



By Ron Haworth

Outrigger Koa Log is an endeavor to sift for snippets in the sand of our century glass, so that we might rediscover the misplaced and forgotten as well as pumice our modern image and achievements.

“Kakina! Kakina! Kakina!”

The chant rang clear and vibrant like a proclamation on the expectant morning air minutes before the 10 mile inaugural wahine Dad Center Memorial Distance Race in August 1974 from Moanalua Bay to Outrigger Canoe Club.

The *Kakina* was then carried with reverence to the water's edge and lowered into the sea... she was home.



Outrigger leads paddlers to the finish line of the first Dad Center race.

The Novice Nine

Some are destined to lead in life's pursuits so that others might follow; the Outrigger crew, coached by Tommy Conner, was to become the winning wahine novice nine of outrigger ocean distance racing. One hour and 21 minutes later their niche in history was gained by the thinnest of koa veneer margins, six seconds ahead of Healani Canoe Club.

Waikiki Surf finished 39 seconds behind Healani. Then came Kailua, Lanikai, and Hui Nalu. Official time separation from first to last was five minutes and 15 seconds.

And that folks is one heck of a distance canoe race!

Prior to Dad Center, wahine distance canoe racing was an untested dream of a few; a distance felt too far by too many in a sport ruled and dominated by men. But Coach Tommy Conner and the koa canoe *Kakina*, both veterans and winners in the blue and unpredictable sea beyond the reef, would prove the skeptics wrong.

Coach Tom Had a Winning Strategy

The crew itself was an unproven, risky, mix for a 10 mile race. Four paddlers (Lynn Mason Haia, Tracy Haworth Ayers, Maile Morgan Ryant, and Stephany Sofos) had never raced more than a quarter mile in Hawaii Canoe Racing Association (HCRA), regattas; four (Heidi Hemmings, Laurie Siegfried, Kristy Muller Monroe, and Moira Scully) never beyond a half mile; only Jill Maguire had raced an odometer nautical mile with the Senior Women crew. Maile was 16 and the youngest.

Naturally, all clubs faced the same dilemma.

The girls while training were good-naturedly teased by their male counterparts, told there were sharks and they didn't have the strength to pull themselves from the water into the canoe for a change. "The men thought we were a joke!" Heidi emphasized in a tone less tolerant.

To his credit Conner took on the task of coaching the crew and whipping them into winning form. He and Mark Buck, with input from Marshall Rosa, had conceived the concept of

a distance race that very year. Perhaps it was Marshall's suggestion to begin the historic race on his doorstep. They aptly named the race in memory of Dad who had done so much for women's athletics during his life.

It's Not How You Train, But WHERE You Train

Conner felt the crew which made the fastest changes would be the eventual winner and to that objective he spent one week of the two between the HCRA State Regatta and the Dad Center debut cunningly training the lissome crew to all but fly into the canoe.

"Oh, my God!" Stephany exclaimed, hands to her face. "Once, we went into Honolulu Harbor. Laurie and I were in the escort Whaler and Tom called our names for a two person change. We were very near a large container ship entering port."

"A sewer pipe discharges near here and sharks come to feed so let's see how fast you can get into the canoe," he challenged.

"Laurie and I just stared at each other, shocked! Was this guy serious?" Evidently! Conner told them to jump 70 feet in front of the approaching canoe and so they did; and fear and adrenaline produced a personal best, if not flying fish wings.

Good thing the movie JAWS wasn't released till the next year.

After practice Tom told them with a chuckle they'd made the fastest change of the day

"We were all bruised from practicing changes," Laurie explained. "All the girls had perfected a dolphin kick to propel us upward, and then we'd throw a leg over the mo'o like mounting a horse to get into our seat. This technique meant a cover wouldn't be used 'cause Tom felt the changes would be too slow and difficult."

Luckily race day was malia. No telling the consequences if conditions had been rough. The girls didn't think any of the clubs used covers.

