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[PADDLING]



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Australia's Mooloolabah crew congratulated Kai Opua after the Hawaii crew won the Na Wahine O Ke Kai yesterday.

Kai Opua succeeds in Na Wahine 3-peat

**The crew from Kailua-Kona holds off
Team Eyecatcher for the 41-mile victory**

By Brandon Lee
Special to the Star-Bulletin

Three-peat. Trifecta. Back-to-back-to-back champions.

Any way you call it, a dynasty was officially born yesterday as the women of Kailua-Kona's Kai Opuia Canoe Club made their dream of posting three straight Na Wahine O Ke Kai wins a reality at the race's 24th annual edition.

A 41-mile trek from Molokai to Oahu across the Kaiwi Channel, the event is considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe paddling.

In defeating the 53 other crews yesterday from Hawaii, the U.S. mainland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Tahiti, Kai Opuia became the first state club to win three consecutive times.

"This is as perfect as it gets," steerswoman Jackie Taylor, 32, said. "We did the best race we could. It was a perfect race, it was awesome."

Racing in its fiberglass canoe, Keokea, Kai Opuia crossed the finish line at Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki, in 5 hours, 52 minutes and 55 seconds, nearly a half-hour slower than the record (5:24:32) established by Offshore of California in 1995.

But yesterday's time was the fastest of Kai Opuia's winning times over the past three years. In becoming the first club from the Big Island to win the event in 2000, Kai Opuia crossed a relatively flat channel in 5:56:45. Last year, the crew became the first from the neighbor islands to take two in a row when it won in rough conditions at 6:24:52.

Coming in second again at 5:55:36 after challenging for the lead nearly the entire way and giving Kai Opuia its toughest test in the past three years was 2001 runner-up, Team Eyecatcher.

Comprised of paddlers from Oahu, Kauai, Maui, New Zealand and Canada, Eyecatcher was the last team to win (in 1999, under the Wailua Canoe & Kayak name) before Kai Opuia started its recent run.

"Today was the hardest dog fight we have ever had," Cheryl Villegas, 39, said. "We were up-and-up with Eyecatcher almost the whole race. We just weren't going to give up. We wanted the three-peat and we pushed as hard as we could and we pulled it off."

Said 38-year-old Donna Kahakui of Eyecatcher: "Let's just say nobody got away easy. Almost from the get-go we were doing the dog-fight thing. We would catch a bump (wave) then they would catch a bump, we would make a chase then they would make a chase. My hats off to Kai Opuia because it was a tough, tough race."

Finishing third at 5:57:38 was Australian national champion Mooloolabah. In fourth, Outrigger (Waikiki) crossed in 6:01:20, the first koa canoe to finish yesterday.

Oahu's Surf Sport won the Junior Masters division (35-and-older) in 6:15:12, good for seventh overall, while another Kai Opuia crew took the Senior Masters (45-and-older) in 6:36:22.

Conditions yesterday included a receding tide, combined with 4- to 8-foot swells and tradewinds predominantly blowing at the paddlers' backs, making for choppy seas as the crews battled their way across the channel.

After the 7:30 a.m. start at Hale O Lono Harbor, Kai Opua and Eyecatcher switched the lead position numerous times as they battled toward Oahu's southeastern tip in front of the rest of the pack.

Similar to last year, however, the Big Island crew was finally able to sustain a move on Eyecatcher by taking a more southerly course at Portlock Point off Hawaii Kai, keeping about a half-mile lead the rest of the way.

"It was rugged, it was tough - we got pushed to the limits, pretty much," Kai Opua coach Beanie Heen said. "(But) this is the best crew I've ever coached. Talented wahines. They beat pretty much everybody; wherever we went, they won."

Indeed, Kai Opua has suffered just one defeat overall (a second-place finish at the Dad Center Race last month) in the past two years. It has won with a core group that has pretty much been together for the past 10 years.

Besides Taylor and Villegas, Kai Opua's 10-person rotation (six in canoe at a time, with open-ocean changes) yesterday included: Ronona Della Cioppa, Patty Eames, Jymi Friday, Beth Graves, Carrie Sue Hendricks, Cherisse Kelii, Nicki Lacey-Enos and Amy Young.

Friday was the only new addition to the group this year, but she has been with the club for a decade, just missing the cut for the open crew previously.

After her disappointment in seasons past, "it just means that if you can stick together and train together, and back each other up and support each other, (a dream) can all come true, it can happen," said the 38-year-old Friday.

Fortunately perhaps for the rest of the competition, a number of Kai Opua's women have plans to cease competing in the Na Wahine O Ke Kai as soon as next year. Some are just burnt out from the commitment necessary for their excellence, others are just ready for a new commitment.

"We won in flat (water conditions of 2000), we won in the surf (2001), and now we beat the (toughest) competition," said Hendricks, who celebrated her 30th birthday along with the win yesterday. "We all made one more commitment (Hamilton Island Cup in Australia next June), but after that ... for me, it's having kids."

"Today was a nice way to go out," added Villegas.

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Na Wahine O Ke Kai

Women's World Championships of Canoe Racing

At Waikiki Beach

Open

Kai Opua 5:52:55 (Carrie Sue Hendricks, Jymi Friday, Cheryl Villegas, Amy Young, Nicki Enos, Beth Graves, Ronona Della Cieppa, Patricia Eames, Jackie Taylor and Cherisse Kelii).

Senior Masters

Kai Opua 6:36:22 (Denise Murphy, Miri Sumida, Sue La Lannie, Sari Lassitter, Kim Welty, Mary Jo Bye, Nancy Conception, Jeannie Knapp, Linda Lee O'Dell, Sue O'shaughnessy, Pocho Youderian, Debbie Noland).

Junior Masters

Surf Sport 6:15:12 (Torrey Goodman, Jane McKee, Pam Prescott, Lesline Conners, Linda Fernandez, Debbie Cheever-Follet, Wendy DeWitt, Julia Deardorff, Beverly, Tuaolo, Cindy Grover, Maria Fidler, Beth Schulter).

Koa Canoe

Outrigger Canoe Club 6:01:20 (Paula Crabb, Kisi Haine, Katy Bourne, Karen Hansen, Kelsey Buell, Jennifer Thayer, Lisa Livingston, Malia Kamisugi, Jenny Horner, Mary Smolenski).