

Hawaiian dominates yet again

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

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CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / CRUSSELL@STARADVERTISER.COM

Hawaiian Canoe Club won the women's junior title at the 2016 HCRA state championship held at Keehi Lagoon on Saturday. In the crew are Barbara Querry, front, Lisa Fanning, Fiona van Ammers, Catherine Deboni, Nicole Schroeter and Theresa Gerry (not visible).



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Puna Canoe Club claimed the men's junior title. Making the turn were Kili Wakana, front, Kekoa Sumera-Lee, Jeremy Padayao, Derek Park, Colby Nicolas and Jonah Kalima.

While many showed up to Keehi Lagoon on Saturday wondering about the condition of the notoriously murky water, Hawaiian Canoe Club made it crystal clear that it remains as strong as ever with another impressive performance at the Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association State Championship regatta at Keehi Lagoon.

The club from Maui racked up 13 individual race wins and took the AAAA division (21-40 crews entered) with 427 points to notch a fourth consecutive state title and 14th in 18 years. Hawaiian, which held off Kailua (393 points) and Kai Opua (210 points) in the large division, continued to dominate the

competition, as the dynastic club also has won the Maui County Hawaiian Canoe Association championship 31 years running (this year's championship regatta was canceled due to Tropical Storm Darby; otherwise Hawaiian would most likely own 32 consecutive titles).

"It's phenomenal — everybody works together and takes care of their job all while representing Maui," said Hawaiian coach Diane Ho.

Through the day's first 18 races, Hawaiian already had established a 220-183-63 advantage over Kailua and Kai Opua, which represents the Big Island's Moku O Hawaii. Hawaiian won five of the first eight races and 11 of the first 20 events to open up a commanding lead.

Nine of the early wins were turned in by Hawaiian's keiki squads, surpassing the club's youth record of seven set last year. According to Ho, coach Kauhane Lu'uwai told the kids prior to the race that if they broke the record that he would let them "do what they want to his hair," and they plan on "bleaching his hair, painting it rainbow colors and adding glitter, so that was their motivation today."

Entering the week, nearly 3,500 paddlers representing 53 clubs from six islands and six outrigger canoe paddling organizations were planning on competing in the event's 41 races ranging in length from ¼ to 1½ miles. However, after Keehi Lagoon was cleared for use on Thursday, the state Department of Health issued an indefinite warning and posted signs urging caution in the water because bacteria levels remained high, and illnesses or infection could arise via exposure.

“We just ignored it,” said Ho of the Lagoon drama. “Keehi Lagoon is Keehi Lagoon, and to us, it didn’t matter. It kind of mars it because we’re competitive and want to see where we stand (against the likes of Oahu’s top clubs).”

Seven clubs from Oahu ended up pulling out of the competition due to safety concerns, and additional clubs were faced with a shortage of competitors as paddlers chose not to participate. Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association clubs Hui Nalu, Lanikai, Outrigger, New Hope and Ewa Pu’uloa Outrigger, as well as Na ‘Ohana O Na Hui Wa’a members Na Keiki O Ka Mo’i and I Mua One Blade did not paddle in the regatta, and would have accounted for more than one fourth of the entire regatta field (at least 160 crews of the 570 entered when lanes were assigned).

“I’m super proud of everybody who came out and supported our club,” said Kailua coach Hank Leandro. “We didn’t scratch any crews, but the hard part was convincing everyone that the water quality really wasn’t as bad as (the media and general public) were saying. In the end, we ended up here together and this is a great group.”

While the majority of Manu O Ke Kai’s 10 qualifying crews did not participate in the state regatta, two teams — the men’s 50 and 55 squads — were “given the blessings” to race by longtime club president Randy Sanborn. The men’s 55 crew used the opportunity to claim gold in the event as Derek Lee Loy, Greg Pavao, Edward Kama, Thomas Schlotman, John Hoogsteden and Mika Amantiad raced to victory in the ½-mile race, finishing in 3 minutes and 47.63 seconds and holding off Keahiakahoe by two-plus seconds.

“This is awesome, but I feel really bad for those paddlers who wanted to be out here today,” Lee Loy said. “There are a lot of warriors out there that really wanted to paddle, too.”

Lanikai's absence, as well as the void left by three-time defending OHCRA champion Hui Nalu and a rebuilt Outrigger squad, left Kailua as the lone Oahu club remaining to square off with Hawaiian for a realistic shot at the state crown. However, some of Kailua's paddlers chose not to race, so the club's initial strategy had to be altered on the fly.

"I just couldn't see Hawaiian and Kai Opua coming all this way and not being able to face some big-club competition," Leandro said.

Puna of Moku O Hawaii claimed the AAA Division (13-20 crews entered) with 212 points, while Kihei (178 points) and the Waikiki Beach Boys (165 points) took home the runner-up trophies. The AA Division (7-12 crews) title was shared by OHCRA members Healani and Keahiakahoe (123 points apiece), while Na Kai 'Ewalu of Maui notched 118 points to finish in a close third.

The wide-open A Division (1-6 crews) went to Kawaihae (68 points), while Wailea (64 points) and Waikiki Surf Club (57 points) kept things close throughout the day.

The Waikiki Beach Boys continued their dominant run in the senior women's race and held off Kai Opua to claim the 1½-mile race for the eighth consecutive year. Waikiki crossed the line in 12 minutes and 51.46 seconds, while Kai Opua finished nearly nine seconds — roughly two boat lengths — behind. The Beach Boys actually trailed their Big Island cohorts through the first half-mile, but ahead of the competition at the mile mark, the third of the race's five turns.

"There was a lot of pressure going into this one, it was a whole new game," said Dana Yaross, Waikiki's president and veteran paddler who paddled in the

first seat of the winning canoe. “It was a stressful week, but from the Beach Boys’ perspective, it’s about setting the example.”