

Outrigger Canoe Championship Imua Has a Record Performance in Big Victory

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The unthinkable happened last year-the Imua Canoe Club was beaten in the U.S. Outrigger Championships for the first time in seven years. The culprits were the men's team from Tahiti, which ambushed Imua down the backstretch of a four-hour, 31-mile race from Catalina Island to Newport.

That startling outcome gave Imua's paddlers something to ponder in the off-season. On Sunday, a year of brooding came to an end. Imua left its competition behind on the way to a race record of 4:02.22 over smooth seas.

Some of the Imua paddlers-and four of these guys have been paddling together for 15 years-described this as the team's best race ever.

The only thing that detracted from Sunday's runaway victory was that the Tahitians were not present to witness Imua's moment of glory. A week ago, race organizers learned that Tahiti, the defending men's champions, would not attend the race because they did not have the money to travel here.

But there was some consolation for race officials when the world champion Outrigger Canoe Club of Hawaii announced it would enter a men's team. Some members of the paddling community said Outrigger opted to come because Tahiti's win in 1984 proved that Imua was not invincible.

Just 20 minutes into the race, Imua commanded a 10-boat lead, "usually the distances races are won by," said Clint Reynolds, Imua paddler.

"We were really anticipating Tahiti coming over for the race, and that really had us psyched up," Reynolds said. "We wished Tahiti could have been here so we could beat them, like they did to us.

"Then when we found out Outrigger was coming, we knew we had to put together our best team. They really had us nervous . . . We really expected Hawaii to win. We thought they would be right there with us and it would come down to the last two or three strokes to tell the tale."

But the combination of calm weather conditions and the return of three veteran Imua paddlers who missed last year's race turned the competition into an Imua paddling exhibition, rather than a *deja vu* of 1984's finish. Too bad Imua was so far ahead that the rest of the paddlers could not get the benefit of observing the masterful demonstration.

"Last year's channel was rough, but this time it was our water-flat and smooth and not much wind," Reynolds said. "It was just a matter of putting our heads down and powering it."

Said Imua's Per Hurtig, "We've had a lot of races, but this was my best. We were out there laughing and having a lot of fun. We didn't feel any pressure (after the race began). We were relaxed, and you can paddle so much better that way.

"We were way out in front and we noticed that every time we made a change (of personnel from the escort boat), we were even farther away, so we knew we were doing the right things."

Kevin Olds, Outrigger assistant coach, said Imua enjoyed paddling's version of a home court advantage.

The Hawaiians are more adept at using a steering and paddling technique in choppy waters that allows their outriggers to gain distance through surfing the waves. That is the reason Outrigger generally fares so well in the 41-mile Molokai World Championship race. But the San Pedro Channel's sleek water provided Outrigger with no such opportunities Sunday.

"We like to paddle rougher waters," Olds said. "That's what we're used to, and they're more used to flat waters. It's not as if you're good in rough, you should be good in flat. It's two different things.

"We came out with high hopes and we did the best we could, but they just out-paddled us. They were better than I expected.

"We had one of our best crews here, and it was unreal. They (Imua) just `walked,' and kept right on `walking'-real fast."

In fact, the Hawaiian team found itself embroiled in a tighter race for second place with San Diego's HanoHano Canoe Club and the Off Shore Club of Newport Beach. The three outriggers were bunched for the first half of the race, as Imua receded into a blue and red ribbon inching across the horizon a mile in front.

In the end, Outrigger finished 11 minutes or nearly a 1 1/2 miles behind Imua. But the Hawaiian boat (4:13.15) was just a minute ahead of third-place HanoHano (4:14.20) and fourth place Off Shore (4:14.40).

Off Shore gained considerably on HanoHano in the final quarter of the race, but even the help of four imported world-class kayakers couldn't quite make up the crucial 20 second difference at the finish line.

Off Shore's team included world champion kayaker Greg Barton, who earned his title in the 10,000-meter race in Belgium last week, along with Terry Bellingham and Terry White, who paddled in the two-man competition in the Olympics.

The Malia hull class was won by Off Shore's No. 2 boat in 4:29.05, barely edging Imua's No. 2 boat, which finished 21 seconds behind at 4:29.26. Nahoia of Redondo Beach was the third Malia finisher in 4:32.20, and Dana Point was fourth in 4:36.30.

[Illustration]

PHOTO: Imua's paddlers are tired but happy after winning the U.S. Outrigger championships. The Newport Beach club won the race in a record time of 4 hours, 3 minutes from Catalina Island to Newport Harbor. / HENRY DiROCCO Per Hurtig (wearing the headband), a veteran paddler for Imua called Sunday's race the team's best performance in his 15 years on the team. / HENRY DiROCCO

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