

Outrigger Canoe Club offers members exercise, camaraderie - and sometimes magic

Written by Olivia Hall, Correspondent



Cynthia Brock, front, and other members of the Cayuga Outrigger Canoe Club head out for a practice run on Cayuga Lake. / SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTO



Andrew Waxman, front and Ray Craib, both of Ithaca, lead other members of the Cayuga Outrigger Canoe Club down to the water before a practice on Cayuga Lake. / SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTO

ITHACA — The waters of Cayuga Lake were pleasantly calm on an early summer Saturday, as a handful of paddlers prepared to glide across the surface in a vessel designed for the rougher conditions of the open sea.

Members of the Cayuga Outrigger Canoe Club had gathered to introduce four novices to the techniques and joys of outrigger canoeing, Hawaii's state sport with a history reaching back thousands of years in Austronesian culture.

Maui native Cynthia Brock, the club's president, led the group in carefully lifting the 440-pound canoe off a small dolly and onto the water. Approaching from the left, paddlers climbed onto the six seats, arranged their wooden paddles in the water — odd-numbered seats to the left, even-numbered to the right — and with coordinated strokes moved away from the shore.

Since the summer of 2008, when then-graduate student P.J. Rusello brought the first outrigger canoe (donated by the New York Outrigger club in Manhattan) to Ithaca, COCC paddlers have been meeting at the East Shore Marina two to three times per week from May to October.

The 44-foot-long canoes (wa'a in Hawaiian) are about 18 inches wide and stabilized by a long, hollow float or outrigger (ama), attached on the port side by two crossbars ('iako). While a traditional wa'a was carved out of a single log, the club's three vessels are fiberglass replicas.

"Because the outrigger canoe is so narrow, it creates very little drag," said COCC vice president Bill Schulze, who teaches sustainable business at Cornell. "For paddle craft, they're very, very fast."

Brock added that some of the best teams may achieve speeds as fast as 9 miles per hour, even in rough ocean conditions. "We are not there, though," she said with a laugh. "We do well at 6.5 miles an hour."

At the practice session, Blair Johnson was perched on the rear of the canoe and shouted instructions to the newcomers on how to get the canoe moving. The Cornell graduate student in civil and environmental engineering explained how to rotate from the core with fully extended arms and straight elbows to bring the leading shoulder forward.

"The power comes at the very beginning of the stroke," she said. "Put the blade fully into the water and rotate your body back, engaging your core to complete the stroke. Lift the blade out of the water by the time it reaches your hips, otherwise you are pulling the boat downwards. Relax on the recovery as you rotate forward again."

Add to that switching sides every 16 strokes, announced by the Caller in seat 2 with a loud "hut" on the 15th stroke. With the response "ho," all paddles are moved to the opposite side, ideally without falling out of rhythm.

"At the beginning, trying not to lose your paddle may be the most challenging part," club secretary David Makar said.

Even veterans "have to keep their head in the boat," according to club member Bill Schulze. Each seat brings with it a specific role, ranging from setting the pace (seat 1) to calling strokes (seat 2), providing power (seats 3 through 5) and keeping an eye on the ama and bailing water when necessary (seats 4 and 5). It is rare that the canoe flips, for which the paddlers practice huli ("tip over") drills.

The steersperson in seat 6, however, "is truly in charge of the boat and has to remain very focused," Schulze explained. "You steer with a paddle, which is a bit like pushing a shopping cart backwards."

Any paddlers wanting to put their team's abilities — and endurance, built in the hour-long training sessions — to the test can participate in competitions within the East Coast Outrigger Racing Association (ECORA), the umbrella organization for 15 clubs along the Atlantic seaboard. More clubs exist on the West Coast, in Hawaii and internationally. Races are typically 10 to 12 miles long and last up to two hours.

In past years, COCC has sent teams to a variety of events, including the Liberty Challenge in New York City. This year, members are again preparing for the Kent Island relay near Annapolis, Md. Six-person teams take turns every 8 to 10 miles to complete the 35-mile course.

But for most paddlers, outrigger canoeing is as much about culture as it is about exercise. They regularly get together for picnics, offseason outings, canoe maintenance sessions and occasional lu'aus with Hawaiian music and food.

For a fundraiser, 12 canoeists once spent nine hours fighting headwinds and stormy waters to paddle 39 miles from the northern end of Cayuga Lake to Stewart Park.

“The club is infused with the notion of ‘aloha,’ which is a welcoming, we-are-all-in-this-together Hawaiian spirit, and also very Ithaca,” Schulze said. “You’re all in the boat together.”

In fact, the canoe itself is considered to be the “seventh seat.”

“When the Hawaiians cut a koa tree down, they would promise the tree they would take care of it, and its spirit remained alive in the canoe,” Schulze said. “And even now this tradition remains that you show the canoe respect. You never step over the canoe.”

Members can also identify each vessel by name. Vailea (“by the water” in Tahitian) is being repaired, and A’no:wara (Mohawk for “turtle”) carried the crew during the novice practice. Hoku Ho’okele Wa’a (Hawaiian for “the star which guides the canoe”) stayed on shore that day.

When in use, all three give canoeists “the opportunity to experience our best asset in Ithaca, which is the lake,” Brock said.

“I remember the first day when I saw the lake from a different view,” Makar said. “Once you’re 10 minutes from shore, you look back and can hardly see the buildings over the tree canopy. You realize how green downtown Ithaca is.”

Away from everyday life, “there is a kind of silence and meditative nature to paddling,” Schulze added.

And sometimes, magic happens.

“When all six paddles hit the water in exactly the same instant and your strokes are perfectly together, it’s like the boat lifts up and flies across the water,” Schulze said. “It’s an amazing and exhilarating experience I’ve never gotten in another sport.”

Cayuga Outrigger Canoe Club

FOUNDED: 2008

MISSION: To promote the culture and sport of Polynesian outrigger canoe paddling

ON THE WEB: For a video of the Cayuga Outrigger Canoe Club, click on this story at ithacajournal.com/sports



Members of the Cayuga Outrigger Canoe Club head out for a practice run on Cayuga Lake. / SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTO



Members of the Cayuga Outrigger Canoe Club head out for a practice run on Cayuga Lake. From left, Blair Johnson, Andrew Waxman, Petty Arcadi, Ray Craib and Cynthia Brock. / SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTO