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Kai 'Opua serves notice by winning Dad Center

By Dayton Morinaga
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Make no mistake, Kai 'Opua is the team to beat in women's canoe paddling this year.

The club from Kailua, Kona, proved it yesterday by making no mistakes while dominating the Dad Center Women's Long Distance Canoe Race.

Kai 'Opua completed the 27-mile course in 3 hours, 30 minutes, 45 seconds. The host club, Outrigger, placed second, about a half-mile behind at 3:34:59. Hawaiian, which was actually comprised of paddlers from various clubs around the state, was third at 3:36:53. Defending champion Hui Nalu (3:37:17) was fourth and Kailua (3:42:13) fifth.

The race was for all-female crews. Thirty-six crews completed the course.

"We really had no idea where we stood going into this," said Jackie Taylor, who steered the Kai 'Opua crew. "We knew there were some good crews out there, so that pushed us. But, yeah, we were really surprised at how far ahead we were at the finish."

The course traveled from Kailua Beach to Magic Island, and then back to the Outrigger Canoe Club. Before the fleet even reached Makapu'u, there was a clear-cut leader.

"We were in it for about two minutes off Waimanalo," said Outrigger steerswoman Kisi Haine. "But that was it. They pulled ahead a little while after that and pretty much dominated the rest of the way."

The winning crew included Taylor, Carrie Hendricks, Cheryl Villegas, Jessie Eames, Patty Eames, Nicki Enos, Cherisse Kelii, Ronona Della Cioppa, Beth Graves and Amy Young. Each team was allowed to rotate 10 paddlers into the six seats in the canoe. While six paddle, four follow in an escort boat until relief changes are needed.

Despite paddling in a borrowed canoe, Hendricks said: "Everything went smooth. All our (relief) changes were good, and the boat was really moving."

It probably helped that nine of the 10 Kai 'Opua paddlers were also on last year's winning Na Wahine O Ke Kai crew, including the mother-daughter combination of Patty Eames, 52, and Jessie Eames, 20.

"There's definitely a different feeling this year," said Jessie Eames. "Last year, we worked hard to get it. This year, we're working even harder to defend it."

The Moloka'i-to-O'ahu race, which will be held Sept. 23, is considered the world championship of women's long-distance canoe paddling.

"That's the reason why we're here," Taylor said. "Our focus is to win Moloka'i again."

To be sure, the crew has been practicing daily in both big waves and small off the Big Island.

Yesterday, the winds and swells were calm off O'ahu, similar to the daily conditions off Kona.

"We were prepared for rough water, but we live in the flat water," Hendricks said. "It probably helped us that it was kind of flat today."

As Haine put it: "It felt like Kona, at times. It was hot and muggy and there wasn't too much to surf. It would have been a big surprise if we beat (Kai 'Opua) today. Our crew was hoping for big surf and wind."

The Outrigger crew consisted of Haine, Mary Smolenski, Traci Phillips, Malia Kamisugi, Donna Kahakui, Paula Crabb, Karin Hansen, Sara Ackerman, Lisa Livingston and Katy Bourne. In its training waters off Diamond Head, Outrigger tried to make a late run at Kai 'Opua by surfing on the small waves near the shoreline.

"It didn't pay off," Haine said. "They were too far ahead."

The state's best teams, as well as several top international crews, will meet again this weekend at Kona for the Queen Lili'uokalani Races.

"We have our work cut out for us," Haine said. "Kai 'Opua is setting the standard now."

Hui Lanakila placed 12th overall and won the masters 35-older division in 3:57:15. Kailua was the only entry in the 45-older division, winning with a time of 4:08:54.

The annual race is held in honor of George "Dad" Center, a legendary swimming coach and waterman in Hawai'i during the 1920s and '30s.

- Correction: Kailua-1 won the women's 45-older division of the Duke Kahanamoku Long Distance Canoe Race on Aug. 19. Incorrect results were submitted to the Advertiser and printed Aug. 20.

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Dad Center Women's Long Distance Race

Final results

Open: 1, Kai 'Opua-1 (Carrie Hendricks, Cheryl Villegas, Jackie Taylor, Jessie Eames, Patty Eames, Nicki Enos, Cherisse Kelii, Ronona Della Cioppa, Beth Graves, Amy Young), 3:30:45.

2, Outrigger-1, 3:34:59. 3, Hawaiian, 3:36:43. 4, Hui Nalu-1, 3:37:17. 5, Kailua-4, 3:42:13. 6, Lokahi-1, 3:42:49. 7, Kaiola, 3:47:27. 8, Lae Ula O Kai, 3:51:06. 9, Lanikai-1, 3:53:56. 10, Outrigger-2, 3:56:23. 11, Waikiki Beach Boys-1, 3:56:37. 12, Kailua-3, 3:58:23. 13, Kailua-2, 4:00:48. 14, Healani-1, 4:01:26. 15, Hui Lanakila, 4:02:33. 16, Waikiki Yacht Club-Blue, 4:03:37. 17, Kai 'Opua-2, 4:04:00. 18, Hui Nalu-4, 4:05:47. 19, Hui Nalu-2, 4:06:18. 20, Anuenue, 4:08:18.

35-older: 1, Hui Lanakila (Pauahi Ioane, Lehua Heine, Cheryl Tracy, Deneen McNicoll, Colleen Chun, Lenora Alama, Adrian Wilson, Kuumomi Ho, Robin Nonaka, Kristi Kupele), 3:57:15. 2, Hui Nalu, 4:00:55. 3, Waikiki Surf Club, 4:09:52.

45-older: 1, Kailua-1 (Jan Jones, Mary Martin, Amy Crews, Lynn Kaita, Sara Jane Watson, Molly Mosher-Cates, Mary Jo Buell, Folly Murdock, Dara Fairchild, Rebecca Gonzales), 4:08:54.