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[PADDLING]



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On its way to winning the 52nd annual Hawaii Modular Space Molokai Hoe, Team New Zealand/Hawaii almost lost it just off Diamond Head when the crew strayed too close to shore and encountered a wave. One team member said, "That was a little sketchy."

Team New Zealand/Hawaii wins channel race

By Brandon Lee
Special to the Star-Bulletin

Team New Zealand/Hawaii is an elite paddling crew of close friends, from two different countries, with the primary goal of having fun during the few times they get together to race each year.

But winning, of course, always adds to the level of fun, and that's exactly what Team NZ/H did yesterday at the 52nd annual Hawaii Modular Space Molokai Hoe, a 41-mile trek from Molokai to Oahu across the Kaiwi Channel.

The race is considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger

canoe paddling, and after experiencing the disappointment of finishing runner-up by a mere 20 seconds last year, Team NZ/H stroked to a convincing victory this year, crossing in 5 hours, 2 minutes and 24 seconds. Windward Oahu's Lanikai Canoe Club (5:07:15) reached the finish at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki second, almost five minutes behind.

"It's fun to win; that's why I do this," Team NZ/H steersman Karel Tresnak Jr. said. "I love the sport, love doing it -- but I love to win, too. We did what we had to do."

Added teammate Bill Pratt: "I think one of the greatest things we've found by sticking together through the years is: Don't try to force seriousness; remember that we do want to win, do want to compete, but we're also here to have fun and enjoy each other. We reminded ourselves of that, and because of that I think it allowed us to remain loose and it made things easier."

All longtime paddlers, Team NZ/H members primarily practice on their own, only coming together for a couple of major races outside of Hawaii, and then a handful of long-distance races in Hawaii in preparation for the Molokai Hoe each year. Theirs is not a traditional formula in this most prestigious of paddling races, but it's one that has allowed the team to build its own tradition of success recently.

Combined with a win in 2001, Team NZ/H now has two victories, along with three second-place finishes and one third in the last six Molokai Hoe races. Its win two years ago was part of the closest finish in race history, when it defeated Lanikai by just two seconds.

Team NZ/H yesterday used the same nine-man crew (six paddle at a time, rotating with open-ocean changes) as it did last year, with New Zealand members Rob Kaiwai, Maui Kjeldsen, Eugene Marsh and Andrew Penny, and Hawaii paddlers Raven Aipa, Thibert Lussiaa, Kea Paiaina, Pratt and Tresnak.

"This (victory) is better (than the first). ... You don't want to say that you got a point to prove, but we thought we paddled well enough (to win) last year," Kaiwai said. "We were confident before we started off, but there's a fine line between confidence and arrogance. You never want to cross that line, and you got to pay respect to the other crews out there."

Powering right from the start of the race at Hale O Lono Harbor, Team NZ/H assumed the lead among 95 other teams at the outset and never gave it up. Wailea of Maui (5:15:33) -- which ended up rounding out a Hawaii sweep of the top six spots -- briefly challenged at the outset, but couldn't recover after Team NZ/H caught an early wave.

The champions built their biggest lead of nearly a mile in the channel, where

there were waves in the 3- to 4-foot-face range and moderate tradewinds blowing mostly at their backs. In command, their strategy was to avoid mistakes of their own while also trying to cover any gambles made by the crews trying to catch up.

By surfing swells, overall race record-holder (4:50:31, in 2000) Lanikai ended up closing the gap and gaining sight of Team NZ/H, as both battled the stiff current from a receding tide around Oahu's southeastern tip and southern shoreline. Unlike in 2002, however -- when it was struck by a large wave at Diamond Head and bogged down -- Team NZ/H paddled relatively error-free through the homestretch.

Said Lanikai's Kai Bartlett: "We're pretty happy because it was an improvement from last year (when) we got fourth and couldn't see the (top) finishers. But the race itself was pretty tough for a while. It was real sticky out there. You had to work real hard to get the bumps (waves). ... We came on a little late, but at least we came on."

Sticking closer to land to avoid the current, the paddlers of Hui Nalu (5:12:47), surprised many -- including themselves -- by placing third. Another Oahu club, Outrigger (5:13:24), took fourth, while Hawaiian of Maui (5:14:48) finished fifth. Rai of Tahiti (5:17:17), the defending champion, was the first non-Hawaii club to finish, placing seventh.

"Nobody expected this," Hui Nalu's Kai Mowat said. "We got pretty lucky -- a smart course helped us out."

The first non-open division canoe to cross yesterday was Mooloolaba of Australia, which won the masters ages 35-over in 5:22:49, good for 11th overall. Other division winners were: Namolokama O Hanalei (5:49:41) in masters 45-over, Kailua (5:47:00) in masters 55-over and Lanikai 2 (5:43:34) in the koa division.

PADDLING

Hawaii Modular Space Molokai Hoe

Yesterday

Overall

1. Team New Zealand/Hawaii, 5:02:24. 2. Lanikai 1, 5:07:15. 3. Hui Nalu, 5:12:47. 4. Outrigger, 5:13:24. 5. Hawaii CC, 5:14:48. 6. Wailea, 5:15:33. 7. Ra'I Tahiti, 5:17:17. 8. Hui Lanakila, 5:17:33. 9. Kai Opuu, 5:19:43. 10. Team Mahina, 5:21:46. 11. Mooloolaba, 5:22:49.

Division winners

Open: 1. Team New Zealand/Hawaii, (Kea Paiaina, Billy Pratt, Andrew Penny, Maui Kjelosen, Raven Aipa, Thibert Lussiaa, Robert Kaiwai, Eugene Marsh, Karel Tresnak), 5:02:24.

Masters 35: 1. Mooloolaba from Australia, (Phil Thistlewood, Marc Haine, Russ Johnson, Ron

Grabber, Ken Powel, Greg Rynne, Andrew Sprizzi, Rob Gowland, Guy Wilding), 5:22:49.

Masters 45: 1. Namolokama O Hanalei, (Steve Cole, Steve Baker, Togo Humsurr, Lance Lawey, Mick Callahan, Gene Lopez, Mark Daniels, Leslie Yokotake, Kauaika Goodale), 5:49:41.

Masters 55: 1. Kailua Canoe Club, (Hank Leandro, Mike Watson, Bob Bruce, Paul Gay, Bruce Clifford, Bob Thurston, Willy Dunhour, Sean Murphy, Kalani Delovio, Jeff Metzger, Paul Aguirre, Chris Crabb), 5:47:00.

Koa: 1. Lanikai 2, (Kalani Irvine, Mike Smith, Zane Chess, Aaron Creps, Jeff Cummings, Scott Freitas, Bruce Lucas, James Bustamante, Herb Nahinu), 5:43:34.