

Outrigger Canoe Racing: For Women Who Love the Ocean

by Sharon J. Bintliff, M.D.

Racing Hawaiian outrigger canoes is the very essence of the Hawaiian heritage and tradition, one of the few that remains, and for that reason has an esthetic value for me matched by none other. But why do women race outrigger canoes? What is it that attracts women from all walks of life—professional women, housewives, models, college students—of ages spanning a half century in some crews? I am sure each woman has her own reasons for participating in this beautiful sport, and I would like to share my thoughts, my feelings, my reasons.

Canoe racing is a team sport that combines the challenge and excitement of team participation in that element of nature that I love best—Mother Ocean! The pressure is on each member of the crew to be in top physical condition, yet strength is only part of the formula for a winning crew. Each paddler must become an integral part of a crew of six individuals who must blend together in perfect harmony, physically, mentally and spiritually. Yes, strength is essential and the stronger each individual paddler, the stronger the crew; but without the blending, like a fine-tuned

machine, it rarely is a winning crew. If only one girl of the six is going through the motions but not really pulling her weight, that will make the difference in a race. And only that person knows whether she is carrying her share of the load.

As in any athletic event, there are certain techniques, styles and forms which, when followed precisely, make for excellence. The ability to learn these techniques and styles requires a certain level of coordination, agility, and, most importantly, concentration. This latter is the key quality that separates the occasional Sunday tennis player from the athlete who is accomplished at whatever sport he or she encounters and strives to master.

What goes on in my head during a race is critical and, being very competitive, I keep telling myself that we *can* win, we *will* win, we *must* win. Timing, timing is so important! My blade must enter and leave the water at exactly the same time as the blade of the girl in front of me. The rhythmical movement of my body must be exactly the same as hers. Concentration, only the most intense level of concentration,

when you tell yourself, "That was the strongest pull I had, but it has got to be more the next stroke." You have to fight thinking about things like, "I'm getting tired, how much longer is the race?" You can only think about the next stroke and the fact that it has got to be better timed and stronger, much stronger.

You must concentrate on the fact that there is no room for mistakes, absolutely no mistakes! You cannot miss a change, or let your paddle slip so that you get out of timing, and heaven forbid that you ever drop a paddle. The level of concentration must continually fight the temptation to think about how your body feels, because no matter how it feels you have to keep going, you have to stay in time, and you have to pull with all the strength that you have, and then find more.

I guess at the spiritual level (and there should be a spiritual aspect in everything we do) there is a commune with the ocean. That is one of the reasons I prefer long distance, open-ocean paddling, because the ocean is so beautiful.

There also is a deep commune with the canoe. It is a material object but definitely has a spirit, a symbolic Hawaiian spirit. When I get in the canoe I am saying to it, "Run Kakina, take us in first today, help us paddle a good race." I say things like that and I don't really think about the fact that most people might think it a bit strange to be talking to a canoe. The Hawaiians truly believe that as this canoe is made from the beautiful koa tree, instilled in it is a beautiful spirit. I have experienced a commune with the canoe at that spiritual level, especially during the first women's Molokai crossing.

Racing outrigger canoes is a back-breaking, painfully beautiful ordeal for those of us women who love the ocean. For me it is a deeply personal experience that continues to enrich my life and my ability to share it with others.

Na Waihine O Ke Kai.

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1980 OCC Holiday Schedule

Keiki Christmas Party

Wednesday, December 17, Annual OCC Holiday party for children of members and their parents. Special children's buffet at 5:00 p.m. Santa Claus arrives at sunset by outrigger canoe. Reservations please.

Christmas Eve Lunch and Dinner

Wednesday, December 24, Lunch served on the Hau Terrace 12:00 to 2:30. Special Christmas Eve Dinner served in the main dining room from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Reservations please.

Christmas Day Party

Thursday, December 25, For members only. 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. Luncheon served 12:00 to 2:00 p.m. Special Christmas dinner served from 5:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Make reservations early.

New Years Eve Lunch and Dinner

Wednesday, December 31, Lunch served on the Hau Terrace, 12:00 to 2:30 p.m. Music, Dinner, Dancing . . . Ring out the old and ring in the new at the OCC Gala Party. Starts at 9:00 p.m. Reservations, please.