

Team Primo paddles with Shell Va'a in mind

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

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Team Primo was formed in 2009 with the singular goal of stopping Tahiti's Shell Va'a, the six-time defending Molokai Hoe champion.

After claiming a third consecutive victory in Sunday's Henry Ayau Memorial Race, and making the case that it is indeed the team to beat as far as Hawaii competitors are concerned, Team Primo is poised to contend for canoe paddling's ultimate prize.

Team Primo navigated the 32-mile course, which stretched from Maunalua Bay to Nanakuli Beach Park, in 3 hours, 49 minutes and 7 seconds — more than 2 minutes ahead of the nearest competitor from the pack of 48 crew. Outrigger No. 1 finished second in 3 hours, 51 minutes and 10 seconds and held off Livestrong (3:52:31), Lanikai No. 1 (3:55:51) and Hui Lanakila No. 1 (4:00:28).

With Sunday serving as the final official tune-up for the Molokai Hoe, which caps the men's long-distance season on Oct. 7, Team Primo shored up strategies and tweaked crew rotations in preparation for the momentous race across the Kaiwi Channel.

"The conditions were so-so, it wasn't as bad as I thought. There were some waves, but also some sections that were a little sticky," said Ikaika Harbottle of Team Primo. "There was a little of everything: a little junk, a little happiness. We had a lot of (crew) combinations that didn't really work, and our timing was off, so we have some work to do."

Team Primo features a veteran mix of paddlers from Oahu, Maui and Hawaii island. While it competes under the flag of Maui's Wailea Canoe Club, the team is sponsored by Primo beer.

Sunday's victorious crew also included Jimmy Austin, Kai Bartlett, Kekoa Cramer, Mike Judd, Kaihe Chong, Will Reichenstein, Mael Carey and Jacob Abeytia.

Livestrong, a Hawaii island-based club paddling under the banner of Lance Armstrong's charity, led most of the way but was eventually overtaken by Team Primo and Outrigger.

"We generally had to play catch up, and we didn't pull ahead until we got to Ewa Beach," Harbottle said. "We just started catching bumps around there, and we got past them finally. And, we managed to hold them off."

After winning the Duke Kahanamoku Race on Aug. 19, Lanikai got a true test of what the local competition had to offer. In that race, some of the top teams — including Team Primo and Livestrong — did not participate.

"We're still trying to figure out who our top nine are going to be for the channel, and today was a chance to look at a few different guys to see who's going to fill those seats," said Lanikai paddler Aaron Creps. "Primo wasn't there and Livestrong wasn't there at the Duke, and we knew Outrigger would be strong, so I wouldn't say that the Duke race had any bearing on today's result. There are a lot of competitive Hawaii crews, which is good to see, but Tahiti is still the (crew) to beat."

Team Primo took third in last year's channel crossing, finishing 12 minutes behind Shell Va'a. It seeks to narrow that gap significantly in three weeks, and give the Tahitians a challenge after the Shell Va'a team set the course record in 2011.

"They're just really good, and we'll just see how we hold up," Harbottle said of the impending challenge.

Team Livestrong-Masters claimed the Masters 40 division (4:09:08), and Lanikai-50 (4:33:34) and Waimanalo/Keahiakahoe (4:32:08) took the top spots, respectively, in the Masters 50 and 55 divisions. Healani was the first koa canoe to cross the line, finishing in 4 hours, 52 minutes and 28 seconds.

The long-distance season consists of four races on Oahu — two men's and two women's events — followed by the Na Wahine O Ke Kai and Molokai Hoe: the women's and men's versions of the 41-mile Molokai-to-Oahu race often considered the world championship of the sport. In distance races, crews are accompanied by motored escort boats and are allowed to substitute paddlers in crew changes along the way to provide breaks for the athletes.

The women have the first shot at making the trek from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki Beach in the Na Wahine O Ke Kai on Sunday. Team Bradley, the winner of six of the last seven Molokai-to-Oahu championships, looks to add to its impressive streak, while the Waikiki Beach Boys aim to defend the title.