

MOLOKAI HOE CANOE RACE



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Members of the Shell Vaa team enjoyed a break before jumping into the canoe for practice on Monday.

Shell Vaa the favorite in Kaiwi Channel canoe race

By Brandon Lee
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A year after turning in one of the most dominant performances in the 56-year history of the Molokai Hoe, Tahiti's Shell Vaa is back.

Back to try to defend its title in the 41-mile race from Molokai to Oahu across the Kaiwi Channel that is considered the men's world championship of long-distance, outrigger-canoe racing.

Back to attempt to show that its record-breaking time last year of 4 hours, 46 minutes and 4 seconds -- more than 4 minutes better than the previous record and almost 15 minutes ahead of last year's runner-up -- was no fluke.

And back to do its best to dispel a few myths

56th Molokai Hoe
What: 41-mile race from Molokai to Oahu considered the world championship of men's long-distance, outrigger-canoe paddling.

When: Sunday, 7:30 a.m. start, with first finishers expected around 12:30 p.m.

Where: Starts at Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, with the finish at Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki.

about Tahitian paddlers -- particularly the one that says they can win only if the ocean isn't rough.

"We want to win again," Shell Vaa crewmember Jason Ori said. "The Molokai race is known around the world. When you win this race, it's an awesome victory. It's a big deal for us to win this race, and we want to win a second time. It's a new year."

Sure, it's a new year, with only two days until Sunday's race, where an international field of more than 100 crews is expected at the starting line at Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai, with the finish at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki.

But what Shell Vaa did last year won't be forgotten either. Ever.

The Papeete-based team convincingly broke the Molokai Hoe race record previously held by Lanikai of Oahu (4:50:31 in 2000).

And with Hititoa/Erai finishing second and Raromaitai third a year ago -- albeit well behind Shell Vaa -- it also led the strongest Tahitian showing at the Molokai Hoe since 1976, when Tahiti took the top four spots.

Though the water last year was about the flattest the championship has seen in all its years, the often-treacherous Kaiwi Channel is expected to be a lot more animated this year.

Shell Vaa's response? Bring it on.

"When you come here, you come to race in any conditions," Shell Vaa head coach Gerard Teiva said. "If not, you stay home, because then you're just a champion around your house. Sunday is open for anyone to win. But the (team) with more intelligence, more patience, may be the winning team."

Added Ori: "It's always said that the (Hawaii teams) are much better to surf waves. But if we have the big waves on Sunday, it will be show time. An opportunity to show how Tahitians surf waves."

Lately, Shell Vaa has won more than any other team in the sport's biggest races. A month after taking the 2006 Molokai Hoe, it also won for the second straight time at the Hawaiki Nui Vaa -- Tahiti's biggest paddling event and another among the most prestigious in the world. Shell Vaa also holds that race record, after setting it in 2005.

The team returns seven of the nine paddlers from last year's Molokai Hoe crew (six paddle at a time, with rotations made with open-ocean changes): Ori, Roland Teahue, Karyl Maoni, Jimmy Pirato, Heiarii Mama, David Tepava and Lucien Tara.

After losing its top stoker and second steersman, Dehors Matatini and Mairau Hei-Moana are the new additions.

Contrary to popular belief, Shell Vaa is not made up of professional athletes who get paid only to paddle year-round. According to team president Richel Moux, Shell Vaa is much like any other club team anywhere, picking the best among its groomed members -- who also must maintain regular jobs.

"That's the definition of a professional -- paid to do something," Moux said. "But all of them have a (full-time) job. Most of them work with the company (Shell), but some work outside -- one is a policeman. (Everyone) should know that we also have a lot of sacrifice to do just to be on the top."

Shell Vaa arrived in Hawaii last weekend and, after a practice run from Maunalua Bay to Sand Island on Oahu on Monday, left for Molokai on Tuesday to hunker down and "focus without distractions," said Teiva.

Shell Vaa will use the same Sonny Bradley-built canoe it won with in last year's Molokai Hoe. The Oahu-based canoe craftsman continues to share not only his handiwork with the Tahitians, but also his time and course knowledge by accompanying them at practice and on race day.

If Shell Vaa wins on Sunday, it will become just the second Tahitian team to take back-to-back Molokai Hoe championships. Faa took the titles in 1993 and 1994, with the now-veteran Maoni a part of those crews.

"No stress, because (race) day has come," Maoni said. "We feel good."

With two wins locally earlier this season and a fourth-place finish at last year's Molokai Hoe, Outrigger of Waikiki leads the pack of top Hawaii contenders that also includes Lanikai and Maui's Hawaiian Canoe Club.

Some of the others expected to battle among the lead pack are Team OPT (Tahiti's postal team), two-time former champion Team New Zealand/Hawaii and Team Tiger of Australia.