The wacky, feisty women of the Molokai race

By Beverly Creamer
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On Sunday, when dawn has broken, 20 outrigger canoes paddled by women will sweep out of the mouth of Hale O Lono harbor on Molokai and head for Oahu, across one of the roughest inter-island channels.

Just as they leave the harbor, a paddler from each canoe will drop a lei into the water to honor Lanakila Spencer, who died this summer. Spencer, a Hui Nalu paddler and mother of 10, did much for the sport.

And then, with the wind at their backs, and hopefully, just a light chop in the Kaiwi channel, they will head for victory on Fort DeRussy Beach in the seventh annual Na Wahine O Ke Kai — the 40-mile women's Molokai-to-Oahu canoe race that climaxes Aloha Week on Oahu.

Every year five dedicated, wacky women pull this race together. It takes nine months of planning, hundreds of hours selling Portuguese sausage, much understanding from their families and more than a little energy, perseverence and guts.

This year they're getting monetary help from sponsors Aloha Week, Hawaiian Airlines and Toyota. Still, the women themselves raise $9,000 of the $15,000 needed to bankroll the race.

The women are in their 30s, 40s and 50s, have 15 children among them, and have lived and breathed canoe paddling since they were youngsters.

"We've all paddled since we were 12 or 13; it's all we ever did," says Carleen Ornellas, vivacious, slim and muscular. "But now there's other things for kids to do. When you lived in Kailua then, there wasn't ***anything*** else to do."

Put just four of them together for an interview and it's a chaotic jumble of good humor, funny stories and snatches of race history.

"It's not just jump in a canoe and paddle," says race director Hannie Anderson, who heads the committee of five.

"We have to get all these permissions — from the state to use the harbor, from the ranches to use their property. We have to write the Coast Guard and hire security guards and buy insurance for the use of the harbor.

"And each club has to get an escort boat. And the night before at the Sheraton Molokai we have a carbohydrate-loading dinner for all the paddlers — maybe about 300 people. We're selling Portuguese sausage like mad because we want to have that dinner.

"My satisfaction is to know the girls can do it, that it can be done. It's as exciting as hell to see them coming in."

"You get such a feeling of self-accomplishment that you did it," says Haunani Olds.

"When you tell anyone you paddle, they always ask if you've paddled Molokai," adds Ornellas.

"Our main objective is to have as many women as can, paddle the channel," puts in Puna Dawson.

Way back in 1954, a couple years after the men's race began, it was Anderson and some pals who first began itching to do the channel themselves.

"We felt this race could be done by women," says Anderson.

"And that was unheard of," says Dawson.

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Na Wahine O Ke Kai race committee members, from left: Hannie Anderson, Puna Dawson, Haunani Olds, Carleen Ornellas. Not pictured is Shelly Gilman.

it," adds Anderson, "and the Coast Guard didn't sanction it."

Stymied from racing, several of the women went down to the harbor anyway and hitched boat rides over to Molokai to watch the men's race. They were dropped off half a mile from shore and swam to the beach. Anderson laughs at the stunt she inspired. "The guys wondered, who are these crazy women? They wanted to kill us!"

The idea of a women's canoe race languished another 20 years until, in 1975, Donna Coelho Wolfe began pushing for a race during the Bicentennial.

"But Healani (canoe club) jumped the gun," says Dawson. "They wanted to do it before the Bicentennial."

So in 1975, the Healani club began training in earnest for a crossing. Not to be outdone, other interested paddlers from several other clubs made up a second team — Onipaa — and that year two canoes made the first unofficial crossing.

"Healani won, but it was close," says Ornellas. "There was a half-mile difference. We went on completely different courses. We went south. They went north."

The women burst into laughter again, all talking at once.

"It was good fun," says Anderson, "and the spirit was there."

The two crews slept on the beach overnight, and those 24 people were a far cry from the 300 to 400 camped there nowadays the night before.

Anderson recalls that next morning clearly.

"I remember Chris Faria coming by in this little boat and yelling, 'It is now 6:15 and the race will start in 15 minutes.' That was funny. It was such a little boat."

In that 1975 race, men helped the women make their shift changes because the women team, with six paddling at a time, changing every half-hour.)

"A couple of guys in the water would take you by the pants and throw you in," laughed Dawson, duplicating the heave-ho action. "A few times you landed on the other side of the canoe."

Now "changes" are a large part of the training, explains Olds. "You have to get in and out of the canoe without missing a stroke."

After that first unofficial year, the idea of a women's race ground to a halt once more. Then Chris Faria's wife, Lei, got behind it with Anderson and things started moving again. In 1978 an impromptu meeting in Kona brought many of the sparkplugs together, and the women started a concerted planning effort.

"Lei Faria was an inspiration for all of us. She was the first woman race director for the Hawaii Canoe Racing Association. She was really behind women paddling."

The next year, 1979, the first "official" race was held, with 17 canoes competing. It was the same year Lei Faria died of cancer, and the race was dedicated to her memory.

Others picked up Lei's enthusiasm and the race seemed to be on its way.

But no one could have anticipated the wea er in 1980.

On the day before the race, with everyc camped on the beach on Molokai, 35-foot swe and 80-knot winds rocked the channel.

The Coast Guard called Anderson and ask her to cancel. She decided to wait.

"We all drove out to Hale O Lono and t entrance to the channel was completely clos out (by surf). The escort boats couldn't even g in."

All night the organizers waited. "We talk and cried and jumped up and down," sa Anderson.

"All the way 'til 5 in the morning the ra was still on," says Ornellas.

Once again, that morning is engraved Anderson's mind and she remembers the ra committee driving out to the harbor in the ba of a red pickup truck to make a final decision.

"These guys were in their lawn chairs in t back having a beer and I was in the back wi a bullhorn."

Four hundred people were waiting. With lump in her throat, she called it off.

"You know," she says, "some still wanted go! Who was it, Dutchy? But we had to canc for the safety of the women."

Anderson, an account manager with Hawaiia Air, helped arrange extra flights to get ever one back to Oahu, and she remembers lookir down at the sea from the last plane out. Th pilot, also a canoe paddler, told her she'd bee wise to cancel. "It was boiling down there."

Since then, things have been easier, and th race has continued to grow. This year there a three crews from Tahiti, two from the Mainlar and one from Canada.

In fact the influence of outside teams has ha a big effect, especially on paddle style.

"The Hawaiian style was a spoon, but now lot of clubs use a teardrop," says Dawso "When the Tahitians first came they used th teardrop and won, so everyone used that.

"A few years later it was an angle blade, an they won so everyone changed to that. The there was the angle blade with a T-top and no they're popular."

Aside from the intricacies of style and racin strategy, the women feel they're all in this tc gether. During the April to September seasor paddlers rush home from work every day, fix fast dinner for the kids, race off to two or mor hours of paddling practice and usually get bac home in the dark.

It's a lifestyle that needs total family support.

"We have to be thankful our husbands are s understanding," says Anderson.

"And you have to have a microwave," say Dawson.