

Shell Va'a looks to extend Molokai Hoe streak

[By Kyle Galdeira / Special to the Star-Advertiser](#)

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Richel Moux is in the habit of bringing gifts with him every time he returns to Molokai, as a way to thank his accommodating hosts.

As the president of Shell Va'a, the four-time defending Molokai Hoe outrigger canoe race champion from Tahiti, Moux has made it a habit not only to thank those who welcome him and his paddlers, but also to leave Hawaii with the most-desired gift by a canoe paddler this time of year: championship hardware.

Shell Va'a will set out to tame the Kaiwi Channel once again as it headlines the 59th annual Molokai Hoe, a race often considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe paddling.

Today's 41-mile course takes paddlers from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach. Nearly 120 crews comprised of approximately 1,200 paddlers from around the world will aim to knock off the four-time defending champion Tahitians.

Shell Va'a owns the course record, which it set in 2008 — its third victory during the crew's impressive win streak — of 4 hours, 38 minutes and 35 seconds. According to Moux, last year's victorious crew will return today nearly intact except for the addition of two paddlers.

"We come here to defend the title because, for us, it's a new challenge," Moux said, adding that his crew has remained humble when considering the caliber of competition set to compete today. "We don't consider ourselves as the favorite."

If any crew could be considered the favorite to upset the reigning champions, it would be Team Primo.

The highly regarded crew from Oahu and Maui finished second to Shell Va'a last year in its first go-around, and after an additional year of practice, could test the powerful Tahitians, who will be joined in the race by four other crews hailing from the South Pacific nation.

"Team Primo, with all the good paddlers they have, we expect a battle with them," said Moux. "They are very humble, but from all the Hawaiian teams and from the news I've heard from Hawaii this year, they have a chance to win. I hear they're better than last year." Runner-up Primo finished 12 minutes behind Shell Va'a.

Team Primo carries sizable momentum into today's race after winning both the Duke Kahanamoku and Henry Ayau Memorial races — 26- and 32-mile tune-ups held in August and September. The tune-up events allowed Primo to work on blending with one another and perfecting their technique and crew changes.

"A lot of our training has been based on some good, fun runs, and we've got a bunch of talented guys, but the Tahitians are at another level," said Kai Bartlett of Team Primo. "From last year to this year, we've tried to train with a little more intensity. People like to create the pressure (of being one of the favorites) for you, but it just depends on how you take it. We're just thankful to have the support of the people in Hawaii and our sponsors."

Outrigger, Hui Lanakila, Kailua and Lanikai are Oahu clubs expected to turn in strong performances based on their efforts in the long-distance season. Team Livestrong of the Big Island is also a local favorite to pull off the long-shot upset.

"These guys are really fast. The Tahitians go out and hammer," said Karel Tresnak Jr., one of Outrigger's steersmen. "Those guys are so fast, we've seen it when we go to Tahiti. Primo's putting in a helluva effort, and we're all gunning for the prize."

Tresnak knows first hand what the experience of winning the Molokai Hoe feels like. He won his first title as a member of Lanikai's crew in 2000, and then won the championship with team Hawaii/New Zealand in 2001 and '03.

"I never thought about that until you mentioned it, but it's interesting," said Tresnak when asked about the possibility of winning the Molokai Hoe with a third different team within the decade. "When you line up, you go out to win knowing that anything can happen. You've got to have that mind-set to go out harder than anyone else. It would be nice to see somebody from Hawaii break through."