

Sports

# Shell Va'a eyeing another Molokai Hoe win

By [Kyle Galdeira](#) Special to the Star-Advertiser  
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The men's crew of Shell Va'a raced toward a first-place finish during the 2015 Molokai Hoe in Waikiki.



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**Hironana Flores, left, hugged his Shell Va'a teammates after their first-place finish last year.**

Minutes after claiming their eighth straight Molokai Hoe crown in 2013, some Shell Va'a paddlers confidently proclaimed that they would continue chasing the outrigger canoe paddling world championship "until we die."

#### 64th Annual Hawaiian Airlines Molokai Hoe

>> **When:** Today

>> **Where:** Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, to Waikiki Beach, Oahu (41 miles)

>> **Race time:** Race is scheduled to begin at 8 a.m., with the top finishers expected to finish around 12:45 p.m.

>> **Recent champions:** Tahiti's Shell Va'a claimed eight consecutive Molokai Hoe victories from 2006 to 2013 and won again last year. In 2014, Tahitian crew EDT Va'a, which is named after an energy company, upset Shell to win the title. Lanikai was the last locally-based crew to claim the men's Molokai-to-Oahu hardware in 2005.

>> **Record time:** Shell Va'a set the event record time of 4 hours, 30 minutes and 54 seconds in 2011.

The justifiably confident Tahitian athletes also stated, perhaps in jest, that they needed to “win 10 in a row, then we can stop.” After all, Shell Va'a had 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.

However, Shell's run for 10 straight titles came to an abrupt halt in 2014 when Tahitian competitor EDT Va'a, which paddles under the banner of an energy company, claimed the Molokai-to-Oahu crown. A stunned Shell Va'a squad vowed to return last year and in doing so posted its ninth victory in 10 attempts.

Shell Va'a will attempt to supplement the crew's rich history as the Tahitians headline an international field within the Hawaiian Airlines Molokai Hoe slated for today. Paddlers will take on the 41-mile trek from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki, and more than 90 crews from Hawaii, California, Arizona, Illinois, Tahiti, New Zealand, Japan, Hong Kong, Canada, Australia, France and Brazil are expected to participate.

Shell Va'a crewmember Hiromana Flores explained that last year's win represented a chapter in the crew's “new story. We'll come back again (in 2016 and) I hope for the 10th victory.”

Red Bull Wa'a has been tabbed as one of the favorites from Hawaii to vie for an upset of the Tahitians. The crew finished fourth overall in 2015 as the first Hawaii-based squad to cross the line and did so under the moniker Na Koa O Kona. Last month, the team claimed its third consecutive Henry Ayau Memorial Race title and won the 32-mile competition that spanned from Maunalua Bay to Nanakuli Beach.

Red Bull Wa'a is based in Kona and formerly raced as Livestrong — the namesake of embattled cyclist Lance Armstrong's charity — then switched

monikers to Mellow Johnny's (Armstrong's bicycle shop in Austin, Texas), before changing to Na Koa O Kona last season. This year, the popular energy drink sponsored the crew, which has high hopes of catching the Tahitians, who have continued to dominate the sport on a global level.

"Our goal is to make it onto the (winner's podium) and stick with the Tahitians as long as we can," said Red Bull paddler Chevis Conte. "We hope for the best and will go from there."

Team Primo, which is based on Maui but features paddlers from across the state, is also expected to vie for the elusive title and still holds the record for the fastest time by a Hawaii competitor, which it set in 2011 (4:42:59). The crew represents a model of consistency by garnering sixth place or better in every Molokai Hoe since forming in 2009.

Hui Nalu has emerged as the top Oahu-based crew and started the long-distance season on a positive note by defending its title at the Duke Kahanamoku Race, a 26-mile trek from Kailua to Waikiki Beach, on Aug. 21. The crew has employed new training methods and learned a new stroke from paddler and coach Mario Mausio. The paddling technique is modeled after the Tahitians and focuses on the front of the stroke, where power can be maximized without wasting energy throughout the entire motion.

"It's almost like pulling the water with the goal of launching the canoe forward like a rocket," Mausio said. "It's not just about being strong. You need to have a feeling for the boat, and it's hard to put into words, but it's all about rhythm."

Added Hui Nalu teammate and steersman Jimmy Austin: "It's all about the Molokai Hoe. Every year we try to get better, and judging by the results, it seems to be working."

Lanikai, the last Hawaii-based team to win the Molokai Hoe, in 2005, was the top local finisher in 2014 via a fourth-place standing. Kailua, Outrigger, Healani and Hui Lanakila have also showed promise throughout the long-distance season and will look to keep pace with the lead pack on Sunday.