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PADDLING



SB FILE PHOTO

The Waikiki Surf Club competed in the freshman half-mile race during the 1975 running of the Walter J. Macfarlane Regatta in Waikiki.

Tradition

Hawaii's oldest regatta has a list of legendary champions

By Cindy Luis
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CANOE surfing is an art, not just a sport.

It's understanding how the ocean moves and knowing how to move with it.

On the Fourth of July, it means one thing: the Walter J. Macfarlane Regatta at Waikiki. And when there is surf, it

means some of the state's best outrigger steersmen are out for daylong rides.

The oldest regatta in the state celebrates its 63rd running tomorrow. It's the only surf race on the Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association's calendar and, with lanes limited to seven instead of the normal 14, it's also the most elite.

Crews have to qualify to race, accumulating points from the previous four regattas. Clubs are allowed to use open steering, meaning a steersman can race at any level and as many times as needed.

Tradition alone gives it prestige.

The names of the winning steersmen are legendary, starting with Duke Kahanamoku, then representing host Outrigger Canoe Club. The late great waterman steered three men's crews to victory in the inaugural 1943 event, including what is still the blue-ribbon race, the senior men.

That first Macfarlane had eight men's races, two for women, a relay race, one for surfboards and a tug-of-war. It has since grown to 37 races ... all for outrigger canoes.

According to a list compiled by Outrigger Canoe Club historian Marilyn Kali, Kahanamoku -- the father of modern surfing -- steered three more winning crews over the next two years. His total of six pales in comparison to those at the top of the list, but it did set the tone for the current leader in overall Macfarlane victories.

Great surfers make great steersmen. Fred Hemmings, a former world surfing champion, has 58 victories while steering for Outrigger and Hui Nalu between 1956 and 1992. (The total is unofficial because race results are incomplete for 1956, 1963-64, '66, '71, '74, '75 and '81.)

"What I love about the race is that it is one of the last traditionally and culturally rich events we have left," said Hemmings, who won his first Macfarlane race at age 10, steering the boys 14-and-under Outrigger crew. "Too much of what is Hawaii has been lost, especially in Waikiki.

"What makes this race special? In a word -- surf. It creates an unpredictable and challenging element. In flat water, the margin of victory is most often about paddling power. On waves, the margin of difference is steering."

The margin of difference between Hemmings and the No. 2 steersman -- Jim Foti of Lanikai -- is 15. Foti, at age 38, has 43 victories heading into tomorrow's race.

Older brother John is No. 4 with 35, although he remembers steering the winning 18 boys crew in 1981, one of the years missing from Kali's list.

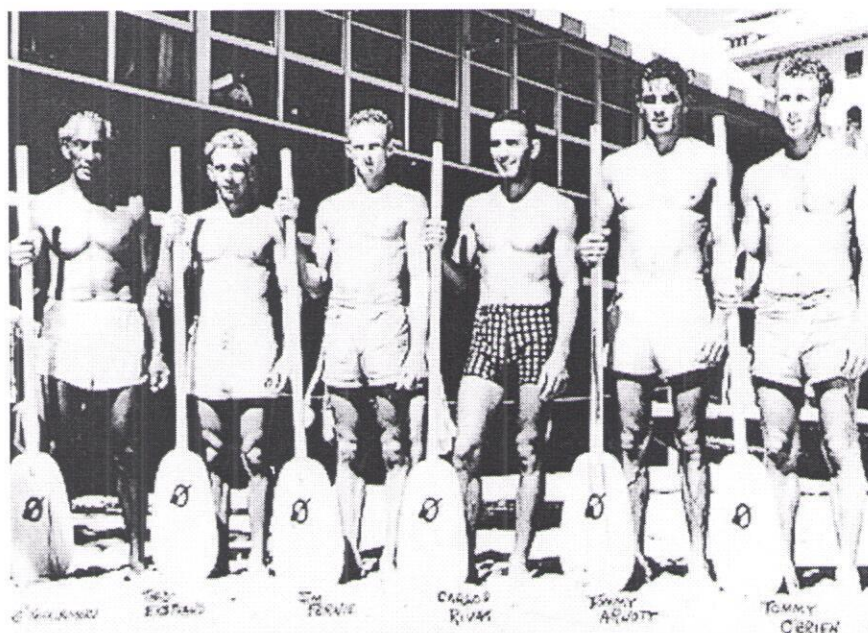
Winningest steersmen*

- 58:** Fred Hemmings (Outrigger/Hui Nalu) 1956-'92
- 43:** Jim Foti (Lanikai) 1990-2004
- 39:** Walter Guild (Outrigger) 1985-2004
- 35:** John Foti (Lanikai) 1989-2004
- 34:** Marc Haine (Outrigger) 1983-2004
- 33:** Kala Kukea (Hui Nalu) 1977-'91)
- 31:** Nappy Napoleon (Waikiki Surf/Hawaiian Warriors/Anuenue) 1969-2004
- 30:** Todd Bradley (Outrigger) 1985-'94
- 26:** Brant Ackerman (Outrigger/Hui Nalu) 1968-'99
- 25:** Kamoia Kalama (Kailua) 1972-2003
- 24:** Gary "Sword" Murakami (Kai Oni/Healani/Kailua) 1962-'92
- 21:** Kalama Heine (Hui Lanakila/Lanikai) 1986-2004
- 20:** Tom Conner (Outrigger/Kailua) 1980-2003

*Incomplete or missing results from 1956, '63, '65, '66, '71, '75 and '81

"Besides getting a hell of a workout, this race is always a blast," John Foti said. "It's just fun to steer all kinds of crews with people you don't normally paddle with. And it's fun to light up the kids' faces when they win.

