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Finishing: It's What Counts

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Challenging and channel—the words are interchangeable when describing Kaiwi, the body of water separating Molokai from Oahu.

Unpredictable is also fitting, as evidenced by the different conditions the women in the Na Wahine O Ke Kai outrigger canoe race have faced the last four years. The second race was canceled because of high surf and winds; last year's was almost called off for the same reasons.

The surf at Hale O Lono Harbor, the starting point on Molokai, looked threatening Saturday but when the Hawaii Warriors Canoe Club van pulled up to harbor's edge at 6 yesterday morning, the seas were nearly flat and the winds of the prior day had died down.

"What do you think, Coach?" I asked Babe Bell when the van stopped. "It's been worse," he said.

Hardly comforting words to the 11 Warrior women. But most of them had paddled the channel before. Flo Apa had gone every year, including 1975 when a crew from Healani Canoe Club and a combined crew from various clubs pioneered the women's race with a successful crossing.

THREE WARRIORS WERE making their first attempt—Nancy Crosby, Ellen Komatsu and myself—and we represented the club at the opening ceremonies while the rest of the crew stowed the gear aboard our auxiliary boat *Nani-Kai*, and our escort boat Hawaiian Warrior.



Hui Nalu crew whoops it up after winning the Molokai-to-Oahu race yesterday.

The sun was breaking through mist hiding Lanai island as Rev. Wilson said the *pule* (prayer) in Hawaiian. Paddlers and coaches from the 15 participating clubs joined hands to sing "Hawaii Aloha" at the close of the ceremonies; then shouts of "See you in Honolulu" accompanied the crews as they launched the canoes from the beach.

Little did we know, as the three of us jogged back to our canoe, that it would be nearly eight hours before we would see the rest of the "women of the sea" in Waikiki.

It had been decided that the senior women's crew from regatta season would start the race. Uilani Bell, Kim Yoshimatsu,

Desi Ku, Flo Apa, Lehua Solomon and Kathy "Bozo" Bell were already in the red-and-black canoe *Kai Iwa* as the rest of us climbed aboard the escort boat.

We three first-timers, the other two relief paddlers Terry Catelago and Judy Parish, coaches Babe Bell and Nappy Napoleon, boat captain George Downing and a race official headed out of the harbor to await the start of the race.

The lull provided an opportunity to reflect on the diverse group that would be paddling this race together. The oldest was a grandmother of 53; the youngest, just turned 19.

Crossing Channel Brings Own Reward

Continued from Page C-1

Paddling experience ranged from 15 years to less than five months (myself). Four were from the Mainland, the rest from Hawaii . . .

The canoes were lined up. The yellow flag from the official boat was waving. The race was on.

"Eh, if it stays as flat as this, it'll be boring. The waves are what make it exciting."

"Nappy, I really don't mind being bored—honest."

It was fairly flat as the canoes approached Laau Point and the 30-minute mark where crews would be allowed to change paddlers. Even in calm water, the change doesn't always go smoothly. Our first change was a little on the rough side.

The five of us jumped into the water, waiting for the Kai Iwa to approach. Even out of nowhere, another canoe cut between our line-up and our canoe, causing some confusion as we tried to get out of the way while staying in our steersman's sight. Bozo steered the canoe over to us and the change was started.

It's a panicky moment as you try to lift your body into the canoe while the other paddler rolls out. Sometimes it works, sometimes you get the wrong leg in and end up facing backwards, and sometimes you slip off the gunnel and have to try again.

It was not a graceful sight but the relief crew got in, found the paddles and the timing, zipped up the protective canvas, and was off for its first 20-minute segment.

As tense and keyed up as the crew was, it wasn't long before the rhythm of our paddling got into sync. Nancy has an easy stroke, or rhythm, to follow and after training together for more than a month, it has become automatic—the reaching out, pulling back and recovery.

"One, two . . . The water is so blue . . . I wonder if UCLA beat Michigan . . . The boat is feeling good . . . eleven, twelve, hup, hoo."

What do you think about for 20 minutes at a time? Anything, nothing. The thoughts float in and out, mostly related to paddling. Eye on the blade in front. Relax on the recovery. Pull it all the way back. Power! You can't drift mentally for long without losing the timing.

