

Beach Boys breaks through

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The women of Waikiki Beach Boys bolted to a first-place finish on Sunday.

Dana Gorecki of Waikiki Beach Boys-1 couldn't help but get emotional Sunday after her team finally broke through to win Na Wahine O Ke Kai.

After all, the Waikiki Beach Boys-1:

» ended Team Bradley's six-year winning streak in the event;

» became the first crew from Na Ohana O Na Hui Wa'a — the event's host — to win the event

» paddled in memory of the late Moku Kamaka, who co-founded the club in 1973. Kamaka died in August.

"It is just so exciting, just really overwhelming," said Gorecki, while fighting back tears. "It was a fight the whole way. Being able to do this for Moku and being able to represent Beach Boys and Hui Wa'a, it's just incredible."

Waikiki Beach Boys-1 completed the 40.6-mile race across the Kaiwi Channel in 5 hours, 25 minutes, 2 seconds. Team Bradley was a close second in 5:26:58.

The Na Wahine O Ke Kai, in its 33rd year, started at Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, and finished at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki. The race is considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe paddling for women's teams.

There were four divisions in the race: open, masters 40, masters 50 and koa. The masters 50 teams were allowed to rotate 12 paddlers into the six seats of the canoe. The other divisions rotated 10 paddlers. An escort boat followed each canoe and paddlers had to jump in and out on the fly during lineup changes.

The 72 crews that competed had to deal with a flat ocean, which made the crossing difficult.

"It was a mellow channel compared to many other years, but there was still little runners, little pushes along the way," said Gorecki, who competed in the event for the 11th time. "We found each little thing and took it for what we could."

Members of the Waikiki Beach Boys-1 winning crew were Rachel Brunsch, Kelsa Gabehart, Gorecki, Eko Lapp, Frances Lichowski, Alexia Lopez, Andrea Messer, Kauai Pelekane, Jennifer Polcer and Lindsay Shank.

Gorecki, who also serves as Waikiki Beach Boys president, said: "We rotated equally. Everyone got a fair shot."

The Waikiki Beach Boys-1 paddler who had to fight the most adversity was Lichowski.

She said she ruptured her right Achilles' tendon while dancing five weeks ago and had surgery a week later.

Lichowski wore a protective boot designed by the doctor who performed the surgery.

"My teammates have been supporting me the entire time, carrying me to the canoe and bringing my crutches," Lichowski said.

She said getting in and out of the canoe during lineup changes wasn't a problem.

Waikiki Beach Boys-1 led from the outset and took more of a "southern route heading toward the back end of Diamond Head," according to Gorecki.

"The race itself, once it started, everyone felt really connected," Lichowski said. "Everything felt like one. It was a beautiful race from start to finish."

Waikiki Beach Boys had finished runner-up to Team Bradley, a mix of paddlers from different clubs, the past two years.

"It was a tough race. We were lucky there were a few little bumps and some wind coming down. Hat's off to the Beach Boys. We battled, they battled," said Team Bradley's Lori Nakamura, a four-time race competitor.

Hui Nalu-Revolusun 1 was third overall in 5:38:47, Canada Sprint Team followed in 5:41:50 and Island Connection, a masters 40 crew, was fifth in 5:46:10.