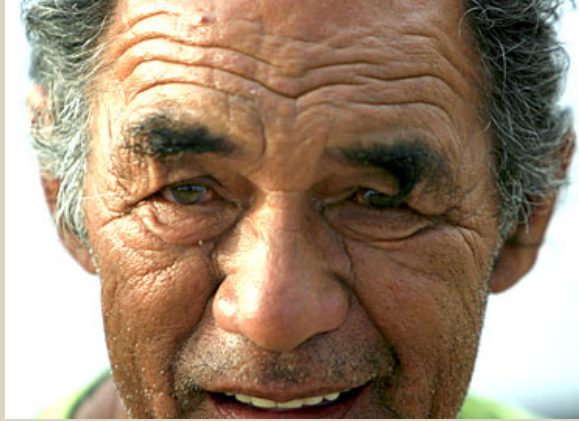


## MOLOKAI HOE CANOE RACE



JAMM AQUINO /  
[JAQUINO@STARBULLETIN.COM](mailto:JAQUINO@STARBULLETIN.COM)  
Joseph "Nappy" Napoleon first paddled in the Molokai Hoe when he was 17. He's still at it 50 years later.

# Napoleon set for 50th straight Molokai Hoe

### STORY SUMMARY »

It's not that he planned this. Not back in 1958 when, at age 17, he finally was able to paddle in the Molokai Hoe canoe race across the Ka'iwi Channel.

"I wanted to do it when I was 15 (too young) and 16 (didn't make the crew)," Joseph "Nappy" Napoleon said. "When I was 17, they had no choice."

The teenage stroker for the venerable koa Malia, Napoleon helped Waikiki Surf Club to the first of six consecutive titles in 1958. That streak pales in comparison to that of Napoleon's -- Sunday, the 66-year-old legendary waterman will compete in his 50th straight Molokai Hoe.

The humble Napoleon said it's "no big t'ing" to him because he never thought about doing 50 in a row. He enjoys everything about outrigger paddling: being on the water; being with friends and family; challenging himself, his crew, the other canoes and the ocean; and the Hawaiian-ness of the sport.

"The interesting thing about him is that he's made the transition through the years, from when it was all koa canoes to now (mostly fiberglass)," Anona, his wife of 43 years, said. "But the one thing he has fought for is the 'Hawaiian-style' canoe. Others, like Canada and Tahiti, have made changes to make it more aerodynamic, but here it's still Hawaiian."

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Nappy Napoleon doesn't want to draw attention to his 50th Molokai Hoe crossing because "it's not like this is the last one."

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JAMM AQUINO / [JAQUINO@STARBULLETIN.COM](mailto:JAQUINO@STARBULLETIN.COM)  
Nappy Napoleon doesn't want to draw attention to his 50th Molokai Hoe crossing because "it's not like this is the last one."

**By Cindy Luis**  
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It goes beyond respect.

Even if Nappy Napoleon wasn't his father, Aaron would still want to paddle with -- and for -- him.

"I'm not impressed by many things, but my dad ... he's kind of impressive," said Aaron Napoleon, an outstanding waterman in his own right. "You're blown away by how strong he is, his technique, how he pulls the blade. He's not trying to impress you, he's trying to teach you."

Even if Nappy Napoleon wasn't his grandfather, Koa Lyu-Napoleon would still want to paddle with -- and for -- him.

"He's a legend, and for me to be asked to do this race with him is such an honor," Lyu-Napoleon, 19, said. "It's history."

It's also the realization of a dream. On Sunday, Joseph "Nappy" Napoleon will cross the Ka'iwi Channel with an all-in-the-ohana crew comprised of sons Joey, Aaron, Darryn, David "Kawika" and Jonah, and grandsons Josh, Sepa and Koa. They'll be competing in the 56th Molokai Hoe -- the men's outrigger canoe race from Hale O Lono to Waikiki -- for 'Anuenue, the club founded by Napoleon in 1983.

