

MOLOKAI WORLD SURF SKI CHAMPIONSHIPS 2012 – RACE REPORT

Tim Altman

On arriving in Molokai, the sight of the bay we were to start in with a fleet of escort boats, skis on the beach and at the hotel, and the army orange shirted paddlers really got the adrenaline flowing. Add to that the fact that the Island of Oahu was merely a speck in the distance, I was feeling a mix of excitement and dread of the competition and task that lay ahead.



From L to R – Sarge, Sweens and myself.

As mentioned in the pre race report, we already felt extremely ‘toey’ in the days leading up to the race and especially ‘the morning of’. The feeling is that of excitement or impatience to get going combined with a feeling of dread that makes you sick in the stomach. At times, I felt that it would be easier and far more comfortable to actually fall sick or for something to go wrong and not be able to race. At least that ‘toey’ feeling would be over sooner.

The pre race briefing where everyone comes together hand in hand to honour the tradition of the race was really touching. This combined with listening to the build up or hype from locals and fellow competitors prior to the race gives one a real perspective of the deep tradition of the race and this channel and how important it is to the them and to the Hawaiian culture. It is so much more than just a long paddle back against some fast paddlers.



Once the briefing was over, it was down to business:

- Apply final sunscreen to legs, arms, feet, ears , neck and head (just in case my hat fell off). We were going to be out there for up to four to five hours, so everything that was to be exposed was covered.
- Vaseline to the hands - we were told by many paddlers who've done the race to apply Vaseline to our hands at night for a few days prior to the race and an hour or so prior. This is counter to what I had always practiced, but these paddlers had been adamant that it helps to prevent blisters etc. When I jumped on the water to warm up however, I couldn't hold my paddle, so I quickly returned to the beach to remove the Vas. It still probably worked as the base layer remained and I only ended up with one small blister.
- Check drink systems and gels – I had two full 2 litre bladders with salt tablets in them. One for my ski (sitting in the well between my foot pedals and the hump on the deck of the ski in front of the pedals, with the tube being tucked into my shorts). One for my escort boat (they also had extra water in case of emergency).
- I also carried two small plastic bottles in my shorts legs that contained the equivalent of 4 gels per bottle (that can be quickly sucked out at intervals). In addition there was an extra gel bottle with gels containing caffeine (to keep me alert) that I was to introduce after 2-2.5 hours.

- Checking all equipment – paddle joiner, nuts for foot plates on the ski, the rudder etc. etc. Not being the most organized or mechanical person generally, I always make this check prior.
- Locate my escort boat and paddle everything not required on the ski out to them for the trip back. There are a lot of boats out in the bay and locating your boat can take a while.
- Finally, warm up time – finally. A chance to settle that nervous energy.

It was pretty cool during the warm up seeing so many great paddlers getting ready to go.

The start was not overly hectic. I managed to jump on Clint Robinson's wash initially and we lead out with another group to our north also leading the field.

I was comfortable on the wash, but I was so mindful of what I had felt was the most consistent advice I had received in the week prior to the race - 'don't go out too hard' - that I just wanted to settle into my own pace and rhythm early. So I let the wash go and moved over to the side not far from Oscar and Marty Kenny. The wash riding would not have lasted long anyway as we started to get some assistance from runs fairly early. They didn't get significant until a few km's into the race.

Early on I took it pretty easy making sure that I did not put into those really hard strokes to get onto runs or linking them. I guess I paddled at roughly 80% of what my maximum pace would be at any stage of the race. I simply did not want to get too caught up in competition with everyone else and go out too hard. The thought of blowing half way through the race and having a miserable, painful, even delirious (some of the words used by competitors who have experienced this in previous crossings) last couple of hours of the race was something I wanted to avoid. I wanted to go well, but most of all, I wanted to enjoy the paddle. And that sort of pain is not fun.

