

# Shell Va'a looks for No. 7

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Tere Roland, Paiea Laurent, Mairau Moana, Yoann Cronstead, Bruno Tauhiro and David Tepava of Shell Va'a paddled to a Molokai Hoe record last year.

As the calendar turns to October, two things remain constant from year to year in men's outrigger canoe paddling: Shell Va'a rules the sport, while crews from Hawaii and the rest of the world play play catch-up.

Tahiti's Shell Va'a sets out to tame the Kaiwi Channel again as it headlines Sunday's Molokai Hoe, a race considered the world championship of long-distance paddling.

The 41-mile course takes paddlers from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach. At least 100 crews from around the world — including representatives from

Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, France, Canada, Italy, Washington, California and New York — aim to knock off the six-time defending champion Tahitians. Shell Va'a set a course record en route to winning its sixth consecutive Molokai Hoe title last year as the paddling powerhouse finished in 4 hours, 30 minutes and 54 seconds — nearly eight minutes faster than the previous record, which it also held.

In its first three years together, Team Primo finished second, fifth and third in the 2009, 2010 and 2011 editions of the Molokai Hoe. The team was assembled with the seemingly insurmountable task of taking down the Tahitians.

As proof of Team Primo's struggle to stick with Shell Va'a, the crew set the record for the top Molokai Hoe time posted by a crew from Hawaii (4:42:59) in 2011, breaking the previous mark by nearly eight minutes, but still finished more than 12 minutes behind the Tahitians.

"Keeping up with them will be a chore; they're really fast," said Team Primo coach John Puakea of the challenge presented by Shell Va'a. "They paddle technically sound. With Primo, there are some very good individual paddlers, and if they can paddle better together as a team, then hopefully we can compete on Sunday. We have some catching up to do."

Team Primo features a veteran mix of paddlers from Oahu, Maui and the Big Island. While it competes under the flag of Maui's Wailea Canoe Club, the team is sponsored by Primo beer. The crew is expected to include Jimmy Austin, Mike Judd, Felipe Gomes, Kai Bartlett, Kekoa Cramer, Kaihe Chong, Will Reichenstein, Mael Carey and Jacob Abeytia.

On Sept. 16, Team Primo claimed victory in the Henry Ayau Memorial Race — the final long-distance tune up prior to the Molokai Hoe. 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 two minutes ahead of the nearest competitor from the pack of 48 crews that entered the event.

Outrigger, Hui Lanakila, Lanikai and Kailua are Oahu clubs expected to turn in strong performances based on their efforts in the long-distance season. Team Livestrong of the Big Island, which races under the banner of Lance Armstrong's charity, is also a local favorite to pull off the unlikely upset.

"There are a lot of competitive Hawaii crews, which is good to see, but Tahiti is still the (group) to beat," said Aaron Creps, an experienced paddler with Lanikai, which won the Duke Kahanamoku Race on Aug. 19 to begin the long-distance season. "We have a lot of respect for the Wailea (Team Primo) guys. They've been the top dog for the past couple years now."

In what it hopes still serves as a positive prelude to Sunday's race, Lanikai defeated Wailea in the 1.5-mile senior men's race at the Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association State Championship Regatta on Aug. 4 at Keehi Lagoon. While the race was a short sprint compared to the arduous journey ahead, the experienced crew from Lanikai gleaned some momentum from the victory as it moved ahead to the distance season.

"It shows that we do have what it takes to be competitive in the (Kaiwi) Channel, and it's just a matter of stretching it out over 40 miles and grinding it out in those (unpredictable) ocean conditions," Creps said.

While the race provides a gauntlet of challenges and inherent danger even during favorable conditions, Sunday's weather projection could squash any hopes crews have of posting a record time.

Winds are expected to shift to the southwest, which will not only create headwinds for the paddlers, but will also hinder crews as they attempt to ride waves along the course. Not only does riding the surf aid paddlers in making it through the channel faster, but time spent on each wave allows crews to conserve energy and save strokes.