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Shell Va'a paddlers favored after last year's runaway

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The pre-race hype for Sunday's Bud Light Moloka'i Hoe can be summed up in three words: Tahiti is back.

After dominating the race last year, Shell Va'a has returned to defend its title this year. Because of that, all of Hawai'i's top teams are playing the underdog card for Sunday's race.

"We're optimistic, but we're realistic," Outrigger coach John Puakea said. "Because of what Tahiti did last year, you absolutely have to look at them first."

The Moloka'i Hoe is a 41-mile race from Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka'i, to Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Waikiki. It is considered the world championship of long-distance outrigger canoe paddling for men's teams, and more than 100 crews are expected to participate.

Shell Va'a won last year's Moloka'i Hoe with a record time of 4 hours, 46 minutes, 4 seconds. Tahiti teams Hititoa/Erai and Raromaitai placed second and third, respectively.

Outrigger placed fourth, more than 15 minutes — or about two miles — behind Shell Va'a.

"We've ironed out a lot of things since last year, and we feel like we're faster," Outrigger steersman Karel Tresnak Jr. said. "But we can only be hesitantly confident because we know Tahiti is here."

In addition to Shell Va'a, Team OPT — the No. 2-ranked team in Tahiti — will enter the Moloka'i Hoe for the first time. Venus Va'a, another strong entry from Tahiti, is also in the field.

Hititoa/Erai and Raromaitai are not entered this year.

"The Tahitians are in a league of their own," Tresnak said. "They came in one, two, three last year, so you can't just look at (Shell Va'a)."

Still there is reason for optimism for the rest of the field.

Shell Va'a dominated last year's race when the Kaiwi Channel was calm. It is expected to be lively this year with more wind and swells.

"We definitely didn't want it flat again," Tresnak said. "So it's looking pretty good."

Outrigger is considered the top contender from Hawai'i, especially after an impressive victory in the Henry Ayau Memorial Race two weeks ago.

BUD LIGHT MOLOKA'I HOE

What: 41-mile outrigger canoe race for men's teams.

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

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

Who: More than 100 crews from around the world competing in various divisions (open, masters 40-older, masters 50-older, masters 55-older, koa canoe).

Format: Crews in the open, masters 40-older, masters 50-older and koa canoe divisions can rotate nine paddlers into the six seats of the canoe throughout the race; masters 55-older crews can rotate 12 paddlers.

"We were definitely surprised at how far ahead we were in the last race," Puakea said. "But we also know the other teams were not up to their full potential, for a lot of different reasons."

Tresnak is a skilled steersman in the surf, but Puakea said Outrigger's crew will need to work together if the Kaiwi Channel is rough on Sunday.

"If the crew can't get him on the bump, he can't do his job," Puakea said. "So that's something we've been working on."

Lanikai, which won the Moloka'i Hoe in 2004 and '05, is also proficient in the rough water. Lanikai is considered a strong contender, even though it has not won a long-distance race this year.

"From a confidence standpoint, that's not good," Lanikai coach Tommy Conner said. "But for flying under the radar, it's beneficial. We go in with the thinking that we can only get better."

Team New Zealand/Hawai'i is back this year after disbanding for one year. They won the Moloka'i Hoe in 2001 and '03.

Hawaiian Canoe Club from Maui, which placed eighth in last year's Moloka'i Hoe, is coming off a runner-up finish to Outrigger in the Henry Ayau race.

"There's a good handful of crews that can win it," Hawaiian's Kai Bartlett said. "I would like to think of ourselves as one of those, but I think we would need to have a really, really good race on that day because we're still a young crew."

Australia is also expected to have several contenders, led by Team Tiger. At the Hamilton Island race in Australia in June, Team Tiger beat Team New Zealand/Hawai'i.

Lanakila, which is the top team in California, is also in the field.

Dark-horse contenders from Hawai'i include Tui Tonga, Leeward Kai and Hui Lanakila.

"Moloka'i is different from any other race," Lanikai's Conner said. "You can try to gauge who the best teams are, but how they finish is always a question mark."