



TOP TEAM—The Outrigger Canoe Club is the two-time defending champion and favorite to repeat in Sunday's Molokai-to-Oahu race. Team members are, kneeling: Nina Williams, left, and Muffer Scully. Standing, from left: Traci Phillips, Kaiulu Downing, Pii Schneider, Mary Franco, Lisa Siggers, Paula Carbone, Jeanne Jenkins, Donna Kahakui, Susan Barron and Tiare Finney.—Star-Bulletin Photo by Mike Tsukamoto.

OCC Favored but New Coach Still Searching for Extra Edge

By Jack Wyatt

Special to the Star-Bulletin

For Sunday's Na Wahine O Ke Kai Molokai-to-Oahu Canoe Race, Outrigger Canoe Club's Mary Franco is seeking every advantage.

No matter that her two-time defending champ Outrigger is everyone's race favorite to repeat. Or that OCC has won the 40.8-mile race, from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki's Fort DeRussy Beach, four of the last six years.

Franco, OCC's first-year wahine paddling coach but long-time steersman, searches for more.

Not even Outrigger's exceptional 12-women crew, which boasts a record 36 Molokai races among them, soothes Franco's pre-race jitters.

Helming OCC's sleek Leilani, one of Hawaii's fastest koa canoes, helps bolster Franco's confidence a little but the search goes on.

THE FORMER PUNAHOU School athlete is looking for that can't miss home-field advantage

—huge breaking waves and strong winds in the Kaiwi Channel that will turn the waters between Molokai and Oahu into a froth.

"The bigger the waves the better. The race then becomes a steersman's contest," Franco said. The coach explained that while local crews can handle most rough conditions, visitors usually flounder.

At last count, 19 crews—10 from Oahu, three from Maui and one each from Kona, Kauai, California, Illinois, Canada and Tahiti—have entered the Aloha Week finale. The race begins at 7 a.m. with the winner expected to arrive at the Ft. DeRussy finish about 1 p.m.

Franco knows well that the Illinois Brigade will bring its world-class marathon canoe paddlers; California's Offshore Canoe Club will enter top international kayakers; and Canada and Tahiti crews will be made up of paddling all-stars.

"Most visiting paddlers race on flat water. Big channel seas should work to our advantage," she said.

Franco recalled that in the race two years ago, it was the big surfing waves that sped OCC to its six-hour, 12-minute and 11-second course record. "For a fast crossing, everything—the wind, the sea, plus choosing the right course—has to come together," Franco said.

Franco, at 24, is the youngest OCC crewmember and the only OCC paddler who has finished all six previous events. "The first year (1979) I paddled for Hui Nalu," she said.

FRANCO CREDITS OUTRIGGER'S success to its experienced crew. "Unlike most Island clubs, we have a nucleus of women who have paddled together for years," she said. OCC enjoyed an over supply of Molokai race hopefuls.

"I began with 20 women competing for 12 spots. They all worked hard right down to the final selection," she said. Outrigger's wahines train four evenings a week, plus one long session on weekends. "We're ready," the coach said.