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## Different strokes, same goal

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The Great Hawai'i Hope for canoe paddling has come down to a great debate.

To club or not to club, that is the question.

Outrigger Canoe Club and Team Primo — considered Hawai'i's top contenders for Sunday's Moloka'i Hoe championship race — offer a contrast in philosophies.

Outrigger has been training together for the past two years, sometimes twice a day.

Team Primo is a select crew of elite paddlers that was formed two months ago. They have paddlers from Maui, O'ahu and California, so practices were mostly restricted to individual workouts.

"There really is no magic formula when it comes to this race," Team Primo paddler Mike Judd said. "There is a difference between a team and a club, but I think both concepts can work."

Bottom line? Both Outrigger and Team Primo are aiming to challenge the Tahitian dominance of recent years.

"Right now, it's us against Tahiti; us meaning Hawai'i," Outrigger paddler Will Estes said. "So hopefully one of us gives the Tahitians a run for their money."

The Moloka'i Hoe — a 41-mile race from Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i, to Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki — is considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe racing for men's teams.

Shell Va'a from Tahiti is the three-time defending champion and the overwhelming favorite again this year.

In the last three Moloka'i Hoe races, no Hawai'i crew has come within 13 minutes of Shell Va'a.

It is why Outrigger steersman Jimmy Austin is not afraid to admit: "We just want to get closer to them this year. Don't get us wrong, we'd love to win. But it's unrealistic to think that in one year, we can step up our training and all of a sudden beat the Tahitians."

### THE OUTRIGGER WAY

Outrigger placed sixth at last year's Moloka'i Hoe, more than 16 minutes behind Shell Va'a.

Shortly after that race, the Outrigger paddlers agreed to intensify their training for 2009.

### MOLOKA'I HOE

**WHAT:** 41-mile outrigger canoe race for men's teams

**WHERE:** Start at Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i; finish at Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki.

**WHEN:** Sunday, 7:30 a.m. start; first finishers expected between noon and 1 p.m.

**WHO:** More than 100 crews from around the world competing in various divisions (open, masters 40-older, masters 50-older, masters 55-older, masters 60-older, koa canoe).

During the peak of the training, there were double-practices — 5 to 7 o'clock in the morning, then 5 to 7 in the evening. There were also mandatory weightlifting and running sessions.

"It took a whole new level of commitment," Outrigger coach John Puakea said. "We realized that's what we had to do if we wanted to be competitive with Tahiti."

The increased workouts led to increased victories. The Outrigger men went undefeated during the sprint regatta season, then won three long-distance races (Duke Kahanamoku Race, Kailua Bay Iron Challenge and Catalina U.S. Championships).

"Once we saw the results, we knew we were doing something right," Austin said.

Still, the workout schedule has meant making sacrifices in other areas.

Estes, who is a pilot in the Air National Guard, had to put in extra hours on the weekends to make up for work time he lost to paddling practice.

"There was a lot of switching schedules with co-workers, getting permission to come in late, stuff like that," Estes said. "It wasn't easy."

Austin had to sacrifice time away from his newborn baby.

"My wife is really the one who sacrificed," he said. "I don't get to see my baby go to sleep at night, and that part of it is tough."

Some quality paddlers opted out.

"It's a bummer we lost some good guys," Puakea said. "But it also gave some young guys a chance to step up and be a part of this."

Outrigger's nine paddlers for Sunday will be Austin, Estes, Kaponu Brown, Craig Gamble, Scott Gamble, Noah Gibson, Mike Kane, Simeon Ke-Paloma and Tapa Worthington.

"If we can run with the Tahitians even for a little while, we'll be stoked," Puakea said. "They're that good."

## **TEAM PRIMO'S WAY**

Kai Bartlett, Mike Judd and Mike Pedersen were all on the Lanikai Canoe Club crew that won the Moloka'i Hoe in 2004 and '05.

They will paddle with Team Primo on Sunday.

"I'll always believe that paddling for a club is a good thing," Bartlett said. "But with what Tahiti has been doing the last couple years, we just felt like we wanted to try something different and see how it works."

Team Primo paddlers train as hard as paddlers from other clubs, just not together.

"To make this work, you need guys who are responsible and disciplined enough to train on your own," Judd said. "There's a convenience that comes with that because you can train on your own schedule, and not have to be at a certain place at a certain time."

The concept has worked. Team Primo won three long-distance races in recent months (Big Boy Challenge, Queen Lili'uokalani Race, Henry Ayau Memorial Race).

"Those are some of the best paddlers we have in Hawai'i, so it's not surprising to me that they've been winning races," Outrigger coach Puakea said. "They have the ability and confidence to do things that way and make it work."

The Team Bradley women's crew has used a similar formula to win the last five Na Wahine O Ke Kai races.

But like the Outrigger men, Team Primo realizes the daunting task ahead.

"More than anything, I'd like to see Hawai'i paddlers be able to race at a level that Tahiti is now at," Judd said. "Whether that's with a team or a club shouldn't matter — we all need to get better."

### **BEST OF THE REST**

There are other contenders in the field.

Among the other Hawai'i crews contending for a top-10 finish are Hui Nalu, Hui Lanakila, Kailua, Keahiakahoe, Lanikai and Team Livestrong.

Tahiti teams Erai Va'a and Paddling Connection are hoping to extend the Tahitian success. Led by Shell Va'a, Tahiti crews have finished first and second in each of the last three Moloka'i Hoe races.

Northcliffe from Australia and Lanakila from California are also hoping to contend.