

# Waikiki relishes 'Super Bowl' win

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While it was no "Super Bowl Shuffle," the women of Waikiki did their best touchdown celebration after winning what is known as the Super Bowl of outrigger canoe paddling.

The Beach Boys formed an impromptu in-water huddle followed by a celebratory splash in the cool ocean after claiming the 36th annual Hawaiian Airlines Na Wahine O Ke Kai -- the 41-mile women's paddling championship that stretches from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach -- for the second time in four years Sunday afternoon. Waikiki completed the long-distance season undefeated, just as it did in 2011, when the team won the title for the first time.

"I would say this is a sweeter victory to come back and do it again; it was that much harder and it took a lot to come through the season undefeated," paddler Dana Gorecki said after emerging from the Beach Boys' celebration.

The "Beach Girls" crossed the line in 5 hours, 29 minutes and 12 seconds. The event is regarded as the world championship of outrigger canoe paddling, and featured 61 crews representing Hawaii, California, Washington, D.C., Canada, Japan, Australia, Tahiti and Hong Kong.

Team Bradley -- an experienced group of paddlers hailing from Oahu, Maui, Molokai and Kauai that bears the name of outrigger canoe maker Sonny Bradley -- was aiming to three-peat and build a lengthy win streak similar to the six straight titles posted from 2005 to 2010, but finished second at 5:30:25. The team holds the event record at 5:22:05, which it set in 2008, and has won eight of the past 10 Na Wahine O Ke Kai events.

"I don't think you can ever say you had breathing room, not with them," said Gorecki, who also celebrated her 15th Kaiwi Channel crossing. "There have been times when we've had much (larger leads), and what did Bradley do? They pulled from within and walked right past us. There's never a level of comfort, even turning on that buoy (marking the finishing stretch), there was that sense of uncertainty."

Hui Nalu (5:39:27), Outrigger (5:47:22) and Team Bora Bora (5:55:32) rounded out the top five finishers.

Waikiki boasts a wealth of veteran waterwomen who are well accustomed to the rigors of crossing the channel. The winning crew also included Chelsea Bizik, Rachel Brunsch, Eko Lapp, Alexia Lopez, Jennifer Polcer, Jessica Kaawa, Kelsa Gabehart, Lindsey Shank and Alanna

Bender, and according to Gorecki, coach Sean Monahan made appropriate crew changes at key points to help the paddlers "stay fresh in the front."

"They came off the wall at La'au Point (along the southwest tip of Molokai) nice and smooth, then probably three to three and a half hours into the race, we jockeyed back and forth and started to move and created a little bit of distance," said Gorecki of the intense battle with Team Bradley. "We focused on us and did what we needed to do to take care of ourselves."

Bruntsch completed her first channel crossing as Waikiki's primary steerswoman. Bizik, an experienced steerswoman in her own right, spelled Bruntsch briefly in the back of the canoe.

"The whole race was a battle," said Bruntsch. "I wanted to look over my shoulder (to locate Team Bradley), but my coach was yelling at me not to. It always feels good to finish this race and achieve your goal."

Lauren Spalding of Team Bradley has completed the Molokai-to-Oahu crossing every year but once since 1996, and has also traversed the Kaiwi Channel multiple times in one-man vessels. She explained that "around Portlock and near Maunalua Bay, we got into some sticky water and made a couple mistakes" that allowed Waikiki to pull away.

"We closed the gap a bit near Diamond Head, but hats off to them, we gave it all we had and no disappointment here," said Spalding, who was joined by Claire Townsend, Noelani Auger, Kristin Foster, Mahealani Botelho, Nicole Pedersen, Dane Ward, Alana Goo, Lori Nakamura and Coral Gonzales. "Every year when you come into this race, you never expect to win. No matter what place you finish, it's a gift to cross this channel and the finish line."

"I'm happy for the Beach Girls, that's awesome. They're our paddling sisters."

The men will get their chance to tame the Kaiwi Channel on Oct. 12 with the Hawaiian Airlines Molokai Hoe. Shell Va'a of Tahiti will look to build on its eight consecutive victories, while local crews aim to bring home the title for the first time since Lanikai did so in 2005.