

3-peat for Tahiti's Shell Vaa

By

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Three years, three Molokai Hoe races won, three records broken.

Tahitian club Shell Vaa retained its supremacy in the realm of men's long distance canoe paddling with another dominant performance in the 41-mile contest considered the world championship of the sport.

The two-time defending champion set a blistering pace across the Kaiwi Channel and arrived at Duke Kahanamoku Beach from Hale O Lono Harbor on Molokai with its competition as blips on the horizon. Its time of 4 hours, 38 minutes and 35 seconds shattered its own record from the previous year by nearly 2 minutes (4:40:22).

"(It was) the paddlers," Shell Vaa president Richel Moux said in explanation. "The unity. It's a great, great thing. And a lot of Hawaiian people (support us). I thank them."

He thought the team's new canoe crafted by Sonny Bradley might have put his crew into record-breaking territory on a day of mediocre swells (3 to 6 feet).

The returning winning members of Shell Vaa were Jimmy Pirato, Dehors Matatini, Mairau Hei-Moana, David Tepava, Lucien Tara and Yoann-Claude Cronsteadt. Three new paddlers—Hoani Picard, Bruno Tauhiro and Jean Manea—contributed to Shell's winning ways. But Moux said he was uncertain if his club would return for a shot at a fourth title next year.

It was an overall day of celebration for the Tahitians, as four of the top five teams hailed from the Southern Pacific island. Venus Vaa, competing for the second year, posted its best finish in second place at 4:48:59, pulling away from third-place Lanikai (4:51:50) in waters out from Hawaii Kai. Team Opt and Erai Vaa were fourth and fifth at 4:53:14 and 4:56:38.

"Stuck in the Tahitian Sandwich, but it's good to see the rest of the Tahitians are where we're at," Lanikai's Kai Bartlett said. "Shell, they're on their own trip."

Bartlett discounted Shell Vaa's stroking technique as the reason for their victory, which others had lauded leading up to the race.

Venus Vaa steersman Owen Manutea explained the general style in Tahiti as such: "It's just more smoother, less power. Riding a smooth wave (more) than a powerful wave, like the Hawaiians."

Lanikai posted its best-ever time of 4:51:50, more than 2 minutes faster than the mark of 4:54:05 that the Windward Oahu club posted to win the 2004 Molokai Hoe.

Lanikai's Jim Foti, who steered at times, was somewhat shell-shocked after the race.

"Shell is just on fire," he said. "Three years in a row, what can you say. Three records in a row. They just keep raising the bar."

He paused when asked if he was discouraged or encouraged that Lanikai—which dominated the Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association distance tune-up races leading up to the Molokai Hoe—had put forth its best effort yet, but still came up short.

"At this point it's neither," Foti said. "We're sort of in this state of shock where we can't say we're discouraged, but I'd certainly say we're not encouraged." He chuckled ruefully. "Now what do we do? We really put an effort in this year. A real effort."

Meanwhile, the last canoe to finish yesterday achieved a victory nonetheless.

Pure Light Racing, a team of adaptive paddlers steered in part by coach Aka Hemmings, became the first entire crew with disabilities (except for Hemmings) to attempt and complete the Molokai Hoe.

Pure Light ignored omens such as its escort boat sinking off Molokai just a day prior to the race. A new boat was brought in at the last moment and the team agreed to proceed.

"Man, I don't know if I want to drop dead or if I want to celebrate," said John Greer, the team's other steersman, with a laugh. "Wow. It's nothing that I can compare with. Paddling the Kaiwi Channel, you can't do it on your own. You rely on all your teammates. It's an awesome experience. It was an honor and privilege to do this."

Lanikai Koa was the best of two koa canoes yesterday at 5:41:28, while Livestrong Outrigger was the best in the Masters 40-plus category at 5:12:35. Kailua Canoe Club 2 won the Masters 50-plus at 5:30:33 and Team Bradley/Hui Nalu took the Masters 55-plus at 5:56:53.