

Kailua wins fourth straight OHCRA crown

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Kailua's men's masters 40 crew made a turn ahead of Lanikai. Hui Nalu won the race, but Kailua went on to take the OHCRA championship regatta.

After enduring a season full of frustration, the Kailua Canoe Club picked the right time to return to its winning ways.

Kailua claimed its fourth consecutive Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association title, winning the organization's championship regatta at Keehi Lagoon on Sunday. Lanikai entered the regatta

as the favorite, having won the previous six OHCRA events of the season, but Kailua used a regatta-high 12 victories to retain its crown.

"Thanks to the hard work from everybody involved. We really wanted to win this regatta because we haven't won one yet this season — this is what we were shooting for from the beginning of the season," said Hank Leandro, Kailua's co-head coach. "This was our mission, and we did it."

Kailua took the AAA division (27-39 crews entered) trophy with 96 points, fending off neighboring rival Lanikai (85 points), Hui Nalu (78 points) and Outrigger (64 points) — which was aided by its girls 15 and men's 65 crews completing undefeated seasons. With two events remaining, Kailua held a nine-point lead over Lanikai, which needed two consecutive wins and no further points from Kailua in order to reverse its fortunes — something that would not come to fruition.

"It always feels good when your team comes together at the right time, but that doesn't happen without the team effort and sacrifice. Today was the culmination of that in an effort from some very humble paddlers that were willing to put forth their best effort," said longtime Kailua coach and paddler Kamo Kalama. "Just like anything else, through struggle you get stronger. Lanikai is a very competitive team, and we've got great coaches here that allow our paddlers to put their best effort forward."

In defeat, Lanikai's senior men capped an unblemished season, winning the 1 1/2-mile marquee event in 11 minutes, 12.35 seconds. The crew of Patrick Dolan, Jack Roney, Manny Kulukulualani, Aaron Creps, John Foti and Michael Beyer led at every turn, and fended off sporadic charges from runner-up Outrigger (11:26.67). The victory also gave Lanikai its first lead of the day in the team point standings, a 61-60 advantage over Kailua.

"Most of us have been paddling together for a few years now, and we committed pretty early on last October to trying to get better, and it seems to be paying off," Creps said.

"Our goal is always to score points for the club and try to improve through the season. Our short-term goal is to do well in the state regatta, but our ultimate goal is to improve in the Molokai Hoe."

Sunday's races were run on a quarter-mile course, mirroring the upcoming state championship layout. That meant participants in the 1 1/2-mile races needed to make five total turns, a departure from the usual three turns necessary in the traditional half-mile layout.

"It was fairly calm, and they made it a quarter-mile course, so it's nice to get used to that ... we're not used to making five turns in a race," said Creps. "It helps to get in the frame of mind of doing a quarter-mile at a time rather than a half-mile."

Nearly 3,000 paddlers ranging in age from 12 and under to 65 and above represented OHCRA's 16 member clubs in races spanning a quarter-mile to 1 1/2 miles.

In addition to battling for gold in individual races, crews continued pushing toward qualification for the Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association state championship regatta scheduled for Aug. 4 at Keehi Lagoon. The top four crews from each OHCRA event earned automatic berths in the state race based on cumulative point standings, and with so many crews on the bubble of qualifying, Sunday's races were dually important.

"We'd like to win the regatta, but ultimately, we'd like as many crews as we can get into states, and try to compete against (perennial Maui and state champion) Hawaiian in the big dance," Creps said.

Hui Lanakila captured the AA division (14-26 crews entered) title with 36 points. Keahiakahoe (32 points) and Healani (22 points) rounded out the medium-size division.

In continuation of its season-long dominance, Hui Lanakila won the senior women's race and established itself as a crew to watch in the upcoming state championships. The team of Arlene Holzman, Pauahi Ioane, Lori Nakamura, Ally Sokei, Whitney Martinez and Violet Carrillo completed the 1 1/2-mile course in 12:47.47 — 25 seconds ahead of runner-up Lanikai.

Waimanalo, which had its men's 60 crew complete a perfect season, won the wide-open A division (1-13 crews entered) with 6 points.