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Bayfront Cruising

Great show in Hilo providing loads of drama

By JASON ARMSTRONG
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The best show in Hilo this week is being provided courtesy of world-class athletes from around the globe.

Beautiful weather, a spacious beach and highly competitive outrigger canoe racing make for a nearly unbeatable combination. And the best part is it's free.

"For the spectators, this is just a great way to spend the day," Thelma Madali, a member of Team California, said after qualifying for the final round of the International Va'a World Sprints that run through Sunday.

"Every time you look out at the beach," Madali added, "you're going to see a race going on."

And the competition can get fierce.

A paddler from Rapa Nui dislocated his shoulder during Wednesday's opening-day racing, said Harlen Fragas, one of the volunteers with the Palekana Kai ocean-safety crew.

A Jet Ski had to rescue the injured man -- but not before he, paddling one-handed, and his team finished the course, Fragas said.

"It was more for survival, I think, just to get off the course," he said of the effort.

Although unpaid, Fragas and safety partner Paul Kealoha have received help from sponsors, which include the Kekua Foundation, Hilo Surfboard Co. and Local Style.

Thursday's racing attracted David Wilson, a former paddler from Puna.

"I'm just here to enjoy myself and get a little sunburn," he said with a chuckle. "It's a real positive thing here. This is enjoyable, and the weather has been good."

Janet Taylor of Kehena also liked the weather, but discovered a shortcoming in her wardrobe.

"I think when I come back I'm going to wear a bathing suit so I can get wet when I get hot," she said.

In the meantime, Taylor was more than content to take in the morning's action.



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"I think it's very exciting to have all these people from all over the world," she said.

The hard-bodied paddlers relaxed between races, joking with each other and trading T-shirts. Several teams sold commemorative clothing and various items from their respective homeland.

"It's just amazing," said Helen Workman, a member of the Hui Va'a Team from California who is participating in her first World Sprints. "I'm just having a blast. It's just so much fun."

Combining recreation with education were about 80 students from Connections Public Charter School in Hilo.

Kealii Lilly, the school's Hawaiian studies and physical education teacher, said his students were using coconut leaves to make a traditional broom that they will present to one of the teams.

"What we're doing is trying to bring (Hawaiian) culture to the event," Lilly said.

The competitors appeared to be as much in awe as the spectators.

"It's really chicken skin down here," said Annie Ferren, a member of the Kai Opua team from Kailua, who appeared much younger than her age.

"Life begins at 65," she said. "I'm 65. They like give us Social Security and Medicare (but) no need."

Also taking it all in was Pat Kilgore, a recent transplant from Southern California.

"I mean it's a once-in-a-lifetime-deal," she said during a break in the racing. "It will never be in Hilo again in my lifetime, I'm sure."

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