Sitting in the second seat, it's easier to concentrate on the stroke—counting silently until the twelfth stroke, calling out "hup" on the thirteenth, and switching sides on the fourteenth.

The minutes fly by and Babe's voice booms out over the megaphone, "Change coming up.

One, two, three, four and five." We're changing everyone except Bozo, the steersman, who eventually steers the entire race.

With the starting crew in the water just ahead, it's time to unzip, put the paddle on the side and roll out as the replacement grabs the side of the canoe.

Once back in the escort boat, the talk between sips of water or soda is about what was going right and wrong.

The swells are beginning to pick up, beginning to hide the competing canoes and escort boats. Oahu is still a dream somewhere past the horizon. We're headed due west.

It seems the changes are getting easier, the ocean water a little cooler and the sun definitely hotter. A sea bird, our canoe's namesake, is gliding between the outrigger and the escort boat. A nice omen.

It must have been right off Sandy Beach when my body said it had had enough. If anyone had asked, I would have said, "No more. I've had enough. I'm not going back in the canoe."

It was frustrating, which was compounded by my tiring body. It was time to start asking, "Why am I doing this?" Babe's "Change coming up" was never more welcome.

"Are we in the channel yet?"
"I don't know; ask Nappy."
"Pretty soon, girls."

Down. A wave crashes over the bow and is prevented from washing into the canoe only by the canvas. Sitting in the first position "at stroke," it seems I'm either paddling air or else hitting the water with my reach. Yes, we're in the channel.

We're also making a move on Hanchaneha's canoe 60 feet away on the starboard. It's the first canoe we've seen in almost two hours. They slow to make a change, and Bozo catches some waves to shoot us ahead. It's about 10 a.m. and Oahu suddenly looms on the horizon.

The changes have become automatic, though not monotonous. Babe switches the seating order to give people breaks and the chance to paddle with everyone else. Sometimes it's hard to adapt to the stroke's style, and the time spent in the canoe seems to double.

This happened during my second turn at sitting through a double change. We were only switching four at a time, which meant someone had to paddle for 40-50 minutes at a time.

I was sitting No. 3 and just couldn't get the timing down after the new crew climbed in.

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It must have been right off Sandy Beach when my body said it had had enough. If anyone had asked, I would have said, "No more. I'm not going back in the canoe." No, one asked, but I was tempted to tell someone anyway.

Fortunately, no one was seasick, but a few girls were very tired or had muscle cramps. Several of us admitted to having "hit the wall." I was not feeling good.

Lying on the deck to ease my stiff back muscles, I closed my eyes, hoping the coach would ignore me the next change. But when several other canoes started challenging us, I sat up to watch. That was a mistake. Babe looked at me and said, "One." I could only nod while thinking, "I really don't want to do this, especially being stroke."

Sitting stroke worked wonders. After a few changes, the burden was passed and the boat was running well. We were off Maunaloa Bay, with Diamond Head coming up—we were headed home.

"Let's go, Warriors. Good stroke. Way to go, Bozo. Okay, three power ten, kung and haw, Way to go, ladies. Almost home."

The voices of fatigued paddlers picked up along with the spirits. Though the crew on the second-to-last change had gained some ground on the other canoes, we knew we would probably finish last.

But it didn't matter. As the senior women took the canoe from the Coast Guard lighthouse past the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, the remaining five paddlers grinned with well-earned satisfaction.

Usually the crew that starts the race finishes it, but Babe called for a change so the nonstarters could paddle across the finish line. Quite an honor.

After crossing the finish line, we turned back a few yards to pick up the rest of the crew from the escort boat. Then we paddled triumphantly toward shore with all 11 crew members in the canoe. Leis, drinks and outstretched arms awaited the final finishers in the race.

From the start of our training, the goal had been to finish while doing the best we could. And that's what we accomplished.

As I walked back to the car, some people sitting on a table near the Hilton Lagoon called out, "How'd you do?"

"Last."
"Eh, you made it. Dat's what's important." Hey, they're right.