For the first hour to hour and a half, I just focused on my own paddling and my own pace. I was acutely aware of those around me, and whilst I was aware of paddlers in further in front of me (as you could see their escort boats) I had no idea how many were in front, how far in front they were or even who they were.

The wind on the day was apparently a 10-15 knot SE cross-tail wind blowing over our right shoulders, meaning that it was not a straight downwind run and you had to resist the temptation to be seduced by the runs and end up too far south. Overall the conditions were good, but by no means great.



At about an hour and a half, I felt good and thought it might be time to pick up my pace. I did not open right up as I still had at least 2 hours to go. I began to drop a couple of paddlers who were with me and I caught a few who were a hundred metres or so in front. This was pleasing, but I felt I was being caught up too much in what those around me were doing or what I was doing in relation to them. So my mind felt too active and I did not feel focused or relaxed.

Around this time I had a moment of perspective and thought that I am paddling in one of the most famous stretches of water in the world, in possibly the most famous race in the world, in some fun runs, all of which I may never experience again, so I should just settle down, enjoy the moment and the conditions, concentrate on my technique and have some fun playing in the runs.

Surprise, surprise, I took off.

Just after 2 hours, I felt great so I upped my work rate another notch and was close to opening right up. It was fun.

Technically, I focused on keeping my hands loose on the paddle (not gripping it too tight – a sure sign that one is over working), not keeping my blade in too long and making sure I made the back of the box (or got some height at the back of the stroke – to enable a better catch on the next stroke). This allows more of a catch and release rhythm or what I call 'lift and thrust'.

I was aware that I was beginning to gain on a paddler who was a few hundred metres in front of me, so after 2.5 hours I lifted another notch to try to catch him before China Wall. Oahu was now clearly visible and becoming nearer and nearer – a very welcome sight.

I had heard afterwards that once you can no longer see Rabbit Island, there is only 5 mile remaining. I had no idea of this. I just knew that the race would take me somewhere between 3.5 to 4 hours, so I judged my pace off this. As to the course I followed, Noah, my escort was experienced with this crossing, so he just ran a 'rhumb line' from Molokai to the bay at the beginning of China Wall just north of Port Lock. If I drifted too far from the line (and therefore the boat) whilst chasing runs, I simply received a whistle from my escort boat and made my way in the runs back towards them.

Somewhere between 2.5 hours and China Wall a pod of dolphins decided to follow me and my escort boat for a good 5-10 minutes. It was great as they were very playful – jumping out of the water near us. Initially I thought I'd passed a turtle under the water as I saw a grey streak in the rich blue water. But when it streaked quickly away I knew it wasn't a turtle. When it turned and came back towards me and then leapt out of the water immediately in front of my ski it also confirmed that it not was fortunately not a shark. So I relaxed and enjoyed the company. After a while however, I had to knuckle down to the task at hand running swells as this distraction was very seductive. I was aware that the first mate on my escort boat was filming this so I thought I could watch it later.

Back to the water, I could not believe how rich or vivid the blue colour of the water was. It was beautiful and something I'd only seen in the South Pacific.



Although I was starting to fatigue a little, I managed to catch the paddler I was chasing at China Wall. It was Damien Daly (DD) with his clearly distinguishable orange blades. I was chuffed and spurred on by this as I knew he is a very good paddler and would be somewhere up toward the pointier end of the field. I guessed he was more tired than I and I moved away a bit along China Wall.

I had heard many reports that China Wall is extremely difficult and not to be too tired when you get there as you can lose many places. I was certainly not too tired and I did not think that China Wall lived up to the hype as I did not find it too difficult. It was kind of fun – the backwash was different to running runs, but if you stayed relaxed, you could enjoy it. My Stellar Ski has fantastic secondary stability so it was particularly a significant advantage in this tricky section of the race.



Along the wall I set my sights on another paddler (Michael Booth as it turned out) who was a few hundred metres in front but I seemed to be catching him. I knew I did not have a lot of distance left to do so, but I thought it was worth a crack, especially if he was really tired.

