

Sports

No doubt at all for Shell Va'a

By [Kyle Galdeira](#) Special to the Star-Advertiser
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The Shell Va'a crew began to celebrate after being the first to finish in the 64th annual Molokai Hoe outrigger canoe race on Sunday



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Raiarii Buillard took a selfie with Roland Tere of the winning Shell Va'a paddling team.



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Heiva Paie of the EDT Va'a crew, right, congratulated Hiromana Flores of the Shell Va'a crew at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki on Sunday.

To characterize Shell Va'a as a confident group is an understatement.

So self-assured was the crew and its immense entourage that the Tahitian team had victory cakes made earlier Sunday morning in advance of the race waiting for the paddlers at their post-event party.

Shell Va'a showed the world why it's perpetually pegged as the world's top men's outrigger canoe paddling squad and frosted its cake by claiming its 10th Molokai-to-Oahu title in 11 tries amid stellar ocean and weather conditions Sunday afternoon. The black-clad Tahitians now have won the race two years in a row after claiming eight consecutive victories from 2006-13.

Shell Va'a supplemented the crew's rich history as the Tahitians headlined an international field within the 64th annual Hawaiian Airlines Molokai Hoe. Shell Va'a crossed the line in 4 hours, 49 minutes and 17 seconds and still holds the course record that it set in 2011 (4:30:54). EDT Va'a (4:56:29) and Shell

Va'a 2 (5:05:00) made it a Tahitian sweep of the top three spots, while Team Primo (5:09:29), Red Bull Wa'a (5:12:07) and Hui Nalu (5:14:46) represented Maui, the Big Island and Oahu to round out the top six.

“This makes 11 consecutive times that Tahitians have won this race and 10 times for Shell Va'a, so we're very happy; we can relax now,” said victorious crewmember Hiromana Flores, who set the pace up front as the team's stroker. “We train hard, and when there were some waves (behind us), we had to 'bam, bam, bam,' just like that. It's a good feeling.”

Paddlers made the 41-mile trek from Molokai's Hale O Lono Harbor to Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki, and 94 crews from Hawaii, Arizona, California, Illinois, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Hong Kong, Japan, Tahiti and New Zealand participated in the ultimate test of strength, endurance and strategy. Crews enjoyed steady winds and small-yet-surfable waves throughout the Kaiwi Channel, conditions that suited the Tahitians perfectly.

“This one is very special because it signifies the sacrifice by the team,” said Shell Va'a's Roland Tere. “The conditions weren't great for surfing, but that's good for us. We hope to come back.”

Shell Va'a's winning crew also included: Raihere Tevaeearai, Kevin Ceran Jerusalemy, Damas Ami, Paiateuira Tamaititahio, Yoann Cronsteadt, Iorama Teahu and Solomona Teuruarii.

According to reports from officials and escort boats on the water, the Tahitians jumped out to an early lead as Shell Va'a 1 and 2 joined EDT Va'a amongst the lead pack, while Red Bull Wa'a, Team Primo and Hui Nalu kept the leaders in sight. By the time Shell Va'a reached Maunalua Bay fronting Hawaii Kai, the crew already had opened up at least a $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile lead over the next closest canoe and continued to widen its advantage down the stretch.

Team Primo, which is based on Maui but features paddlers from across the state, still holds the record for the fastest time by a Hawaii competitor, a mark that 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.

“We've got a really tight group of guys, and that adds to how much fun this is,” said veteran waterman and Team Primo paddler Kai Bartlett. “The No. 1 thing is believing in one another, because without that, you've already lost. We've come to a reality: if we can compete, we're stoked. But a lot of us have families and we don't want to neglect them too much, so if we can't (overcome

the Tahitians), life's not over and we'll keep coming out here and having a great time."

Joining Bartlett in Team Primo's iconic yellow-and-blue canoe were: Ryan Dolan, Patrick Dolan, Tyson Kubo, Kekoa Cramer, Mael Carey, Kekupa'a Naeole, Felipe Gomes and Will Reichenstein.

Red Bull Wa'a is based in Kona and had 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 lofty hopes of eventually catching the Tahitians who continue to dominate the sport on a global level.

"It was hard to find a groove. We were hoping to do better, but it wasn't our day," said Red Bull paddler Chevis Conte. "Team Primo has a solid group of guys and they were stronger today, but we'll learn from our mistakes and come back next year. Red Bull is a big name, and everyone expects a lot from us, but this is part of the process."

Veteran Hui Nalu paddler and steersman Jimmy Austin completed his 15th consecutive Molokai Hoe. He noted that Team Primo and Red Bull Wa'a were able to establish some distance on Hui Nalu by taking an extreme inside route and cutting right around the Diamond Head buoy en route to Waikiki.

The Hawaiian Airlines pilot and father of three, who also coaches kayaking for Punahou, explained that it is important to balance life outside the canoe with competition on the ocean.

"We always know that Team Primo is fast and on top of their game, I used to paddle with those guys and we set the record for the fastest time by a crew from Hawaii; it was amazing," Austin said. "Preparation-wise, we can't do what the Tahitians do, they're professional paddlers, but they deserve a lot of credit for putting in the work and doing their homework.

"We try to get the most time we can on the water and see what happens on race day. You get out there, and it's a challenge in itself."

Lanikai still holds the distinction as the last Hawaii-based team to win the Molokai Hoe, a feat it accomplished in 2005. The Kailua-based club finished seventh overall on Sunday with a mark of 5:21:27.