, widely recognized as the world championship of six-man outrigger canoe paddling. The 41-mile race from Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, across the Kaiwi Channel to Waikiki Beach will feature more than a thousand paddlers representing nearly 100 clubs from around the world.

"This race is so important, it's chicken skin time!" said Chun Fook.

The "all-star" crew features nine paddlers based in various locations ranging along North America's west coast. The team, dubbed Pacific Northwest, features: Washington based paddlers Lance Mamiya, Lance Kahn and Doug Miyata; Rick Graves of Portland, Ore.; Gary Parsons, Don Mehling and Gary Saldana of Maui; Chris Wong of San Francisco; and Jeff Ienhardt of Vancouver, British Columbia. Chun Fook would participate himself, but an injured shoulder forced him to join Don Isaacs as support captains for the crew.

"That's the thing about this race, having all the different guys makes it more exciting because of the knowledge each paddler brings," Chun Fook said. "We're going to do everything involved, like canoe surfing, and when we get to Molokai, were going to do the Molokai (sweet) bread run, go body surfing, and experience more of Hawaii out there. For some, it's the first time in their lives (traveling to Hawaii). It's a good chance for them not only to experience paddling but see Hawaii too."

Mamiya and Miyata enter the race riding a wave of momentum after claiming the 27-mile Pacific Northwest ORCA Outrigger Challenge on Aug. 29 at Sand Point Beach on Seattle's Lake Washington. The pair raced with Kikaha O Ke Kai as the club won the race in 3 hours, 11 1/2 minutes, and got a feel for the crew changes that play a key role in the Molokai Hoe. The race allows each crew nine team members, and with the three extra paddlers riding in a mandatory escort boat, crews can change out paddlers strategically to maximize effort and efficiency.

"It's going to be different this time around, because they've never practiced together, but they're very experienced," said Chun Fook of his hodgepodge crew. "Lance Mamiya organized all the boys together, so he briefed everybody on change-outs and what they needed to do for training. When we get to Molokai, we brief everyone on who's doing what legs, all the guys know this stuff but we just have to keep reminding them."

Team Pacific Northwest is looking to improve upon last year's time of just under 6:06 — good for 60th place out of 105 finishers. The crew is entering the highly-competitive master's 40-and-older division, and has their sights set on perennial powers Outrigger (Oahu), and Mooloolaba (Australia) — last year's champion and runner-up.

"Hopefully we can get some wind, Lance (Mamiya) is a good steersman and he loves to surf," said Chun Fook. "It's good for us, too, if it's flat, but we're looking forward to surfing. It's been so nice over here, it's unreal. I've been text messaging all my club members and they say: 'I wish I was there!' "