

# Last Hawaiian Paddle 1975

*The 65th Annual Molokai to Oahu canoe race will be held on Sunday, October 9 with Outrigger entering several crews. Here, Fred Hemmings Jr., reminisces about the 1975 race which was won by OCC.*

By Fred Hemmings Jr.



ABOVE: OCC's winning 1975 Molokai crew: Tom Conner, Paul MacLaughlin, Fred Hemmings Jr., Brant Ackerman, Mark Buck, Marshall Rosa, Tim Guard, Kevin Olds, Don Mailer.

RIGHT: The paddle on the far right is Fred's 1975 racing blade, the second paddle from left is a koa big wave steering blade.



It was 1975. I had paddled in a number of Molokai races starting in 1966. Remind me to tell you of the 1966 race, we never made it to the finish. The official name of the race back then was not Molokai Hoe. It was the Molokai to Oahu Canoe Race. The race was as it is now the world championship of outrigger canoe racing.

I am proud of my 46-year-old son Heath who finished seventh in last year's race in a very competitive international field of about 100 teams. He has raced in 22 Molokai's. I only completed 12.

By 1975 our Outrigger teams had done well in previous year's races and we certainly qualified as one of the favorites. Three complete teams from Tahiti were rumored to be entered in the race for the first time.

Hawaiian clubs were very interested in the Tahitians. It seems that they were paddling with a smaller tear drop shaped blade with a much higher stroke count of about 60 strokes per minute (spm). We thought that was a sprint and

they would never last. Our team from Outrigger, as I am sure is true with other Hawaii teams, was eager and looking forward to the challenge.

The Hawaiian teams raced with a traditional blade and stroke as we had done throughout the history of modern canoe racing in Hawaii. The stroke was the same my father had used in the 1930s.

Hawaiian paddles were big oval shaped blades. We paddled at about 42 spm and took it up to 44-46 spm for sprints. It was quite arduous pulling large paddles. Our stroke was very long. We would bend deep with chest to almost the gunnels reaching out in front and pull the cumbersome blade to past our hips. It was a pretty and rhythmic stroke.

"Pretty and rhythmic" was soon to become obsolete. I wanted to make a "statement" and had my pal Kimo Austin make me a traditional koa paddle. Racing paddles at the time were made of lighter woods. I would steer with the koa blade for the 40+ miles.

There may have been about 35 teams entered in the 1975 race. As usual most crews camped out at Hale O Lono Small Boat Harbor in the southwest lee of Molokai. Each team had a larger change boat and many had a smaller "chase" boat for drops and recovery.

Outrigger racing canoes have six seats. For many distance races there are nine paddlers on a team. Hence periodic changes in which relieving paddlers are dropped on course in front of the racing canoe and as the team paddles by several paddlers would jump out and the relief paddlers would haul themselves in.

The object is to change without slowing the canoe much. It is a difficult maneuver to have several paddlers jump out of a fast moving canoe in turbulent seas and have replacements get in. Changes are a big part of the race.

The race starting line was right outside the harbor and about three miles to La`au Point at the end of Molokai land fall. The approximately 40 mile race ended in front of the Moana Hotel at Waikiki Beach.

The Kaiwi Channel was famous for several reasons including usually being very rough with groundswells and brisk trades.

Being successful in the Molokai race required a lot of finesse as well as paddling ability. Besides paddling the boat fast, course, efficient changes, optimum use of swells, and a number of other factors played a part in the success of what seems like an uncomplicated sport.

I can remember lining up on the starting line curious about our Tahitian competitors. Our traditional rivals were Waikiki Surf Club, Healani and Hui Nalu.

It is no secret that getting to La`au Point as a leader was important. The reason is that all the chase boats are required to stay behind the racing crews till La`au Point when the first change could be made. All the contending teams would go all out to La`au to get in the lead in order to avoid the wake and chaos of escort boats.

Part of my job as steersman was to make sure our crew blew off the line first. A huge dynamite explosion on shore started the race. To our astonishment within the first mile the Tahitians already had a hundred-yard lead. Our Outrigger team was fighting with Surf Club for fourth.

So it was when we hit La`au and entered the channel the Tahitians had what seemed to be a quarter-mile lead. I remember thinking that it was going to be a long day. Our redemption was the channel. The swell was big and the trade winds were brisk. Hooray!

Looking ahead I could see the Tahitian boats snaking and not holding a solid course in the stubborn channel. Nevertheless they were ahead, way ahead. Due to tides that day it was smart to aim right for Diamond Head rather than Koko Head and try to ride tidal currents into Waikiki.

The Tahitians were on a zig zag straight course to Diamond Head. I figured that by staying behind them and just paddling they would be difficult to pass. Surely their steersman would be smart enough to "cover" us as we got close and tried to pass them. We took a northerly course. I figured if we could get high on them by a mile or two and stay near

them we could turn down and surf past them.

The Tahitians were paddling fast indeed but they were all over the place. About three-quarters of the way to Oahu we were what appeared to be abreast of the lead Tahitian canoe but way north. Surf Club was behind us. It was then we made our move and took a new line "downhill". We aimed for the front of the lead Tahitian boat.

Our crew was strong, steady and relentless. We finally reached the Tahitian pack and surfed into first. We never looked back and after 5 hours, 39 minutes and 7 seconds of paddling we crossed the finish line in a record time. I had a difficult time getting out of our racing canoe the venerable *Kakina*.

Our Outrigger Canoe Club crew consisted of Brant Ackerman, Mark Buck, Kevin Olds, Tom Conner, Tim Guard, Paul MacLaughlin, Don Mailer, Mike Rodrigues and me. We were proud.

As fate would have it was the last time that contending canoe teams used the traditional Hawaiian blade in canoe racing. Now 41 long years later my koa blade hangs on my wall. It is the last Hawaiian paddle.



*A gorgeous home @ Diamond Head.*

