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Tahiti's Rai back to defend title at Moloka'i Hoe

By [Dayton Morinaga](#)
Advertiser Staff Writer

One year after its breakthrough victory in the Moloka'i Hoe, Rai Canoe Club from Tahiti is still sky high.

After a year of basking in the victory, Rai is back to defend its title in Sunday's Hawaii Modular Space Moloka'i Hoe.

More than 100 crews from around the world are expected to participate in the 41-mile race from Moloka'i to O'ahu. The race is considered the men's world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe paddling.

Last year, Rai — the Tahitian word for sky — became the third team from Tahiti to win the Moloka'i Hoe in the 51-year history of the race.

"When we went back home, we took all the attention," said team captain Lewis Laughlin. "It's like we were special people for a certain period of time. Tahiti hasn't won the Moloka'i Hoe that much, so a lot of people were happy about what we did."

The victory was especially satisfying because Rai opted to enter the Moloka'i Hoe over the Hawaiki Nui Va'a, which is Tahiti's most prestigious canoe race.

"In Moloka'i Hoe, you have more than 100 canoes on the starting line — some of the best paddlers in the world," said paddler Milton Laughlin, Lewis' older brother. "In Hawaiki Nui, it's the best paddlers in Tahiti with maybe 60 canoes on the starting line. We've won Hawaiki Nui before, but winning Moloka'i Hoe was bigger."

Thanks to its victory last year, many sponsors in Tahiti chipped in to send Rai back to Hawai'i to defend its title. Lewis Laughlin estimates that the trip will cost around \$30,000.

"People are sponsoring us with that kind of money, we're not coming here to go shopping," he said. "We are serious about winning again."

Seven of the nine paddlers from last year's crew are back: Lewis Laughlin, Milton Laughlin, Pahutini Hikutini, Towtu Temanupaioura, Joakim Marere, Gilles Tching and Jean-Pierre Barff. The two new members of the crew are Antoine Ly and Ignace Temarono.

Because some of the team members live on different islands in Tahiti, practice time has been difficult.

Hawaii Modular Space Moloka'i Hoe

What: 41-mile outrigger canoe race for men

When: Sunday, 7:30 a.m. start; first finishers expected around 12:15 p.m.

Where: Start at Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i; finish at Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki

Who: Approximately 100 crews from around the world competing in various divisions (open, 35-and-older, 45-and-older, 55-and-older koa canoe)

Format: Each team will paddle a six-person canoe; teams can rotate nine paddlers in the six seats throughout the race; 55-and-older teams can rotate 12 paddlers.

"Six of us practice together at least once a week," Lewis Laughlin said. "But mostly, we get together for special races like this one. We are all paddlers, so we all know what to do."

Conditions for last year's race were considered to be relatively flat, something that may have worked to the Tahitians advantage. However, Laughlin said this year's crew is prepared to race in small surf or big.

"I don't know if it's a tradition, but people like to say that it has to be flat for Tahiti to win," he said. "With this team, it doesn't matter. We're ready for anything."

Tom Conner, a veteran Hawai'i steersman who steered the Faaa team from Tahiti to Moloka'i Hoe victories in 1993 and '94, will provide navigation for Rai along the escort boat.

"If it's rough, only one guy needs to know how to surf, that's the (steersman)," Conner said. "And Lewis knows how to surf. The other five can just go and go."

Rai beat Team New Zealand/ Hawai'i by 20 seconds in last year's Moloka'i Hoe. In June, Team NZ/H beat Rai by two minutes in a long-distance race in Australia.

"Not all our guys could make that race," Lewis Laughlin said. "Our main team is here now."

What's more, there will be no conflicting race in Tahiti this year. Rai is scheduled to leave Honolulu on a chartered flight Sunday night to return in time for the start of the Hawaiki Nui Va'a on Wednesday.

Besides Team New Zealand/ Hawai'i, other crews expected to contend for first place include Lanikai, Outrigger, Kai 'Opua and Hui Lanakila.

• **TV time:** A 30-minute television broadcast of this year's Hawaii Modular Space Na Wahine O Ke Kai will debut on Oceanic Cable channel 16 on Sunday at 7 p.m. Rebroadcasts are scheduled for Oct. 13 (10 p.m.), 14 (6 a.m. and 2 p.m.), 18 (2 p.m.) and 19 (10 p.m.). Mooloolaba of Australia won the Na Wahine O Ke Kai two weeks ago.