



PART IV
**PREHISTORIC
HAWAIIAN CONTESTS**
by Chuck Shipman

The pressures and rewards of contests are the roots of professionalism in any sport. So it is today with modern surfing, and so it was with prehistoric surfing. For all the distress and controversy surrounding surfing contests then and now, we must never forget that the pressures and rewards of contests have always pushed surfing forward with, in the end, better equipment and more aggressive riding.

Prehistoric Hawaiian contests often featured greater pressures and more lavish rewards to the victors than any of today's modern contests. Some of these ancient tournaments were extemporaneous events, while others were planned well in advance, as the annual Makahiki Festival of Games and Arts. The Makahiki was the Hawaiian equivalent of the Greek Olympics, and ran from October to February thruout the Islands. Surfing matches on winter swells were important Makahiki events.

The Hawaiians were the greatest gamblers of the Polynesian peoples and had a great variety of games and sports. "Mokomoko" (boxing) with its deadly weighted gloves, elaborate rules, and presiding judges and umpires attracted thousands of bloodthirsty spectators who cheered each knockdown with deafening yells, cursing, and drumbeating. Somewhat less fatal in their results were "hakoko" (wrestling), "hee nalu" (surfing, "kukini" (foot races), and "pahee" (dart throwing). All these games attracted hordes of hyperactive spectators. If the contest looked exciting enough, extreme wagers were made in which men and women of all ranks eagerly staked everything they possessed on the success of their favorite players.

The roster of champion surfers of old Hawaii reads, like a prehistoric "Who's Who." Kaumualii, the last king of Kauai, was said to be the finest surfer in all the Islands during the 1790's and the early 1800's. Indeed Kauai was the island that produced the most celebrated surfers of ancient Hawaii, from the mythical Prince Lohiau to Prince Kaumualii. Many chiefs

prided themselves on their surfing skills and, on occasion, would be willing to bet their lives on their ability to win a surf contest. One contest which took place before Columbus left for Spain on his first voyage of discovery has been written as one of the greatest legendary surfing matches:

