

Trail Tales: A brief description of the HURT100, 2026 awards by Rex Vlcek

The ancient Hawaiians believed that all trees had spiritual significance. The Koa tree, specifically, was considered sacred and was used in religious ceremonies, to build canoes, and to fashion weapons. The wood was believed to carry the mana, the spiritual energy, of the land and its people.

Koa wood is known for its rich color and striking grain. Koa has long held a special place in Hawaiian culture. For the ancient Hawaiians, Koa was not just a commodity. Koa was a symbol of strength, resilience, and artistry. The word “koa” itself means “warrior” in the Hawaiian language, reflecting the wood’s association with courage and valor.

The Kane Koa were the elite fighters of the islands who often trained on Oahu’s trails due to their challenging steep ascents and descents. A legacy of female warriors, Wāhine Koa, also existed emphasizing balance and fierce protection for their Ohana. These warriors utilized the islands’ varied landscape as village boarders, defensive outposts and interstate travel, making the very trails that comprise the ridges and valleys of the HURT100 course essential to their overall strategy of survival.

Ghosts of these ancient Hawaiian Koa warriors, named appropriately the “Night Marchers,” are said, “to roam the trails at night;” in particular the Nuuanu Pali segment of the 100 mile course. According to legend the Night Marchers are most often described as “a group of warrior ghosts marching in a haunted procession up and down the mountain, typically with torches and accompanied by drumming... (or Cowbells maybe?) They travel, cloaked by the early morning mist, under the canopy of the tropical forest. Sometimes, in the distance, you might hear a moaning resembling the sound made by blowing into a conch shell. Other times you might experience the sounds that resemble the stomping of feet as they navigate the sinewy labyrinth of roots, rocks, mud and stream crossings. Some even say that a faint scent of Sulphur alerts you of their presence. They often march on the night of the last of the four Hawaiian moon phases just before the moon goes completely dark.

Now we probably should have warned you of these “Night Marchers” at the pre-race briefing, but we didn’t want to frighten anyone from “toeing the line” in the darkness of the Makiki Nature Center before entering the belly of the beast. This is, after all, only a tale, spine-tingling as it may be, rooted in Native Hawaiian history... and “Rooted”, let’s say, to the more seasoned runners associated with the Hawaiian Ultra Running Team.

The tale is told by Lopaka Kapanui, a Hawaiian storyteller known as “The Ghost Guy,” or maybe it might have been told by our own HURT storyteller, Mike Muench, trying to motivate runners to keep moving in the somnolent, lonely, endless liminal hours of darkness. The story goes like this. “If you find yourself in the Night Marchers path, you’re

supposed to run as fast as you can to distance yourself from the spirits. If it's too late to escape, or you're too fatigued from going out too fast on the first two loops, you're supposed to strip naked, lay prone on the ground, cover your head and shut your eyes until they pass. Breaking these rules surely would give you quite a scare or worse. If you're bloodline traces back to one of these warriors, or you have the protection of a Kaua'i Pāhoa, then your life would be spared."

This year, to commemorate the warrior spirit of all the runners that "toed the line" on January 17th and 18th, 2026. I've made these Kaua'i Pāhoa for the top finishers of the HURT100 annual 100 mile trail race on the island of Oahu. The Pāhoa is described by Danial Maile, son of Hawaiian Cultural Practitioner and Kumu Keith Maile, as follows: "Pāhoa lā'au (Kaua'i) means lacking metal. Hawaiians relied on natural materials for their weapons, generally called 'Mea Kaua.' Hawaiians were apt to use a variety of combat items, including spears, slings, clubs and a kind of battle art known as Lua.

Among weapon items often utilized, daggers were useful in close-quarters combat. Called "pāhoa" in Hawaiian, daggers ranged both in size and shape, depending mainly on the person wielding them. Many of these weapons were not complex, and some daggers were simply shaped pieces of hard woods with a point on one end, resembling Western dirks. Others were more stylized in their form with curves and angles worked into the overall aesthetic. Some examples of pāhoa have been linked to the island of Kaua'i and are noted for having such a stylized form, with a long blade and a long handle, allowing for a strong grip and forceful effect. The pointed end widens out in facets to a sloping projection which functions both as a slight guard and a point to stop the hand from moving forward along the attacking end of the dagger. The grip is worked in such a way that it allows for more than one manner of holding the weapon but remains comfortable in the hands."

These spirited Kaua'i Pāhoa were hand crafted from locally sourced Acacia Koa provided by Douglas Gorden of Hawaiian Fine Furniture with consultation and the rough shape provided by Kumu Keith Maile of Maunalani Design Group Inc. Keith also provided the cordage for the hand crafted lanyard by the legendary Piai lug family of Satawal. In Satawal culture, the strength of the community and the continuity of knowledge are symbolized by the traditional rope, or sennit, made from braided coconut fibers. The hang tag CNC engraving was provided by Kiaaina Wong of Woodwork Designs Hawaii LLC. We appreciate HURT's continued support of Hawaii's local craftsmen.

Like the Koa tree, the mana of the HURT Ohana community continues to perpetuate the energy of the land and its people.