

Hui Nalu Edges Kailua

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Hui Nalu paddlers, from left, Kerri Cummins, Mary Ann Kawakani, Madi Minkel and Tayte Brock made a turn on their way to a victory in the 11/2-mile race on Sunday at Keehi Lagoon.

While Kailua Canoe Club appeared poised to complete its "Drive for Five" straight Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association titles, Hui Nalu arrived just in time to turn the tables and shock the reigning champions.

Kailua held a one-point advantage entering the final race of Sunday's OHCRA Championship regatta held in the calm waters of Keehi Lagoon. Hui Nalu faced a clear-cut proposition: finish ahead of Kailua and the championship would be theirs.

Hui Nalu's mixed open crew of Catherine Fuller, Raven Aipa, Claire Townsend, Maggie Twigg-Smith, Brandon Woods and Brad Child crossed the line in 3 minutes, 54.45 seconds to win, while Kailua finished sixth in the 1/2-mile race. The result netted Hui Nalu the OHCRA title and ended state defending co-champion Kailua's run of four consecutive championships.

"You're kidding me!" exclaimed Aipa, after learning of the good news as he exited the winning canoe. "It was important for us to win the regatta, but also to get into the state race. I didn't realize the (point standings) were that close, but we lucked out. We had a good lane to help shield us from the wind a bit."

Hui Nalu claimed the AAA division (27-39 crews entered) trophy with 174 points, and used victories in three of the day's final four races to fend off Kailua (169 points), Outrigger (146 points) and Lanikai (136 points).

Kailua's boys 14 and mixed novice B crews capped undefeated seasons while supplementing the club's regatta-high tally of 12 victories on the day. The girls 16 crew from Outrigger and women's novice A crew from Lanikai also completed undefeated seasons.

Through the regatta's first 24 races, Kailua had built a 102-93 lead over Hui Nalu, while Outrigger (91 points) and Lanikai (72 points) remained within striking distance.

Hui Nalu then inched ahead of Kailua, 125-123, with 11 races remaining. Kailua responded by winning four of the next 10 races, and took a 168-167 lead over Hui Nalu into the final race of the day.

"It's unbelievable because the club is still building," Aipa said. "Every year we gain more and more numbers. Hopefully more paddlers want to be a part of this. It's a culmination of a lot of hard work."

Kailua's junior men came through for the club in one of the day's most competitive races. The crew of Jason Akamine, Dustin Young, Kawai Mahoe, Julian Wicker, Brad Wong and Joseph Avicolti completed the 1-mile course in 7:41.81, a mere half-second ahead of Hui Nalu.

Entering the half-mile turn, all seven crews were within a boat length of the lead. Kailua rounded the flag first and emerged as the front runner with half a mile left to paddle. But Hui Nalu's burst of power down the stretch cut what was a three-boat-length advantage to a finish determined by a few strokes.

"When it's on the line, it's nice to know that all the boys can push together to get the results we wanted," said Wicker, a veteran paddler and youth coach who returned from the mainland, where he's furthering his college education, to paddle with Kailua.

"We had to put it all together, and it's great for the club. We take these Oahu championships very seriously, and try to qualify as many crews as possible for the state race as we can."

Hui Nalu took the early lead as favorite to claim the OHCRA title this season, winning the organization's first three regattas by a combined 10 points. However, Kailua settled in and won the last two regattas while gaining momentum entering Sunday's championship races.

Nearly 3,000 paddlers in age groups from 12-and-under to 65-and-above represented OHCRA's 17 member clubs in 42 races spanning a quarter-mile to 1 1/2 miles. Sunday's races were run on a quarter-mile course, mirroring the upcoming state championship layout.

In addition to battling for gold in individual races, crews aimed to qualify for the Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association State Championship regatta, scheduled for Aug. 3 at Hanalei Bay, Kauai. The top four crews from each OHCRA event earn automatic berths in the state race based on cumulative points standings.

Keahiakahoe completed the season sweep of the AA division (14-26 crews entered) by notching 87 points to claim the trophy for the sixth consecutive regatta. The Kahaluu-based club claimed three victories in the regatta in besting Leeward Kai (39 points) and Waikiki Surf Club (31 points).

Hui Lanakila claimed three race wins, and notched 35 points to secure the A division (one-13 crews entered) championship.

Na 'Ohana O Na Hui Wa'a held its championship regatta Saturday at Keehi Lagoon, with Na Keiki O Ka Mo'i claiming its third title in four years. Both organizations will take a week off before traveling to Kauai for the state championship races.