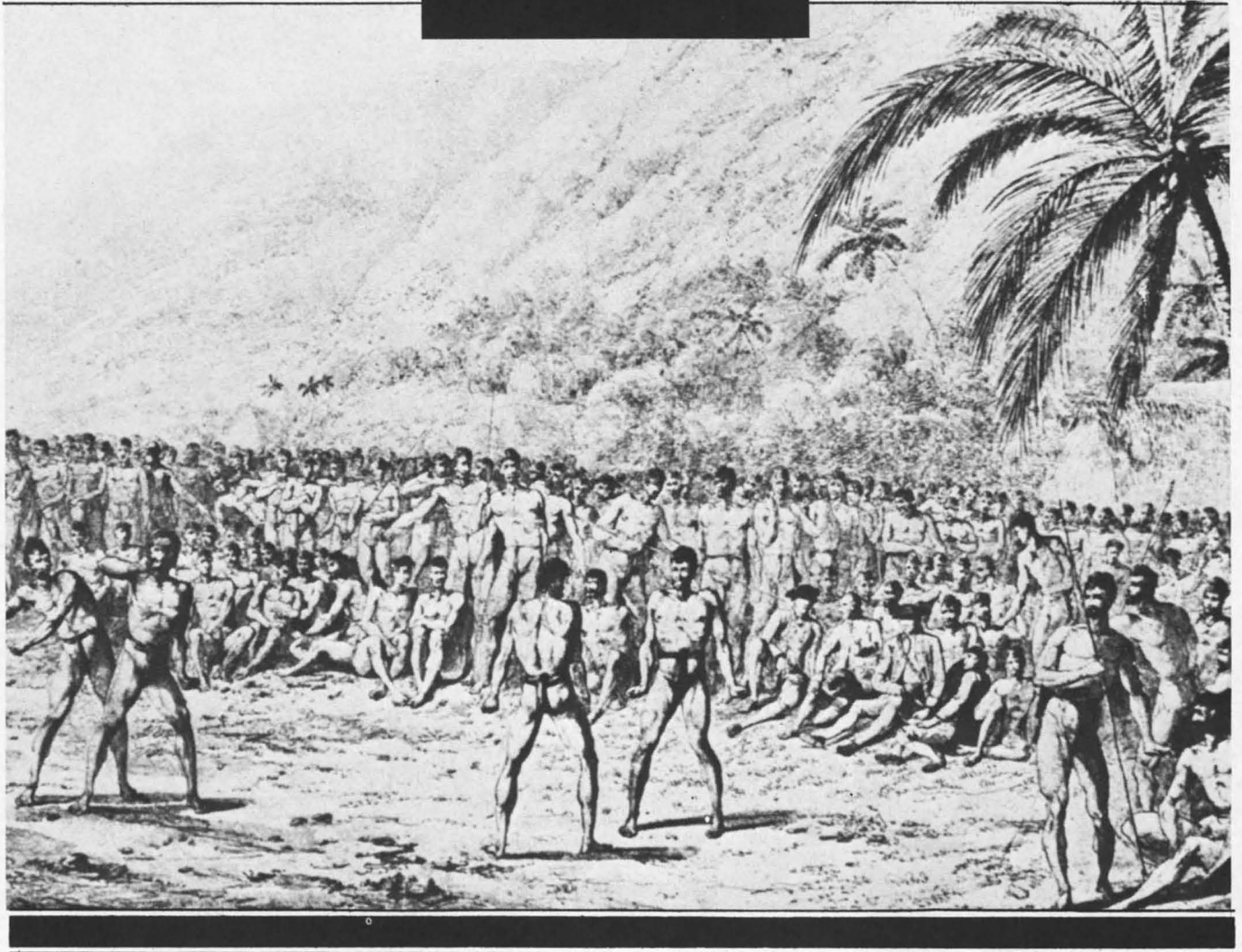
The Aalii (chiefs) of old Hawaii had many taboos which restricted their mobility. The Aalii were also burdened by duties and pressures generated by their position in society. From time to time, many of them would wander off secretly to another island or district where they would not be recognized. Alone, or with a few chosen companions, they would be free of responsibilities and able to mix with the common people.

Umi-a-liloa left the court of Hawaii upon the death of his father, King Liloa, and wandered to the south toward Hilo, the land of Waipunalei. Umi's companions kept secret his identity. Each day they farmed the lands and fished in the sea. One day Umi went down to the beach in Laupahoehoe, a historic surfing site. There he saw Paiea and several men of the place out surf riding. Looking on, Umi and his companions heard praises of Paiea and his great skill in the use of the surfboard. Young Umi was also a master of the surfing arts, since the best instruction and equipment was at his disposal during his childhood at the royal court of the Island of Hawaii.

As they watched, Umi decided that he could defeat Paiea in any contest. He approached one of the people of Laupahoehoe and whispered to him "Is this the best Paiea can do, just to rise up with the surf and fall back again? That is not the way surf is ridden in our land." When the fellow heard this, he went over to Paiea and repeated to him what he had heard, Paiea, angered, called Umi to come to him. Paiea asked, "is it true that you passed the remark that has been reported to me by this man?" Umi replied, "It was

only a casual remark on my part, I did not think that he would take me seriously." Paiea then challenged Umi, "Let us have a race surf riding. If you beat me I will be your servant, and if I beat you, you will be my slave." Umi accepted the challenge and wager. Not satisfied with his own wager, Paiea further put up two double canoes and an outrigger canoe against Umi's whale's tooth jewel pendant. Umi accepted, but that was all the wealth he had. Paiea then offered four more double canoes thinking to wager them against the bones of Umi, a not uncommon wager in those days as fresh human bones made the best fish hooks and other useful items.