Tracy, the only other qualified steersman, recalled Tom calling for a seat six change with Heidi, in Kewalo Basin in front of Fisherman's Wharf, another favorite snacking ground for the occasional tiger shark. "Tom was taking due precautions against unforeseen race mishaps," Heidi acknowledged.

TIMEX! It Just Keeps on Ticking

And the novice nine were keenly motivated to just keep lowering their stop watch time.

The morning of the race Auntie Eva Pomroy gave our girls a blessing, a poem she had written for the event.

Our heavenly Fathers,
E kou makou makualani
We ask for your love and guidance,
ke noi aku nei makou aloha
With the sailing of our canoe,
e malama mai I ka holo ana o
Over the big waves, the little waves,
ko makou, i kaale nui
The swelling waves of the deep blue ocean.
ka ali iki na ohuku ale
May we live through your "Aloha"
na ale popolohua o oka moana
e ola makou, makou aloha

She also made a promise...a prediction:

"What you do today is for the women of tomorrow. You will win and make history, and what you undertake today will change the future for many tomorrow. I know some of you have a fear of sharks, but they are my family aumakua and I have prayed to our ancestors to protect and not harm you."

"I was 17 and it hadn't entered my mind we were about to make history," Tracy admitted.

Coach Conner had previously advised the crew to load up on carbs before the race. "I remember pancakes, stacks of pancakes in a Niu Valley restaurant; we drove out in the Club van and Tom treated," she added.

Maile washed breakfast down with a Coke. Was it fortification in case they ran into white water? Possibly, she admits begging Tom during training to take her out before entering the channel when the surf was up. "He just laughed and left me in."

Outrigger led from the start, a strategy Conner had in his mind all along, a breakout lead in tandem with excellent crew changes and the right course outside the Waikiki surf line proved an unbeatable strategy. Tuck Siegfried was driving the escort boat.

"We were making a change about every 10 or 15 minutes to keep the girls fresh and it paid off royally. Near the finish I remember it got a little jammed up but with Heidi's knowledge of the area she brought the girls to the finish line cleanly. Heidi steered the perfect race."

"We were a good crew and deserved to win and despite the close finish I never felt threatened by the other canoes," Heidi said.

Crew members remembered Tommy had gone out to view the course the day before to familiarize himself with conditions. "That was Tom's way," Heidi stressed. "He was in it to win."

"Tom was so confident in our ability he called for a three paddler change just before the channel; fresh arms and backs for the sprint to the finish line."

The *Honolulu Advertiser* quoted Lei Faria, HCRA executive secretary: "They (Outrigger) were climbing in and out of the boat (canoe) like pros. A lot of crews lost time during changes but Outrigger was fantastic."

"We made Tom a proud coach that Sunday morning," Tracy spoke for the crew. "And as I stood on the beach after the race it was obvious our physical crew size was more agile by his design than most."

Auntie Eva's Prediction Became Reality

The novice nine won, but all crews popped the cork which let the wahine genie out of the bottle for those who were to follow with even longer and more grueling feats of stamina; the course from the sixth Dad Center forward was lengthened between Kailua and Outrigger and Queen Liliuokalani in Kona and Na Wahine O Ke Kai Molokai to Oahu are both long distance spinoffs of that original Dad Center.

Stephany was on a cloud the next day, "We were in the newspapers; the day before was a high, but it wasn't till then it sunk in we'd made canoe paddling history. Wow!"

"Dad Center would have been proud!" Tracy and Tuck both agreed.

That the girls prevailed to leave a legacy and wake for others to trace and color is yet another snippet of achievement in the sand of Outrigger's century glass.

Mahalo and Aloha: Coach Tommy Conner, Auntie Eva, Kakina and the Novice Nine Wahines.



Dad Center ladies 40 years later: Laurie Siegfried, Tracy Haworth Ayres, Stephany Sofos, Heidi Hemmings recall their first distance race.

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