Rounding Port Lock, I caught a small run next to the rocks and it was a very welcome sound to hear humans on the rocks clapping and cheering as I passed them. I followed the course I had been shown earlier in the week by a local, Ed Joy, to avoid the coral reefs and had no dramas.

The final 1 to 1.5 km to the finish line inside the point in the flat was the hardest part of the race as it was now a head breeze. It was the only bit that was not much fun (and it hurt), but I just kept my tempo up and ground away to the line. On crossing the line I was relieved and very happy. Relieved that it was

over and I had made it. And happy mostly that I'd managed to achieve my main objective in having a good race that I enjoyed and was able to smile at the end. Mission accomplished.

I also knew that I'd had a pretty good paddle (I finished in 3 hours 40 minutes), but had no idea of my placing at that stage.

It turned out that I came 10th overall (of the single ski paddlers) and 4th in my age group (40-49 years). Although subsequently, to my surprise, I was awarded the trophy – or plate – for first in my age group. I later found out that, as the first three in my age group were in the top six overall, they were placed into the elite field and I was awarded first. Whilst it felt a bit 'token', it was nice to take home a souvenir, a (wooden engraved plate) as a reminder of the race.



I was wrapped with 10th overall given it was my first attempt at this race and the field was of such a high standard.

Apart from Peter Currie who unfortunately was crook on the day and had a ski not suited to him, all of the Victorian contingent of paddlers had great paddles and were very happy with how they went.

Bruce Bunlop came 20th overall and third in the 50-59 age group finishing in 3 hours 53 minutes.

Both Jeff Sweeney and Andrew Sargeant finished midfield in times that they were very happy with so it was a fantastic result all around for the Victorian contingent.

I felt quite good after the race. I was not too tired at all. I think that the hydration and eating strategy I used worked perfectly and this had me finish well and relatively freshly.

Looking back at the race some weeks after I am still very happy with my result and, at this stage, feel that I would like to have another crack at it next year. I loved being so fit and feel, with a year of experience under my belt, I feel I could pace myself a bit better. As in - less conservative for the first hour to hour and a half (without going crazy). If I could halve the time deficit between myself and the fastest paddler (making it 8 minutes behind or less), I would be very satisfied.

Another 9-12 months of training over longer distances and in the ocean more will make a considerable difference also. In order to stay motivated, and to provide me with incentive to improve, I will attend some of the Australian Ocean Racing Series races (such as The 20 Beaches and The Doctor) and perhaps a couple of the international races (The Dragon Run in Hong Kong for example). As they say; "if you want to play a better game, play a better opponent".

Overall the whole experience of the Molokai race was a fantastic adventure – I would highly recommend it to anyone who may be considering it (no matter what your standard of paddling). And adventure is the perfect word to describe it. The training was tough, but fun. Going away with a group of friends to Hawaii for a week prior to the race and competing in the event was the highlight for me. It definitely helps that the weather in Hawaii is so good, the food and shopping is great, and the locals are very welcoming.

I have many people to thank following my adventure.

Firstly to Paul Garrard of G-Boards and Stellar Surf Skis for supporting me in Victoria. I love these skis and Paul is a great mate.

Also to Dave Thomas and Ed Hoffmeister of Stellar Skis in Nth America for their support by supplying myself and Jeff Sweeney (and Matt O'Garey of Coffs Harbour) skis for the race in Hawaii. It was great to meet you guys and I hope to see you there again next year.

To my fantastic escort boat captain Noah Auna and his first mate (sorry forgot his name) for their support. Also to Todd Bradley who made us feel extremely welcome over in Hawaii.

Also to the guys I travelled with – Bruce, Sweens and Sarge and their wives (Jacqui, Liz and Kylie). Thanks for a great adventure and a lot of fun, especially in Hawaii.

Finally, thanks to my dear friend Anita, whose influence helped me to achieve my main mission of enjoying the race by keeping things in perspective.



Pre-race dinner with the full Victorian contingent.