

Sports

Team Bradley reclaims Na Wahine O Ke Kai crown

By [Kyle Galdeira](#) Special to the Star-Advertiser

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BRUCE ASATO / BASATO@STARADVERTISER.COM

Team Bradley finished first with a time of 6 hours, 5 minutes and 34 seconds at the Na Wahine O Ke Kai canoe race from Molokai to Oahu on Sunday.

Team Bradley is back in business.

After conceding the title in 2014 and enduring an extended wait after last year's race was canceled, Team Bradley crossed the line in 6 hours, 5 minutes and 34 seconds to claim gold at the Hawaiian Airlines Na Wahine O Ke Kai. Sunday's event marked the 38th edition — and 36th crossing — of the 41-mile race from Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, to Duke Kahanamoku Beach fronting the Hilton Hawaiian Village in Waikiki.

Outrigger (6:11:46) finished second, while Hui Nalu (6:15:11), the Waikiki Beach Boys (6:16:47) and Lanikai (6:24:44) rounded out the top five.

Sixty four crews took part in the race, and the competition featured a diverse blend of squads from Hawaii, California, Washington D.C., Australia, Japan and Hong Kong. In distance races, crews are accompanied by motored escort boats and are allowed to substitute paddlers along the way to provide for ample breaks and hydration.

Three hours and thirty minutes into the race, Team Bradley had established a “five-to-six boat length” lead, roughly a quarter-mile, with Outrigger, Waikiki and Lanikai close behind. Paddlers took advantage of 6-to-8 foot swells throughout the channel, and by the time Team Bradley reached Diamond Head in advance of the home stretch, the victors had opened up a half-mile advantage over Outrigger.

“It's a blessing to cross the channel, and winning gives you a great feeling,” said Lauren Spalding of Team Bradley, who has completed the Molokai-to-Oahu crossing every year but once since 1996. “It's amazing to see so many women competing in this race, it's great for the sport. Outrigger and Hui Nalu had a great showing, too.”

Team Bradley has now claimed nine of the last 11 titles — including six straight crowns from 2005-2010 — and set the current race record time of 5 hours, 22 minutes and 5 seconds in 2008. The victorious crew included: Spalding, Dane Ward, Andrea Moller, Cherisse Agorastis, Kristin Foster, Noelani Sawyer, Lori Nakamura, Nicole Pederson, Coral Gonzales and Kaulu Lu‘uwai.

The Waikiki Beach Boys entered the competition as defending Na Wahine O Ke Kai champions, and also won the race in 2011. Team Bradley and Waikiki are still chasing the precedent set by Offshore (Calif.), which also won the race six consecutive times (1986-1991) and was victorious 10 times out of 11 tries (1986-1996).

“We never really think about (the record for total wins), we’re just stoked to be out there,” Spalding said. “You don’t expect another win, but it feels great and we’re humbled by the experience.”

With a crew composed of paddlers from Kauai, Oahu, Molokai, Maui and the Big Island, Team Bradley rarely practices together as a team. The squad makes up for the lack of group training by working out in one-person canoes and cross-training; by sticking to the rigorous program, the team continues to compete at an elite level despite actually paddling together just a handful of times each year.

“It’s so amazing, and I’m thankful and happy to be a part of this group of women,” said Gonzales, who lives on Molokai. “We want to keep going strong (and representing) Hawaii every year. It’s an honor to be part of this team.”

Traci Phillips helped Outrigger secure the runner-up finish, and did so 38 years after being a part of the winning crew in the inaugural Molokai-to-Oahu

women's race. The experienced paddler, who has also competed in multiple Olympics in kayaking, served as a paddler-coach for the talented young crew that exceeded expectations under the guidance of coach Johnny Puakea.

"We were just stoked to be in the hunt for the first four or so hours, everyone including our novice paddlers stepped up and did really well," Phillips said.

"We never expected to win, but were lucky to have a shot. You want to promote these young girls because they are the future, and our very young crew has a lot of potential. Hopefully this gives them hope, and I'm very proud."

Similarly, Lanikai used a blend of veteran and up-and-coming paddlers to claim what crew and club members called the team's best Na Wahine O Ke Kai finish.

"The competition is so good, we tried our best and are stoked to be in the top five," said Donna Kahakui, a Lanikai paddler who also coached the crew along with Alika Guillaume. "I couldn't be more proud as a coach, and the hope is that we can continue to be competitive with the top dogs. It goes to show that if you fortify the skills that will help the young paddlers, anything is possible."

The men will compete at the Hawaiian Airlines Molokai Hoe on Oct. 9 and will follow the same course as the Na Wahine O Ke Kai in the final event of the outrigger canoe paddling season. Team Red Bull of the Big Island and Team Primo of Maui represent the local favorites to take home the prestigious race's hardware, but crews from Hui Nalu, Outrigger, Kailua, Lanikai, Hui Lanakila and Healani have also showed promise throughout the long-distance season.