

# Team Bradley overcomes rough waters

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Special to the Star-Advertiser

POSTED: 1:30 a.m. HST, Sep 24, 2012



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Team Bradley closed in on the finish line at Waikiki during its victory Sunday in the 34th annual Na Wahine O Ke Kai race.

As it strived to reclaim bragging rights within the women's outrigger canoe paddling realm, Team Bradley faced roadblocks in the form of its talented competition as well as the natural elements.

Despite finishing with the slowest winning time in more than a decade, Team Bradley overcame rough waves, a strong current and sloppy ocean conditions en route to a victory Sunday at the 34th annual Na Wahine O Ke Kai, the 41-mile women's outrigger canoe paddling championship that stretched from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach. The

event is considered the world championship of outrigger canoe paddling, and featured 71 crews representing Hawaii, California, Australia, Hong Kong and Japan.

Team Bradley finished the grueling test of both physical and mental fortitude in 6 hours, 14 minutes and 47 seconds, and became the first crew to win the race in more than 6 hours since Kai Opua in 2001 (6:24:52). The defending champion Waikiki Beach Boys finished second, crossing the line in 6:17.13, and Hui Nalu-Yellow (6:29:14) rounded out the open division's top three.

Hui Nalu-40s claimed the masters 40-plus division, finishing fourth overall in 6:35.25. Team Aussie Aunties (6:54:39) of Australia captured the masters 50-plus division, and finished eighth overall while also earning the distinction as the top team not from Hawaii to finish.

"We wanted this really bad, and it feels great to get it back," said Team Bradley steerswoman Lori Nakamura after emerging from a group hug with her crewmates. "The conditions were tough."

The winning crew also included Lauren Spalding-Bartlett, Kelly Fey, Dane Ward, Noelani Sawyer-Auger, Andrea Moller, Alana Goo, Claire Townsend, Nicole Pederson and Arlene Holzman.

Large waves in Haleolono Harbor at the start of the race swamped 10 canoes and sent a Kailua woman to the hospital, Maui County officials said. The woman, from the Kailua Canoe Club, complained of pain to her shoulder and ribs and was taken to Molokai General Hospital, officials said. Crews rescued a total of 30 people from the harbor, and no other injuries were reported. Of the 10 canoes, officials said nine went on to start the race. One was damaged and had to be towed back to shore by event boats.

Team Bradley — an experienced group of paddlers hailing from Oahu, Maui and Kauai that bears the name of outrigger canoe maker Sonny Bradley — has now won seven of the last eight Na Wahine O Ke Kai events, including a streak of six straight titles from 2005 to 2010. The team holds the record in the event at 5:22.05 — nearly an hour faster than Sunday's winning time — which it set in 2008.

"It's pretty sweet, just bringing it all together, we had a great energy," said Fey, the team's elder stateswoman who noted that this was most likely her final run with Team Bradley after seven titles to their credit. "We really have a strong bond. We fight and struggle together through the channel, and when it comes to this moment (in the winner's circle), that bond just gets stronger. We're all so happy."

According to officials on the water, Waikiki took an early lead, and was followed closely by Hui Nalu-Yellow and Healani, while Team Bradley held fourth position before making its move. As race officials described the event's start, paddlers had to deal with waves boasting "faces up to 25 feet high," which forced some canoes into near vertical positions as they labored to clear the massive swells on the way from the beach to the starting line. The wave sets came in every 3 minutes with at least seven waves per group, so making the way into the channel proved extremely difficult.

"The start was gnarly, the channel on occasion would close out, so it was pretty hairy even trying to get out to the starting line," Nakamura said. "I've never seen it like that before. We just tried to focus on ourselves and not pay too much attention to other crews."

After braving sloppy conditions throughout the channel crossing, Team Bradley built a quarter-mile lead over Waikiki as the crews passed Maunalua Bay in Hawaii Kai, and would not relinquish the winning margin.

The Waikiki Beach Boys put an end to Team Bradley's winning streak last year, and entered the race with the hope of starting a similar string of victories. Waikiki completed the 2011 race in 5:25.02 — nearly two minutes ahead of Team Bradley — but Sunday's conditions prohibited the "Beach Girls" from hoisting the championship hardware for a second consecutive year.

"I think we got to La'au (Point, the southwestern tip of Molokai) first, but a lot of time I was just focused on surfing and trying to catch bumps to motivate the crew," said Waikiki steerswoman Kaui Pelekane. "We had an awesome race, but we just couldn't catch Bradley. The currents were sucking North (back toward Molokai), so we tried not to get pulled in."