It was the seventh running of the Molokai Hoe when Nappy made his first crossing, helping Waikiki Surf Club to its third title. Back then, he never thought about doing another 49, nor did he think about NOT doing another 49.

"For me, it's no big deal," he said. "My friends are so nice, making a big thing about 50. But it's not like this is the last one. I'll do it until I fall apart."

He's finished first six times, all with Waikiki Surf Club, all in the venerable koa Malia. His wins span three decades -- 1958 to 1973 -- including the infamous 1966 race where only half of the 12 canoes finished. Conditions were described as "fierce," with swells up to 20 feet, winds gusting to 40 mph and small-craft warnings.

### **Joseph "Nappy" Napoleon**

**Age:** 66

**First Molokai Hoe:** 1958

**Wins:** 6 (1958, '61, '66, '69, '72, '73), all with Waikiki Surf Club

**Celebration/benefit banquet:** Oct. 12, 5:30-9 p.m., Kapiolani Community College, Ohia Dining Room, \$50 donation.

Proceeds to buy a koa canoe for Anuenue Canoe Club.

Information: 778-8941 or 222-4054 Web site:  
[www.anuenuecanoecclub.org](http://www.anuenuecanoecclub.org)

"The '66 race was a little scary but fun," he said. "Most of us surfed. It was like surfing big waves. The only scary part was when the canoe went over 'cause you thought something wen' break."

The Malia hulled three times, but the majority of the crew were beach boys working in Waikiki, "so we knew what it was all about to turn over the canoe," Napoleon said.

His other memorable race was the first, his third attempt at making the crew. At 15 in 1956, he was too young; at 16, he trained but wasn't chosen.

Finally, after stroking a very dominating 17-under crew during regatta season, Napoleon was chosen, joining veteran watermen such as Blue Makua and Dutchy Kino.

"That first time, you're such dummies," he said. "Us young guys, we nevah know not'ing."

Those who know Napoleon know better.

"He's a good steersman because he's a good paddler, he knows the water," said longtime friend and competitor Richard "Babe" Bell, who has done 47 Molokai Hoes, his first also in 1958. "I call it a feeling in the okole, whether he's steering or paddling, a feeling in the seat. Knowing when the bumps are coming, the angles to take.

"If you ask him about the tide, the currents, he'll tell you he doesn't know, that you got to get in the canoe to feel it."

Napoleon didn't start out as a steersman; he sat No. 1, the stroker. Even today, he said he enjoys stroking, "but it's hard for me because every time I'd be steering from the front," he said.

This is his 50th Molokai Hoe but not his 50th time across Ka'iwi. He's coached dozens of women's crews or been an official during Na Wahine O Ke Kai, and competed in a number of solo and relay canoe events.

"He's the best in the business, as a steersman and as a waterman," said Peter Caldwell, an 'Anuenue paddler who's been on six of Napoleon's Molokai crews. "He knows how to get the most out of the ocean, out of the conditions, no matter where we are.

"We always have the best possible chance because he always puts us in a position to do our best. We always have an edge with him."

The respect is global where Napoleon has been successful, from the first Catalina (Calif.) race in 1958 to Hamilton Island (Australia) to the various World Sprints venues. The Patagonia clothing company even named a color of their outdoor apparel line "Nappy Green"

His competitive spirit has never aged, especially when it comes to the Molokai Hoe. Napoleon stares at what will be Sunday's finish line nearly every day; 'Anuenue's club site is Duke Kahanamoku Beach.

"Of course I still like win this race," he said.

"I know I can win again. Other guys have asked me to steer them, but I cannot because I have my own club. I still like go with the guys in my club. I want to win with them."

As it is most Sundays, it's ohana time for the Napoleons. Nappy and Anona, his wife of 43 years, have 14 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Dozens of family members not paddling will accompany 'Anuenue on a spectator boat.

"We've had so many great adventures paddling," Anona said. "This is another one.

"We know we won't live to see someone else do 50. There will never be another Nappy."