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CANOE_RACING

OCC women take lead and never let up

By Jack Wyatt

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Like a bullet train speeding across a prairie, defending champion Outrigger Canoe Club kept on the fast track yesterday, winning the Dad Center Long Distance Canoe Race for women for the 16th time in 23 years.

"Our goal was to break three hours," said OCC steersman Kisi Haine, "We accomplished that mark with two minutes, 29 seconds to spare."

Outrigger inched ahead of the 31-canoe fleet at the Kailua start and didn't let up until the Waikiki finish 24 miles - and two hours, 57 minutes and 31 seconds - later.

"It was a paddler's race - only a few bumps (swells) in which to surf," said Haine of the relatively calm conditions.

The race honors George "Dad" Center - Hawaii's legendary swim coach of the 1920s and 1930s. Center, who died in 1962, was an advocate for women's participation in water sports.

Kailua placed second in the open division, finishing in three hours flat. Hui Nalu finished third in 3:02:38.

Lokahi won the masters 35-years-and-over division, placing 16th overall in 3:23:01.

Each crew consisted of six paddlers and three substitutes. All canoes were of fiberglass construction, except for eighth-place finisher Lanikai, which used a koa-wood boat.

"We got off to a good start, with Kailua following close behind," Haine said. Rounding Makapuu Point, Outrigger enjoyed a 1:45 lead. By Koko Head, the Dad Center host had extended its lead to two minutes.

"Our best (surfing) rides came as we approached Portlock," Haine said. "Race conditions, overall, were pretty much on the mild side."

Several canoes capsized but the boats were righted and crews continued racing.

Two disqualifications were reported - Outrigger's second crew when it's escort was found to lack proper communication equipment, and Lanikai's masters for not having an escort.

"It was a good training race for the upcoming Bankoh Na Wahine O Ke Kai, from Molokai to Oahu (Sept. 29)," said Joan Malama, president of the Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association.

Outrigger's longtime women's coach, Steve Scott was happy with his crew's performance.

"Finishing first in the Dad Center is, of course, our first priority," he said. "Our women approach each race as a serious competition.

"But the Dad Center was also a test - to check our level of Molokai race preparation. Based on what I saw today, I'd say we're ahead of our (training) schedule."

OffShore Canoe Club of California, winner of nine of the past 10 Na Wahine O Ke Kai events, is on every Oahu paddler's hit list.

"OffShore is beatable," Scott said, "We beat them in the Molokai race four years ago. Our Outrigger women will never be in awe of any club, in any race."

Scott said he made paddler combination changes yesterday that makes his crew even stronger than ever.

Top finishing Outrigger and Kailua plan to take their Molokai preparation to an even higher plane early next month. They've both entered crews in California's hotly contested Newport Beach to Catalina Island race for women scheduled Sept. 7.

"It's an expensive trip but a great opportunity to test our crew against the best," said Kailua paddler Makanani Wong.

Is Kailua serious about paddling? "To help pay for this trip, we held a lot of fund raisers," Wong said. "Wanna buy a club T shirt?"

To most Dad Center participants, paddling is a competitive sport, not simply an exercise.

And most paddlers aren't about to be intimidated by any visiting crew, regardless of its world-class status.

"In a race such as the Na Wahine O Ke Kai, anything can happen and any crew can be beaten," Wong said.

Added Outrigger's Traci Phillips, a three-time Olympic kayak paddler: "In the Catalina and Molokai events, like today's race, we'll go out and do our best. And let the strongest team win."