After the bets had been decided upon, Umi and Paiea paddled out to the kulana nalu, the place where the surf rose before breaking, and there awaited the next series of waves. After a while, Paiea upon seeing the first surf called out to Umi, "Let us take this one." But Umi said no. On the approach of the second surf, Paiea again called out to Umi, "Let's go." Again Umi refused for he was awaiting the third and highest surf. When Umi saw the wave he wanted, he called out, "Let us take this one." Paiea agreed and they caught the same wave and flew toward the beach. As they neared a large rock that was in the way, Paiea, knowing the break well, crowded Umi toward the rock. Paiea then struck Umi with his board to throw him into the rocks and thereby kill him. Umi recovered instantly, but was forced to make a dangerous passage on the inside of the coral rocks. His radical turn and successful maneuvers placed him closer to the finish line than Paiea. Thus, Umi stepped on to the beach first and was declared the winner. Koi, Umi's companion, watched all that happened and when he saw the bruise on the shoulder of Umi, he went up to him and whispered, "After you have become king of the land, I shall slay Paiea." In later years, Koi was to fulfill his promise and offer Paiea as human sacrifice for Umi's temple at Waipunalei.



The ancient Hawaiians valued beauty and grace in surfing. To them surfing was "halala i ka nuku manu," or in English, like flying; they sometimes would say: "surfing like a bird." But beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and Hawaiians never would wager such high stakes on subjective judging. Hawaiians did not attempt to judge surfing as an art form. Instead they would concentrate on certain skills developed from surfing such as wave and current knowledge, endurance, speed, maneuverability, and aggressiveness, and then developed a contest on a measurable basis.

A surf riding race is the simplest type of objective contest. A nose riding contest is a more modern example of an objective contest calling upon general surfing skills.

The ancients often used surfing sites for contests that were tricky and dangerous. They would lay out a course using natural features such as the kulana nalu, coral heads, backwash, rocks, and currents combined with artificial bouys and judging platforms. The contest itself might consist of a series of races to the beach or cliffs through and around natural obstacles. The judges above would signal the take-off with flags to enable the surfer to take advantage of the strongest and highest waves.

The old Makaha contest with its bouys and flags and marked courses is a direct descendant of some of the prehistoric Hawaiian surf matches. Usually the ancient surfing sites had more hazards than Makaha, and thus physically weeded out a good number of competitors, simplifying the judges' tasks. Apparently an all-island championship was never held, though visiting surfers from other islands often took part in district matches and regional contests.

A popular surfer of those days would find life more enjoyable, even if he couldn't make a real living from the sport alone. Girls and women who enjoyed the beach life found him more desirable, common people sought to be around him, other surfers wanted to learn from him, and most of the district would be more hospitable to him and more solicitous of his needs.

Kahunas were the educated people of old Hawaii. They were highly specialized and in general comparable to the professional class in our society. The supernatural was real to early Hawaiians, so the Kahuna needed to be aware of the spiritual aspects of his chosen field, whether it be medicine or canoe building, as well as the technical aspects. Many Kahunas surfed and some specialized in the various aspects of surfing,

such as foretelling the weather and waves, building surf crafts, blessing surfboards, judging contests, and aiding contestants. These men were professional surfers to the extent that they made their living from surfing.

Surfing was one of the many Polynesian games and skills that was actually taught formally by "haku" (master teachers). The chiefs retained the most talented of the instructors for themselves and their children. The surfing arts were of such high esteem that these teachers often found themselves elevated in rank and power no matter how humble their origins were. The late Duke Kahanamoku epitomized the traditions of the ancient "haku" (master teacher). Had the Duke lived five hundred years earlier, he would just as surely have risen from his humble circumstances to an honored position by the means of his athletic skills and his magnificent personality while instructing others in those Polynesian arts.

The district champions, the surfing kahunas, the surfboard builders, the gamblers, the surfing chiefs and the able instructors all advanced their means and lives through surfing. Their sport was destined to rise Phoenix-like from the ashes of the Hawaiian culture and become a part of ours. This is more than our history, it is our heritage.