

The Evolution of the Knowledge, Experience and Lore of Hawaiian Outrigger Canoe Racing and Its Related Equipment

By Tay Perry

I have been associated with this sport for a period of 50 years. In this association, I have come up with some observations that describe the vast expertise of those connected with Hawaiian canoeing which evolves over a period of time.

I am using a fictitious paddler to illustrate my points. In the following observations, I am referring to the paddler in masculine terms even though these qualities will apply equally to either gender.

Since the earlier years of paddling are the most dynamic with respect to acquired knowledge, I have broken down the knowledge periods as follows. The following describes a typical "lifer" in Hawaiian outrigger canoe paddling. Please pardon me if some of this is done with tongue-in-cheek.

First Year

Our paddler is anxious to learn, very awkward, and often feels inferior to the other paddlers. He listens closely to the coaches and tries hard to perfect his abilities. He is a sponge for knowledge.

Second Year

He has learned quite a lot since his initial year of paddling. He is not as awkward in his technique as he was the prior year. He has picked up a lot of the names of canoe parts and maybe has learned how to count to three in Hawaiian. He is beginning to find out the importance of "blending" with the rest of his crew. He still is aware of having to learn a lot more about the sport.

Third Year

Our paddler now feels much more experienced and is a stronger, more efficient paddler. His technique has improved with two years of being coached and now he feels he needs less coaching. He also is starting to notice some of the shortcomings of his paddling peers.

Fourth Year

By now our paddler considers himself a seasoned veteran. He is now acutely aware of the defects of his crew-mates, and is often willing to mention them to the offending paddler as well as the other members of the crew and the coach. He is now starting to give his coaches tips and pointers as how to improve the crew performance.

Fifth Year

He wishes that there could be five more paddlers as good as he is, because then they would go undefeated for the season. The inadequacies of the outrigger canoes being paddled, now becomes a subject for concern. Canoe weights, shapes, ama and rigging begin to account for less than winning performances by a crew. If our protagonist is not a steersman or a stroke, performance by these positions is often blamed for poor results. He now wishes to help the coach with his crew and participate in the selection of the other members of the crew.

Sixth through 10th Years

These years are known as the peak period of outrigger paddling knowledge. The grasp of all that is involved will never get much higher than it is during this time period. During this period of participation there is usually little radical change in his level of expertise. Any change that occurred would have probably evolved slowly over the five year period.

He is often consulted by those newer paddlers needing his sage advice. Our paddling personality considers himself an expert in outrigger canoe paddling. He is probably a head coach of his club. He has definite ideas on canoe design and construction. Paddle shapes and design are areas in which he might be consulted.

At this point our paddler may have become involved in intra-club strife because of the difficulties involved in implementing his ideas. The problems usually come up over differences in coaching style, equipment procurement and crew selection methods. The term "Paddletics" has been coined to describe this process. It is during this period that he may have to change canoe clubs or start a new one.

10th through 20th Years

Our personality is now probably in charge of his own canoe club either by having started his own club or having taken over an existing club with the help of some allies. He has invested a great deal of time and probably money in putting together his club. This type of club is exemplified by many of the "one man shows" prevalent in the Hawaii canoe racing associations.

These clubs are often small because of rapid turnover of paddlers

who might not be able to accept the non-democratic/authoritarian rule of their leader. They seldom have more than six crews entered in a regatta. These small clubs also often suffer from a lack of top-notch equipment because they lack the large membership base from which to afford the best equipment.

20th through 30th Years

Very often, a paddling person begins to have some doubts about his vast store of universal paddling truths and axioms when he hits the 20 year mark. There have been numerous revelations and improvements in both the equipment raced and the paddling techniques used over that past 20 years. What they did then and what they thought was right then is no longer applicable.

Sometimes it is hard to unlearn what he has learned and he stubbornly sticks to some of his old ideas while the paddling world passes him by. Often during this period he might become disillusioned and start to think of taking up golf, fishing or some other pastime. This is known as the burnout period. Often, at this time, our paddler will take a vacation from paddling activities or quit altogether.

30 Years and More

If he has made it this far, he is probably in it for life. Very often he is regarded by others as being at the peak of his knowledge in the lore and culture of outrigger canoe racing. The paradoxical thing is that, at the time he is being regarded in highest esteem, he, himself, realizes how little he knew about the sport in which his life has been spent. Now he is impressed by not what he knows, but what he does not know. He has probably finally switched almost exclusively to OC-1 paddling.

Conclusion

The outrigger canoeing sport has changed more in the last 10 years than it did in the previous 70 years. Prior to 80 years ago the sport was not organized, nor were there any canoes built specifically for racing that are known of. Nor were we really aware of the paddling techniques that were used in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Hawaii.

Now we are involved with space-age canoe and paddle construction

materials, speedy "scientific" designs and ergonomic paddling techniques. It seems in the face of all this technology, that there would be no limit to what might be developed in this sport if there were no limitation to the equipment used.

At this point, I personally, fall back to support our traditional values in Hawaiian canoe design. I believe in supporting the Hawaiian koa canoe as the epitome of Hawaiian Canoe racing in Hawaii. The dimensional specifications of the Hawaiian canoe are not perfection, they were taken from an average of most of the koa racing canoes in existence in 1977.

These dimensions have no relationship to speed or performance except in the imaginations of each of the individual canoe builders of that time. There were no wind tunnels, tank tests or computers used in the designs then.

The 400 lb. weight limit goes back to the very early 1950s when the HCRA became concerned at the structural integrity of koa canoes that were being thinned out to achieve lower weights. Many of them began cracking or breaking up because of the removal of too much material from the hull.

I only mentioned this equipment thing because it is a large part of canoe knowledge and many new paddling people do not know the history of the Hawaiian canoe and why there are weights and specifications.

I can tell you a lot about the history of canoe racing in Hawaii, but not much about the best canoe, the best ama, the best non-koa construction materials, the best paddling technique, the best training methods, the best racing strategy, the best course or any of the other variables involved in outrigger canoe racing. All of the above items are a matter of opinion, sometimes supported by performance.

After having mentioned all of the changes above, I will note that the things that have changed the least are the character and personality of the average paddler, the politics of the individual canoe clubs and the operation of the canoe racing associations. In many ways these are the same as they were when I began outrigger canoe racing in 1948.