"What makes it exciting is that anything can happen, anyone can win. You can be dead last at some point, catch a wave, and win. Or you can seemingly be miles ahead and, if someone else gets on a wave, you're dead last."



COURTESY MARILYN KALI / OCC

The senior men's crew of Duke Kahanamoku, Thad Ekstrand, Jim Fernie, Carlos Rivas, Tommy Arnott and Tommy O'Brien won the inaugural event in 1943.

The 42-year-old Foti recalled the senior men's event in 1996, when Lanikai was the only club using a koa canoe (the Mokulua). The 2-mile race is an out-and-back course with turns at half-mile flags.

"We kept taking a beating on the way out, bailing (water) all the way," he said. "We'd make the turn, pick up a wave, pass everyone and be first making the turn (closest to the beach).

"That happened every time. We'd fall behind going out, pass everyone back in. We caught a wave at the quarter-mile flag and won."

Now that using koa canoes is optional, few clubs risk damaging their prized wa'a in the Waikiki event. Before the advent of fiberglass canoes, there was no option ... which led to the use of open steersmen to safeguard the koas.

"We held onto the mandatory koa rule as long as we could," said Outrigger's Walter Guild, who ranks No. 3 with 39 wins from 1985 to 2004. "But there were a couple bad collisions that

damaged the Malia (Waikiki Surf Club), the Leilani (Outrigger) and others. You don't want to risk it.

"With fiberglass, steersmen can go for it more, you take off on anything, whereas before (with koas) you hesitated."

Guild has a special fondness for the Macfarlane race, which is named for his great uncle.

"The family connection weighs heavily," said the 48-year-old Guild. "It's very special for me and fun to be part of the tradition."

When it comes to family connections, the Fotis -- with a combined 78 -- top the list with wins. Besides John and Jim, brother Frank and mom Mollie have one win each.

The Hemmingses (Fred, brothers Aka and Mark, sisters Maria, Cynthia and Heidi, and son Heath) have 75.

"I was raised to steer," said Heath Hemmings, who has six victories. "My dad knows the waves, he's got the knack with his surfing background. What he taught me was to keep control of the crew, use good judgment and keep your focus."

"The history of the race speaks for itself. It's one of the most celebrated for a lot of reasons, but the main message is to have fun. Hopefully, the steersman can do that for the crew."

Behind the Fotis and Hemmingses are family names etched in the storied past of Hawaii's water sports: Napoleon (combined 58), Haime (41), Kalama (41), Kukea (41), Makua (20), Thompson (20), Downing (17), Froiseth (14).



COURTESY PHOTO

Jim Foti, left, has 43 victories and brother John, right, has 35.

Nappy Napoleon, who holds the record for competing in the most Molokai Hoe races (48 consecutive), won his first Macfarlane race as a steersman in 1969. According to the list, he added 30 more over the next 34 years.

"It's a good race if there's plenty surf," said Napoleon, the 64-year-old coach of Anuenue. "And anybody can win. You can lose all season, but when you go in that race, you always get chance for win.

"I like to steer this race. For me, I like to think I can do it like I did before. I feel I got the edge because, being a beach boy, I know where the surf is, where to go out, where to come in. It hasn't changed much in all the years."

The stories would swamp as many canoes as the 1969 event, when the Star-Bulletin headline read, "30 canoes swamp." The senior women from Waikiki Surf Club won their race in 1954 finishing backward, with the stern of the Malia crossing the line first.

The 1956 race was postponed because of high surf and was rescheduled four days later. An 8-foot wave wiped out the entire field of the 1969 junior men's race.

The Malia lost three feet of its bow in a 1979 collision and over \$1,000 was raised on the spot "probably before they were even able to swim the canoe into shore," said Guild.

And, in 1985, Fred Hemmings steered what is believed to be a record 15 races, winning four.

The mark for most victories in a day (8) is shared by Hemmings (1974) and Jim Foti (1995). Foti also had a six-win day in 1997, his brother John six in 1998.

Few women have been allowed to steer, which has cut down on the opportunities to win. Outrigger's Kisi Haine has the most victories for a female (7), with Luana Froiseth, who has steered for both Waikiki Surf Club and Healani, second (5).

Haine's older brother Marc had five of his steering wins in 2001. Except for a hiatus in the 1990s when he lived on the mainland, Haine has had at least one victory in every Macfarlane since 1983.

Because of recent back surgery, he will sit out tomorrow "for the first time that I can remember," said the 46-year-old, who competes for Outrigger.

"There is such an unknown to this race," he said. "Everyone has a chance to win. The surf is the motivation, the draw. It brings out the Hawaiian-ness of the sport.

"Qualifying for this race is the gift. Being in the race is the prestige."

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