

Shell Va'a reigns again

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Shell Va'a of Tahiti pushed its way past the finish line at Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach to claim its fifth straight Molokai Hoe title yesterday.

Dominant might be an understatement when describing Shell Va'a and its reign as kings of the Kaiwi Channel.

The Tahitian crew turned in another stellar run en route to claiming its fifth consecutive Molokai Hoe title, finishing yesterday's 41-mile race from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach in 4 hours, 38 minutes and 50 seconds — 15 seconds off the record time it set in 2008. The crew finished nearly 13 minutes ahead of the closest competitor and led a convoy of fellow Tahitians as Team OPT No. 1 (4:51:34), Team OPT No. 2 (4:55:57) and Paddling Connection Tahiti (4:57:19) filled out the next three positions.

Team Primo, a combination of paddlers from Maui and Oahu, was the first local crew to cross the line, finishing fifth in 4 hours, 57 minutes and 21 seconds. Lanikai No. 1 (5:05:10) and Hui Lanakila No. 1 (5:10:19) finished eighth and 10th, respectively. Rounding out the top 10 were:

Outrigger Australia (sixth place, 5:02:12); Bora Bora Va'a (seventh, 5:03:47); and Erai Va'a Tahiti (ninth, 5:07:05).

Shell Va'a jumped out to the lead off the starting line and would never relinquish the advantage. According to official spotters, Shell Va'a held a 3-mile lead as it reached a point approximately 4 miles off Diamond Head and turned the event into a race against its own record time as competing crews were well out of the picture.

"This time I think it was a good challenge because there was a lot of good competition out there," said Shell Va'a president Richel Moux. "We were surprised with the gap between us and the other boats."

Steady tradewinds and a sheath of cloud cover provided paddlers with some relief from the extreme heat and humidity experienced in past years, but the choppy conditions and strong currents made for a laborious channel crossing that is often considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe paddling.

"There were good conditions for a new record, good for us," said Shell Va'a paddler Loroland Tere of the near record-breaking performance. "It feels good. Molokai is a great race, and we will keep coming back."

Hawaii's best hope of reclaiming the race title was in the hands of Team Primo until an accident early in the race put the crew at a major disadvantage.

Each crew in the open division was allowed nine paddlers, who are used to fill the six seats in the canoe while the remaining members ride along in an accompanying motored escort boat. Crews then changed combinations throughout the race as a way to provide rest for certain paddlers while also making it possible to use certain racer's strengths when they are most useful along the course.

However, as Team Primo was performing its first crew change, paddler Peter Konohia dislocated his shoulder while attempting to enter the canoe from the ocean, and was taken to the hospital while his team was left a man short.

"All year, you train with nine, and you practice rotations with nine, so it can tax some guys more than others and it showed," said Team Primo's Kai Bartlett. "We're proud of what we did with what we were given. You've got to feel for Peter. He worked so hard and then can't even get in the boat. You can't control the events that happened, so there's no use crying about it."

After last year's runner-up finish to Shell Va'a by just more than 12 minutes, Team Primo had hoped to narrow the gap and possibly upset the Tahitians this time around. However, the reigning champions proved to be stronger than ever and left competitors shaking their heads in amazement yet again.

"Shell is definitely above and beyond, and it's always impressive when they come here, because they bring the sport to the next level," Bartlett said. "We'd like to expand (our) team a bit more and get a really competitive program going. We want to get the paddlers here to up the ante."

Outrigger Australia is also in the midst of building its team after forgoing the Molokai Hoe since its last appearance in 2004. While its sixth-place finish would be a welcome result by many of the crews who struggled through yesterday's rugged conditions, the Australian crew hopes to work its way into the championship mix in the coming years.

"We can't complain, but you'd like to be higher, so it's up to us to come back next year and try again," said Outrigger Australia paddler-coach Mike Murray. "Next year, we'll be back, and hopefully we can climb the ladder a little higher."

PADDLING

2010 Molokai Hoe

From Hale O Lono to Hilton Hawaiian Village

40.6 miles

Overall: 1. Shell Va'a, 4:38:50; 2. Team Opt I, 4:51:34; 3. Team Opt III, 4:55:57; 4. Paddling Connection Tahiti, 4:57:19; 5. Wailea Canoe Club, 4:57:21; 6. Outrigger Australia, 5:02:12; 7. Bora Bora Va'a, 5:03:47; 8. Lanikai I, 5:05:10; 9. Erai Va'a Tahiti, 5:07:05; 10. Hui Lanikila I, 5:10:19; 11. Outrigger CC I, 5:13:15; 12. Livestrong/Yellow Crew, 5:14:29; 13. Team Punaauia-Tahiti, 5:18:26; 14. Healani I, 5:29:15; 15. Livestrong/Black, 5:30:07; 16. Hawaiian CC I, 5:33:25; 17. Hui Nalu, 5:35:29; 18. Kukui'ula Outrigger Surf, 5:36:23; 19. Lanikai CC IV, 5:37:09; 20. Outrigger CC, 5:38:11; 21. Kai 'Opua CC I, 5:40:00; 22. Puna, 5:40:33; 23. Newport Aquatic Center, 5:41:16; 24. Wa'akapaemua CC, 5:44:28; 25. Waikiki Beach Boys III, 5:44:41.

Division Winners

Koa: Hui Lanakila No. 2, 5:47:50.

Open Glass: Shell Va'a, 4:38:50.

Masters 40+: Kukui'ula Outrigger Surf, 5:36:23.

Masters 50+: Mooloolaba Outrigger CC, 5:46:19.

Masters 55+: California Gold, 6:05:55.

Masters 60+: Namolokama O Hanalei CC, 6:16:45.

Adaptive: Pure Light, 7:48:51.