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Lanikai turned its numbers into a state championship

By Jack Wyatt
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Lanikai Canoe Club's bronze medal finish in the men's masters race - the 33rd and last event of Saturday's state canoe championships at Keehi Lagoon - proved golden for LCC coach Bob Puakea.

"With no team scores announced by the race committee for the last half of the regatta," Puakea said, "I had no idea how we stood to our closest competitor, Outrigger Canoe Club. I thought we may be trailing."

Seconds before the men's masters start, scores were announced - Lanikai was leading Outrigger by a scant four points.

"I was only slightly relieved," Puakea said. "Our men's masters still had to finish close to Outrigger to win the title. And that's often difficult to do."

Kailua Canoe Club and Puna of the Big Island powered away from the 13-boat field leaving Lanikai and Outrigger to battle it out.

"Our crew had no idea of the point standings, and that the championship was in our hands," said Lanikai masters crew member Bill Keller. "We simply dug deep and tried our best just as we have all season."

Kailua finished the one-mile race first in seven minutes, 42 seconds, followed three seconds later by Puna. Lanikai placed third in 7:48, edging fourth-place finisher Outrigger by nine seconds.

When the championship team points were tallied and announced, Lanikai was declared winner of its first Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association title in 30 years. A canoe racing upset.

Outrigger, which had won 11 of the past 12 championships, finished second, five points behind.

"What a wonderful finish to a great racing season," Puakea said. "This win today caps my five year championship plan. I wish this season would never end."

The HCRA championship drew approximately 3,000 paddlers, representing 50 clubs from five Islands. Oahu clubs - Lanikai, with 150 points; Outrigger, with 145 points and Hui Nalu, with 103 points - swept the big club AAA division (15 crews or more).

Waikiki Surf Club edged Koa Kai, 41-39, to capture the AA title (7 to 14 crews).

The Big Island's Keaukaha and Malama Ula of Maui tied for first place among the small club A division (6 crews, or fewer) entries with 27 points apiece.

Lanikai, with 300 paddlers, proved that this year at least, talent is nice but being big is best.

"Simple arithmetic," said Big Island paddler Moa Mendoza. "The more crews a club qualifies and enters in this state showdown, the more points the team has an opportunity to score."

Crews qualify by their performances during the season and at division championships.

"Numbers do make the difference," Puakea said.

"Fortunately, we managed to qualify crews in 31 of 33 events. You can't score points if you haven't qualified the crews."

Defending champion Outrigger qualified 26 crews.

"By not fielding crews in races Lanikai won really hurt us," said Outrigger coach Kalani Schrader.

"It's taken many years to reach this point," said Mollie Foti, a long-time Lanikai member who steered the club's women's golden masters to victory.

"Now our goal is to stay on top," she added.

Foti's sons, Jim, 29 and John, 33, contributed to Lanikai's success with point-scoring performances in men's sophomore, junior and senior races.

Lanikai, winner of seven events, took the team scoring lead after 10 races. They were pushed by Outrigger but were never headed.

Lanikai's girls' 14s, girls 18s, women's novice B, women's freshman, women's golden masters, men's juniors and men's senior each won their respective heats.

Maui's Hawaiian Canoe Club and the Big Island's Kai Opuu were the best and biggest from the Neighbor Islands.

HCRA's president Michael Tongg notes, that based on Neighbor Island participation on Saturday, that paddling on all Islands is on the rise.

Most paddlers now switch to their distance-race mode for this fall's men's and women's Molokai-to-Oahu races.