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[PADDLING]



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Beth Graves and steersman Jackie Taylor celebrate at the finish line after their crew, Kai Opua from the Big Island, won the Na Wahine O Ke Kai race from Molokai to Oahu.

‘Flat water queens’ ride the waves to O Ke Kai title

The champions have not lost to a Hawaii crew all season long

By Brandon Lee
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Back-to-back champions. Well-rounded champions.

Those were the goals that defending titleholder and prerace favorite Kai Opua Canoe Club had entering the 23rd annual Bank of Hawaii Na Wahine O Ke Kai, and those were the goals the Big Island club from Kailua-Kona accomplished yesterday.

In winning the 41-mile Molokai-to-Oahu race -- considered the world championship of women's outrigger canoe racing -- Kai Opua became the first neighbor-island club ever to post back-to-back victories in the prestigious event. It also marked the first time a club from Hawaii (Outrigger in 1984-85) won the title in consecutive years.

"It just feels good to know that all of our homework paid off," steerswoman Jackie Taylor said. "It was way harder to defend, and way more satisfying on this one. We wanted to get the 'flat-water queen' label off of our backs."

And did they ever.

Under a hazy sky with blustery winds and rough seas, Kai Opua posted a winning time of six hours, 24 minutes, 52 seconds, nearly a half hour slower than its winning time from last year. But in 2000, the Big Island crew won in hot, windless, flat, "Kona-like" conditions, much like what it typically practices in.



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Kai Opua Canoe Club of the Big Island won yesterday's

Na Wahine O Ke Kai. The crew's paddlers are (left to right) Carrie Hendricks, Beth Graves, Cherisse Kelii, Ronona Della Cioppa, Patty Eames and Jackie Taylor.

This year, wanting to be prepared for every challenge the unpredictable Kaiwi Channel could throw at them, Kai Opua's women regularly sought out rough seas for practice. They wanted to become more well-rounded paddlers, better at surfing waves, and the practice paid off.

"It was pretty big," part-time stroker Ronona Della Cioppa said of the waves. "We had some stuff lining up, we got to do a lot of surfing, got to have some slop. We've been training for this; we wanted it to be bigger."

Finishing in second place, more than five minutes behind Kai Opua at 6:30:43, was 1999 champion (with Wailua Canoe & Kayak) Team Eyecatcher. Eyecatcher was made up of paddlers from Oahu, Maui and Kauai. Rounding out the all-Hawaii group in the top five spots were Outrigger Waikiki in third (6:32:41), Hui Nalu of Hawaii Kai, fourth (6:39:35), and Kailua, fifth (6:44:08).

The first finisher not based in Hawaii was Canada's False Creek, which placed sixth (6:47:17). With the rough conditions, the race record established by Offshore of California in 1995 at 5:24:32 was never challenged.

Coming in first yesterday in the Na Wahine O Ke Kai's other divisions were: Newport (Calif.) Aquatic Center (7:03:40) for Masters (35 and older), Kai Opua (7:26:01) for Senior Masters (45 and over), and Waikiki Surf Club (7:38:27) for the koa division.

The repeat victory in the race that started at 7:30 a.m. at Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, and finished in front of the Hilton Hawaiian Village, concluded a year for Kai Opua in which it went undefeated against Hawaii teams.

Besides Taylor and Della Cioppa, Kai Opua's 10-woman rotation included: Jessie Eames, Patty Eames, Beth Graves, Carrie Sue Hendricks, Cherisse Kelii, Nicki Lacey-Enos, Cheryl Villegas and Amy Young. All save for Kelii paddled on last year's winning crew. Jessie Eames, 20, is the youngest on the crew, while her mother Patty, 52, is the oldest.

And of course, there was the man that has helped to hold these women from different parts of the Big Island together in coach Beanie Heen.

"It feels real good," Heen said. "We knew we had to perform, and we did. For the Big Island, this is really big, it's huge."

On a day that began on a somber note with heart-felt renditions of "God Bless America" and "Hawaii Aloha," and American flags flying on the sterns of all the record-tying 65 boats that started the race, Kai Opua quickly settled in by taking a slim lead at the start. Kai Opua never

surrendered that advantage, though it received stiff challenges from both Eyecatcher and Outrigger.

As the crews rounded Portlock and entered Maunalua Bay off Hawaii Kai, Eyecatcher took to the inside of the bay while Kai Opua initially intended to stay farther out. Wanting to keep Eyecatcher in sight, however, Kai Opua also took to the inside and that's where it finally began to put some distance between itself and the rest of the pack. The top four did not change positions from Maunalua Bay through the finish.

"I think it was a good race," Eyecatcher's Margie Kawaiaea said. "We just could not get ahead of them. They're very strong, and they've been training together two years, solid."

Said Outrigger steerswoman and 15-time Na Wahine O Ke Kai veteran Kisi Haine: "We would have loved to have won it because we had a bunch of our old, experienced paddlers out there. (Kai Opua is) good, they seem real together, like family they say."

The 50th Anniversary Bank of Hawaii Hinano Tahiti Molokai Hoe-the men's canoe world championship is set for two Sundays from now.

PADDLING

Na Wahine O Ke Kai

Molokai to Oahu

Open glass: 1. Kai O Pua 1, 6:24:52, Jackie Taylor, Ronona Della Cioppa, Amy Young, Cherisse Kelii, Beth Graves, Patricia Eames, Carrie Sue Hendricks, Nicki Lacey-Enos, Jessica Eames, Cheryl Villegas; 2. Team Eye Catcher, 6:30:43; 3. Outrigger C.C. red, 6:32:41; 4. Hui Nalu 1, 6:39:35; 5. Kailua-Kahiau, 6:44:08.

Masters 35 non koa: 1. Newport Aquatic Center 1, 7:03:40, Maria Holmes, Choppie Kalenea, Penny Martin, Camie Kimball, Susan Murphy, Pamela Fletcher, Monique Seager, Kristen Tennaut, Cindy Nartatez, Kim Diltz, Karen Evans, Leslie Gould; 2. Hui Lanakila, 7:07:31; 3. North Shore Masters, 7:18:40; 4. California Masters, 7:27:49.

Sr. Masters 45 non koa: 1. Kai Opua Senior Masters, 7:26:01, Noel Ackerman-Black, Denise Murphy, Linda Lee O'dell, Pocho Youderian, Susan Lalanne, Nancy Concepcion, Sari Lassiter, Peggy Anderson, Marsha Isaacs, Judy Auwae, Kim Welly, Sarah Kihoi.

Koa: 1. Waikiki Surf Club, 7:38:27, Richline Fong, Kuumea Gora, Cheryl Kauhane, Ponolani Tuinei, Kathryn Mitchell, Kathryn Javellana, Lani Mann, Rene Klinge, Lei Marks, Sandra Chong, Gio Aguilera, Arlene Reventas