

Monday, October 14, 2002



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Tahiti, back, edged Team New Zealand/Hawaii by 20 seconds in the 51st annual Hinano Molokai Hoe yesterday.

[PADDLING]

Tahitians go it alone and win 51st Molokai Hoe

By Brandon Lee
Special to the Star-Bulletin

It was a win three years in the making, and victorious Ra'i paddler Milton Laughlin couldn't wait to spread the word back home in Tahiti.

At the shoreline, still waist-deep in water, Laughlin cradled a cell phone and a smile merely minutes after securing a close and hard-fought victory yesterday at the 51st annual Hinano Molokai Hoe.

Exhausted as he was, the historic news had to be relayed to family and friends -- a crew comprised entirely of Tahitians had become world champions for just the second time.

"Coming into Molokai, we try hard to do our best and to win," said Laughlin, Ra'i's 35-year-old stroker. "Some people (back home in Tahiti) say 'you won't be able to win,' but we never give up. Our first thought is to come here and try to win."

A 41-mile race from Molokai to Oahu across the Kaiwi Channel, the Molokai Hoe is considered the world championship of men's long-distance outrigger canoe racing. The race started at 7:26 a.m. yesterday at Hale O Lono Harbor and finished at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki.

In crossing the finish line in 5 hours, 11 minutes and 35 seconds, Ra'i beat an international field of 105 other teams. Finishing a close second after challenging the Tahitian crew the entire race was last year's champion, Team New Zealand/Hawaii, at 5:11:55.

Three years ago, Laughlin, his brother Lewis, Jean-Pierre Barff and Armand Tauotaha helped to start Ra'i. The four veteran paddlers had previously enjoyed success at the Molokai Hoe with Faaa Canoe Club, winners of back-to-back titles in 1993-94.

But those victorious Faaa crews, while based in Tahiti, were both steered by Hawaii paddlers. And it was the group's goal to groom a crew made up solely of their own countrymen and win major international races.

Yesterday's was their first win -- and it happened at the biggest race of all.

According to race historian Hannie Anderson, just one crew comprised entirely of Tahitians had previously won the Molokai Hoe, Te Oropaa, in 1976.

"Three years ago, we started a new team with a few boys who won a few years ago," Milton Laughlin said. "So we knew how to do it, to win. So slowly we train young boys and slowly the level came up -- until today, it paid off."

Added Tautu Temanupaoura, at 20 the youngest of the crew and victorious in his first attempt at the Molokai Hoe: "It's a very happy feeling, (I'm) very happy inside. With all the training we had, it gave me confidence going into the race."

At 43, Tauotaha was the oldest Ra'i member. The other members of the nine-person crew (six in the canoe at a time, rotating with open-ocean changes) were Rodrigue Hikutini, Joackim Marere, Gilles Tchin and Jimmy Tupea.

Under hazy skies, with variable winds and only 1- to 2-foot waves in the channel, Ra'i and New Zealand/Hawaii surged to the lead at the start of the race with overall race record (4:50:31) holder Lanikai and Outrigger trailing.

New Zealand/Hawaii took a more southerly course toward Oahu than Ra'i and held the lead for most of the way across the channel until the teams converged at Diamond Head. The defending champs were then hit by a wave, taking water into their canoe, bogging down and allowing Ra'i to move in front through the surf.

"There was one really crucial area just off Diamond Head," New Zealand/Hawaii's Rob Kaiwai, 45, said. "They just got this probably three or four boat-length runner (wave) and just took off, and it was really hard to come back from there."

New Zealand/Hawaii did manage to pull close to Ra'i again off of Waikiki, but the Tahitians pushed for about a two-boat-length lead as the crews headed for the buoys outside of Hilton Hawaiian Village Pier and held the advantage through the finish.

Just a year after winning by two seconds for the slimmest margin in race history, New Zealand/Hawaii came up just 20 seconds short in its quest to repeat.

"Deja vu all over again -- but we were on the other side of the coin this time," New Zealand/Hawaii's Bill Pratt, 34, said.

The Tahitians have long been known for their prowess in flat-water conditions -- like yesterday's. While both Kaiwi and Pratt felt the outcome could have been different had the Kaiwi Channel unleashed its beastly side, they also praised Ra'i's ability to surf the small bumps present and overall paddling skills.

Ra'i's paddlers didn't feel the conditions affected the outcome. They said they had prepared for any type of conditions the channel could have dealt them, including the rough stuff. Said 32-year-old steersman Lewis Laughlin: "(The conditions) were hard for everyone. Everyone wished for surf."

As for the other top open division finishers, Oahu clubs Lanikai and Outrigger were eventually overtaken by Ikaika Australia, which finished third at 5:16:58. Lanikai took fourth at 5:18:48, and Outrigger fifth at 5:21:44.

Another Outrigger crew (5:34:50) won the Masters 35 years-and-older, while Hanalei of Kauai (6:07:44) won the Masters 45-and-older and Kailua (6:11:22) won the Masters 55-and-older. Yet another Outrigger crew (5:51:29) won the battle between the only two koa canoes entered in the race.

Everyone else used fiberglass canoes, including Ra'i, who yesterday raced their own top-line Mirage model for the first time.

The canoe was just one of the investments that paid off handsomely for the Tahitians, and they plan to leave it in Hawaii so they can return to defend their title next year.

Yesterday's victory meant the most "because it was 100 percent Tahitian," said Lewis Laughlin. "Thanks to the (Hawaii) steersmen that steered us in the past; we just went along by ourselves this time."