

Shell Va'a still rules channel

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The Shell Va'a 1 crew including Roland Tere, Paia Tamaititahio, Laurent Paiea, Yoann Cronsteadt, Bruno Tauhiro and David Tepava, finished first in the Molokai Hoe on Sunday.

No wind, no surf, no problem.

In what has become a recurring theme at the culmination of the outrigger canoe paddling season, Shell Va'a tamed the treacherous Kaiwi Channel once again, winning its seventh consecutive Molokai Hoe — a race considered the world championship of long-distance paddling — on Sunday afternoon. Shell Va'a crossed the line in 5 hours, 15 minutes and 49 seconds, and held off fellow Tahitian competitor EDT Va'a (5:16:50). Shell Va'a-2 (5:33:42), Livestrong (5:36:58) and Team Primo (5:39:34) rounded out the top five.

"It was better to win the first time; now after winning seven times, it's routine," French-speaking David Tepava said through an interpreter. He has been a part of all seven Shell Va'a victories. "My boss (at Shell, where most of the paddlers work) says that we need to win 10 in a row, and then we can stop."

The 41-mile course took paddlers from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Waikiki's Duke Kahanamoku Beach in the 60th edition of the prestigious race. One hundred crews from around the world set out to knock off the perennial champions from Tahiti. Shell Va'a set the course record last year 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.

Shell Va'a's winning crew also included Hei-Moana Mairau, Roland Tere, Yoann Cronsteadt, Heiva Paie-Amo, Paiateuira Tamaititahio, Laurent Paiea, Clovis Trope, and Bruno Tauhiro.

While the race provides a gauntlet of challenges and inherent danger even during favorable conditions, Sunday's weather squashed any hopes crews had of posting a record time. Winds shifted to the southwest, which created headwinds in the faces of paddlers, along with a thick layer of vog, and also hindered crews as they attempted to ride waves along the course. 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.

"There was no wind, no waves, it was really hard," Tere said following a series of congratulatory embraces with his crewmates. "There were not conditions for surfing with the wind in front of us. We have the record now, seven times in a row. We are legends now."

Livestrong, which features paddlers from Kona racing under the banner of Lance Armstrong's charity, earned the distinction of top Hawaii finisher. The crew featured Thibert Lussiaa, Ikaiki Hananio, Masepa Tanoai, Jeff Silva, Kua Nolan, Daniel Chun, Trey Cox, Peter Olson and Eddie Aldridge.

"We worked so hard this year and it finally paid off," said Cox. "We haven't beat Primo in forever, and it was a tough fight with them the whole way. We fought them until (rounding) Diamond Head, where we finally pulled away a little. It was a battle to the end; this is unbelievable."

Team Primo still holds the record for fastest time posted by a crew from Hawaii (4:42:59), which it set last year. The crew finished fifth overall after crossing the line 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. While it competes under the flag of Maui's Wailea Canoe Club, the team is sponsored by Primo beer. Those on the crew are Jimmy Austin, Mike Judd, Felipe Gomes, Kai Bartlett, Kekoa Cramer, Kaihe Chong, Will Reichenstein, Mael Carey and Jacob Abeytia.

"The conditions were a lot different than we've seen in the last how many years, I've been doing the Molokai crossing since 1999, and I haven't seen an upwind race like this," said Bartlett. "The

Tahitians are definitely at a different level than us. They always run away at the same spot, about three-and-a-half hours into the race. Right when Rabbit Island is buried (from view), that's when they take off. Or, maybe we just slow down."

Bartlett notes that overcoming Tahiti's streak of excellence can be done, but that Hawaii paddlers need to formulate a new plan if that is to happen.

"If Hawaii really wanted to compete with them, then we need to go back to the drawing board and recreate what we're doing training-wise," Bartlett explained. "It really works from the youth level up. A lot of us are getting too old for this, at least in terms of keeping up the level of intensity (needed to contend for the title). Hawaii's got to figure out how to make it more attractive for the kids, it's hard to grow a tree when you keep chopping it down."

Team Tahitian Ohana (5:46:16) claimed the masters 40 division, while Mooloolaba Outrigger (5:55:03) of Australia took the masters 50 division. The experienced watermen from Kailua Canoe Club (6:24:31) claimed the masters 55 division and Waimanalo (6:34:22) took the masters 60-and-over division.