

Calendar

Don't Be Fooled by Clockwork Simplicity

Spiritual Canoe Race

To someone unfamiliar with the sport of *paopao* outrigger canoe racing, Art Pichierri, president of a local club, makes this comparison. He notes the difference between the *paopao* canoe's predecessors — the ocean-going boats of the ancient Pacific Islanders — and the ships of Christopher Columbus. "Columbus's were built like castles," he says, because the people who designed them were of the land. "The Pacific Islanders existed on the water. They were in synergy with the ocean. And they designed their craft so they could surf the waves, travel treacherous oceans, and explore what we now know as the 5000-mile Polynesian Triangle."

Fijians and Tahitians used voyaging canoes to make their

discoveries of Tonga, Samoa, and Hawaii. These boats were massive. *Paopao*, by

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contrast, means "little canoe" in Samoan. But everything being relative, a contemporary *paopao* canoe is 45 feet long and weighs 450 pounds, "unburdened." Its "burdened" weight — that is, loaded with six paddlers — is 1400 pounds. "But once it's up and running, it's like a heavenly spirit moving across the water."

The ancient islanders "revered their canoes," Pichierri says. While today's *paopao* canoes are made of fiberglass, those from centuries ago were made of wood from the koa tree, which was considered sacred. "The master canoe builder would go into the forest and pray, staying there — sleeping there — for weeks at a time, observing this tree before he cut it down." On the racing circuit, six people paddle one canoe, whether in the men's, women's, or coed divisions, and each has a special duty.

In the first seat is usually the smallest individual, Pichierri says. This lead paddler "keeps the cadence," stroking at a certain rate of speed.

The second seat is filled by another of the smaller paddlers, who counts the cadence aloud. On every 14th and 15th strokes, he or she calls a "hut-ho." That's two syllables for the final two strokes on one side of the canoe before the paddlers switch to the other side — "in absolute, metronomic unison" — for 15 more strokes. They alternate in this way for the race's duration.

The paddlers in seats three and four are considered "the engine room," in Pichierri's phrase. "That's where you'll see the beef. Those individuals, both male and female, are macho! They're your strength."



Paopao Outrigger Canoe Club

The fifth paddler has the double job of helping the engine room and helping number six — the steersperson.

Considered the team captain, the steersperson uses a special steering paddle or blade not only to steer but to keep the boat from flipping. The steersperson is the only paddler privileged to speak. "There is the person calling the hut — the change — but otherwise it's number six who gives directions on whether our timing is off or we need to reach out a little bit more to maximize our strokes and the efficiency of the physics needed to move that canoe forward. Really, you don't want a lot of talking. The canoe is a place of sanctuary and meditation. And you shouldn't speak because you need to focus. The precision of it can't be overstressed; that's the crux of it."

The six-man or Iron Man race goes for 15 to 18 miles, and the same paddlers compete from start to finish. The nine-man race adds a complication — a relay — exchanging paddlers in groups of three every 20 to 40 minutes, depending

on determinations made by race officials.

Again, timing — the synchronicity of everyone — is critical as the resting trio, riding an escort boat, jumps into the water, then pulls itself into the passing canoe, while its counterpart exits, then waits to be picked up for its turn to rest and replenish fluids and calories.

The continuous exchanges are part of the competition, because "you're out there under the sun and working hard," says Pichierri in an understatement: *paopao* outrigger canoe racing has recently been classified as an extreme sport.

Local club members will race this weekend against 24 other teams from up and down the coast between here and Santa Barbara. Approximately 100 boats and 500 paddlers will compete. The course is a modified triangle, 20 miles in length. Starting and finishing at Oceanside pier, the boats will go north approximately 9 miles; make a more or less right-angle turn, and paddle 2 more

miles; then head back.

Viewing of the launch and the conclusion, as well as of the turn near Vista Lookout, will be possible for spectators, who should not be fooled — or lulled — by the seeming clockwork simplicity of it. Simple isn't always easy. Nor are these individuals merely ultra-competitive. "[The sport] is impregnated with the aloha spirit of the Pacific Islander people," says Pichierri. "And with that comes a reverence for what we call in Samoan our *Ohana* — our family."

— Jeanne Schinto

Paopao Outrigger Nine-Man Canoe Race
Saturday, August 26
Oceanside pier
Races 8:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
Awards ceremony 4:30 p.m.
Free for spectators
Info: 760-434-0386,
760-434-4201,
or www.ppocc.com

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