

Dolans, Primo chasing ultimate prize

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COURTESY LONO GOO

Ryan, left, and Patrick Dolan will join forces as members of Team Primo at Sunday's Molokai Hoe.

While competitive kayaking has taken Patrick and Ryan Dolan around the world, the brothers are back in Hawaii with sights set on catching the seemingly unbeatable Tahitians, who have dominated the men's outrigger canoe paddling landscape for the greater part of this century.

The Tahitian squad of Shell Va'a has controlled the sport's ultimate race, winning eight consecutive Molokai Hoe events, considered the world championship and "Super Bowl" of long-distance paddling. Shell Va'a won last year's race in 4 hours, 53 minutes and 35 seconds, and also owns the course record, set in 2011, of 4:30:54, nearly eight minutes faster than the previous record, which it also held.

While at least 105 crews are expected to enter Sunday's Hawaiian Airlines Molokai Hoe, Shell Va'a's familiar red-and-yellow canoe remains the heavy favorite to win a ninth consecutive championship. The 41-mile course will take paddlers from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach in the 62nd edition of the prestigious race.

The Dolans will compete with Team Primo in an effort to claim the first title by a Hawaii-based team since Lanikai did so in 2005.

For the Dolans, paddling has become a labor of love that spans three generations.

The brothers' grandfather Willis Rich retired in Hawaii after serving in the Navy and was introduced to Lanikai Canoe Club. While at the Naval Academy, Rich participated in crew rowing, so when he was presented with the option of paddling outrigger canoes, it became a natural progression. The activity "trickled down" through the Dolan family. Pat and Ryan have an older sister and brother who paddled as well, and the siblings began competing in the short sprints held throughout the summer regatta season from as early as 10 years old.

"It's a treat to paddle with Pat," Ryan Dolan said. "We raise each other's game."

Pat, 26, parlayed his love for the sport and natural paddling ability into success in one- and six-man canoe racing. He was mentored by elite paddlers Kai Bartlett, who also competes on Team Primo, and Lauren Spalding, a member of Team Bradley, winners of eight of the past 10 Na Wahine O Ke Kai races. Dolan eventually went on to win the state high school surf ski kayaking championship while at Maryknoll.

The waterman joined the Hawaiian Canoe & Kayak Team, and after making it to the junior national championships shortly after high school, he spent six years training for the 2012 London Olympics but came up just short of qualifying. Pat lives in California, but will make it back in time to join his Team Primo brethren in Sunday's race.

Ryan is still pursuing an Olympic berth in K1 at the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro. The youngest of the Dolan siblings developed an affinity for paddling with Lanikai, and cites mentorship from two of the club's flagship members, Jim and John Foti, when discussing his early success. Like Pat, Ryan also began to race kayaks at Maryknoll, and after winning multiple national titles, he relocated to the U.S. National Training Center to work out with the U.S. National Kayak Team.

After participating and excelling in yearly kayaking qualification races, including earning a bronze medal at the 2011 Pan American Games that helped the U.S. clinch a berth in the following year's Olympics, Ryan Dolan missed out on the London Games after finishing second to a teammate in a qualifying trial by a miniscule eight hundredths of a second. Had he won the race, an Olympic berth would have followed.

"We're coming into the final two years of the Olympic cycle, and that's one of the reasons why I started paddling for Team Primo," Ryan Dolan said. "I'm able to kayak and train while also paddling (with Primo), and it's a plus to be part of such a good crew with great guys."

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), finished fifth for a second consecutive year in 2013. The crew has remained consistent, finishing second, fifth and third in the 2009, 2010 and 2011 editions of the Molokai Hoe.

Mellow Johnny's carried the banner as the top Hawaii-based finisher last year and is expected to again joust with Team Primo. The crew, which is based on the Big Island, had formerly raced as Livestrong -- the namesake of Lance Armstrong's charity -- but recently switched monikers to Mellow Johnny's, Armstrong's bicycle shop in Austin, Texas.

According to the National Weather Service forecast, the Kaiwi Channel will be relatively flat on Sunday with a possibility of rain and thundershowers. A lack of large waves plays to the strengths of the Tahitians, who thrive in flat water.

"A lot of people get caught up (with the Tahitians) every year, but for me, if I'm going to race, I'm doing it to perform as best I can," Ryan Dolan said. "We need to realize that it takes time and you're not going to make up 12 minutes (nearly a mile) on these guys in one year. Nothing happens overnight and it takes time. I'm excited to see so many younger paddlers developing."