

Shell Va'a still rules the world

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Shell Va'a hustled toward the finish line at the Molokai Hoe on Sunday.

When asked to provide insight into how long his team's stellar outrigger canoe paddling run would continue, Roland Tere of Shell Va'a said calmly, "Until we die."

The Tahitian squad continued its domination of the sport's ultimate race as Shell Va'a tamed the treacherous Kaiwi Channel once again, winning its eighth consecutive Molokai Hoe — a race considered the world championship and "Super Bowl" of long-distance paddling — early Sunday

afternoon. Shell Va'a crossed the line in 4 hours, 53 minutes and 35 seconds, and held off fellow Tahitian competitor EDT Va'a (4:54:11). Taha'a Nui Va'a (5:07:54), Mellow Johnny's (5:09:31) and Team Primo (5:16:56) rounded out the top five.

The 41-mile course took paddlers from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach in the 61st edition of the prestigious race. Ninety nine crews from around the world — including representatives from Tahiti, Australia, Japan, France, Canada, Italy, Washington, California and Virginia — set out to knock off the perennial champions from Tahiti. Shell Va'a set the course record in 2011 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.

"It was really special because it's eight wins for us, but we have to give credit to EDT Va'a," said Tere, who mentioned that the crew had a hard time blending at the start before finally finding the winning rhythm. "They were ahead at the start, and it was really hard to come back to them. But, we finished first, and that's all that matters. We have great respect for all other crews."

Shell Va'a's winning crew also included Hei-Moana Mairau, Yoann Cronsteadt, David Tepava, Paiateuira Tamaititahio, Kevin Ceran Jerusalem, Hironama Flores, Clovis Trope and Bruno Tauhiro.

"It's just one more victory, but this one was a bit tougher," said Tepava, a participant in all eight victories, through an interpreter. "It was a fight with EDT from the beginning to the end. We want to get to 10 victories and let the young paddlers (coming up through the Shell paddling pipeline) take over."

While the race provides a gauntlet of challenges and inherent danger even during favorable conditions, Sunday's mild weather and calm ocean swells squashed any hopes crews had of posting a record time. As was the case last year, a thick layer of vog enveloped paddlers and light, variable winds made wave-riding difficult. 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.

Sunday's conditions resembled those faced by female paddlers in the Na Wahine O Ke Kai Molokai-to-Oahu race three weeks ago as Team Bradley went on to claim its eighth title in nine years. Near the halfway point through the channel, Shell Va'a had established a five canoe-length lead over EDT Va'a, and held a slim lead over their countrymen as the crews passed Hawaii Kai. Shell Va'a began to pull away as the paddlers rounded Diamond Head, and maintained a torrid pace down the home stretch.

Mellow Johnny's carried the banner as the top Hawaii-based finisher behind the effort of Kainoa Tanoai, Daniel Chun, Kekua Nolan, Nicolaas Schenk, Salesi Apina Jr., Christiansan Kaawa, Earl Cox, Vetea Taurafua and Peu Mahuru. The crew, which incorporated Tahitian paddlers, had formerly raced as Livestrong — the namesake of Lance Armstrong's embattled charity — but recently switched monikers to Mellow Johnny's, Armstrong's bicycle shop in Austin, Texas.

"It was super flat, we were hoping for something better — we were due for a good channel," said Cox of the mild ocean swells. "Our goal was to stay closer and battle with those guys, but one step at a time. Bringing up the new blood has worked so far, and it's nothing but a bright future for us."

Team Primo, which represents Maui's Wailea Canoe Club and set the record for the fastest time by a Hawaii competitor in 2011 (4:42:59), garnered a fifth-place finish for the second straight year. The crew has remained consistent, finishing second, fifth and third in the 2009, 2010 and 2011 editions of the Molokai Hoe. Team Primo featured a veteran mix of paddlers from Oahu, Maui and the Big Island, and included Ryan Dolan, Kekoa Santos, Aaron Creps, Kai Bartlett, Kekoa Cramer, Tyson Kubo, Will Reichenstein, Mael Carey and Jacob Abeytia.

On Sept. 15, Team Primo claimed victory in the Henry Ayau Memorial Race — the final long-distance tune up prior to the Molokai Hoe — for a fourth consecutive year, although Mellow Johnny's was not in the field. Team Primo navigated the 32-mile course, which stretched from Maunalua Bay to Nanakuli Beach Park, in a record 3 hours, 30 minutes and 15 seconds — nearly three minutes ahead of the nearest competitor from the pack of 47 crews that entered the event.

"(The Tahitians) get all their elite athletes to go into canoe paddling, while we put our kids into football, volleyball, baseball, basketball — you name it," said Bartlett when asked about the uphill battle faced when trying to match Tahiti's paddling prowess. "We know where we're at with them, and we don't expect a miracle. It's just a whole new level down there, it's professional. Here, it's not. You're not going to compete with how paddling has evolved in Tahiti."

Tahitian Ohana (5:27:21) took the masters 40-plus division, while Australia's Mooloolaba Outrigger (5:37:42) ran away with the masters 50-plus category. Kailua-55s took home gold in the masters 55-plus division, while California Gold claimed the first masters 60-plus division (6:05:04). Outrigger Canoe Club claimed both the koa canoe division (5:46:14) as well as the inaugural junior (16 to 18-year-old) division as its youngsters crossed the line in 6:08:28.