

Molokai World Surfski Championships 2012 – Pre-Race Report by Tim Altman

Formal training for this event commenced mid-January 2012 when my mate, Jeff Sweeney, said that this race was on his 'bucket list' and would I be interested in joining him. His enthusiasm was so infectious that, at the time, I hesitantly said yes.

I was cautious as I am aware of the training required for such a tough event and I know my mind (sometimes too competitive for my own good) so, if I did this, I did not want to do it half hearted or half fit. It is a big commitment. Both of time and expenses, but also one's energy levels and focus. At times along the way it was hard to keep up with the training combined with work commitments etc. Those with family commitments particularly found it hard. Commitments like this allow a greater appreciation of other aspects of your life that you may normally take for granted).

I was also cautious as I have had a reluctance to race and train for racing over the past 10 years or so. I find competition fun, and it has been my life for over 20 years, but the focus on comparison to others and the attachment to results just does not resonate with me anymore. I like to paddle well, am very competitive once I begin to race (some would say I get 'white line fever'), and results are nice, but the results don't mean as much to me as other aspects of my life – specifically, my internal focus which includes yoga and meditation. As a result, I have felt some internal conflict over this, which also explains why I have retired from racing a couple of times and have focused more on coaching.

What swayed me was that I LOVE paddling, especially paddling in the ocean (and I am pretty good at swell running). In addition, I became frustrated with 'dying in the bum' after about an hour in the Graeme Long Memorial paddle (24km approx) each January. As the 2012 race had only just been completed, this frustration was fresh in my mind. So I thought it would be good to get really fit again, and what better motivation to get fit than a 51km paddle looming in 17 weeks.

In addition, the challenge of competing against some of the best ocean paddlers in the world (several of whom I had competed with and against in my younger, faster years) was very attractive. But not if I wasn't fit.

As to my so called 'inner conflict' – as stated, I adore paddling and paddling fast and it can easily be turned into meditation by getting out of one's head and comparison to others, and focusing the mind and awareness on the breath. I had actually found that I paddle much better in training when my mind is still. The 'comparison to others' aspect can be simply viewed as a source of feedback (without the attachment to the result). And a very close friend of mine had inspired me by her approach to sport and competition which is purely based on enjoyment and participation with friends. So I decided to place my focus during training and racing on enjoyment and being in the moment. Results are nice, but they are secondary. I knew it would be a real juggle on race day when my competitive nature really kicks in, but it was worth a shot. More than anything, I just wanted to enjoy the race. And if I did well or not, then so be it.

So we began. I had paddled fairly regularly prior to this (3-4 sessions per week) but most of it was coaching sprint kayakers and surf lifesaving paddlers, so my fitness was good for an hour solid at best. Some base, but it needed some work.

In addition to Jeff doing Molokai, at that stage, Bruce Dunlop had also decided to do it. He was a previously a state and national level paddler (a gun) from surf lifesaving (a few years older than me, so not really a competitor of mine in the old days – just someone I looked up to when I was a junior), so I trained with him a lot. Bruce is very no-nonsense about his training and not shy of hard work, so he was the perfect training partner, and we pushed each other hard in training.

Later on Andrew Sargeant decided to commit to doing it also (he had originally planned to do it in 2013) and he and Jeff are similar in pace and really good mates, so they became training partners also. In effect, we had two little squads going down on the Surfcoast. We rarely trained together as training times were precious (as per above re the juggling of commitments) as we rarely coincided in availability.

Peter Currie from Jan Juc also did the race and we trained with him a couple of times, but most of his work was done on the river.

My training week included generally 5 paddles per week and 3-5 yoga sessions of 1-1.5 hours each which were designed to keep my body (especially back and shoulder) from breaking down.

The paddling was broken up into two blocks of 6-7 weeks (not necessarily by design – it just occurred that way); broken up in between by one week off and 1 week of speed work prior to Vic Surf Lifesaving Champs; and then finished with a 10 day to 2 week taper or freshening up period.

During the first block of training I did lots of long steady state paddles with at least 2-3 two hour paddles per week, including the occasional 3-4 hour paddle (generally on weekends). The longest I paddled for in the entire lead up was 3hrs 45 minutes (which is incidentally 5 minutes longer than it took me in the actual event). As most of my paddling was steady to solid steady, I found that after 4 weeks and especially at 6 weeks, I felt really flat and dull. No speed at all. This did not feel functional for a down wind race, so I took a week off prior to a week of speed and sprint racing.

In the second block, I did longer paddles on weekends and a fair bit of interval work week during the week – including one lactic tolerance session each week (i.e. 3 x 8x30sec on/15sec off); some pyramids (i.e. 10 double strokes up to 100 d/s and back down in 10 d/d increments); 1 minute on 1 minute off x 30 or so; and intervals such as ins and outs with 6-10 minutes hard down-wind (if possible) and paddle back steady; or 6min hard 4 minutes steady x 6-10 on the river.

I felt much better in terms of speed and freshness doing this. Definitely how I will structure training for future events.

A majority of my paddling was on the ocean, but I did do 1-2 (mostly 2) kayak sessions each week. I think this is a great combination as the occasional river paddle allowed me to focus on my stroke and boat run.



In the weeks leading up to the race I felt really fit, which I loved. I had not felt this fit since 1990 when I was in the Australian senior sprint kayak and I did a tough program (the old NZ program involving 3 x 2 hour sessions per week pre Christmas) in the lead up to trials and then trained at the AIS under Barry Kelly and Steve Wood. The great thing about being so fit is that paddling becomes an absolute pleasure. The 'feel' for the water that you develop is incredible and I felt so fast.

But I was also very tired from the solid lead up blocks.

In the week prior to the race I lightened the paddling workload and really freshened up. I was bursting with energy in the days prior to the race. As none of us (Victorians) had ever done anything like this race, we received a lot of advice in the week leading up to the race from locals (especially Todd Bradley who offered great advice and was fantastic in his hospitality and support of us) and Australians who had done it before (including Steve Coulter, Damien Daley, Martin Kenny and Guy Wilding). The main gist of this advice was that you need to manage your energy levels (definitely don't go out too hard) and manage the heat and your hydration/feeding on the day. I received fantastic advice from an expert on sport and race nutrition, Daryl Griffiths of Shotz Sports Nutrition (www.shotz1.com) the week prior to leaving for Hawaii and I followed this to the letter on race day. It worked beautifully.

I did feel in the last couple of days that it is easy to get sucked into all of the hype around the race and how tough it is etc. etc. which can really get to you. I just decided to take the main and most consistent messages (as above) and let the other hype go. I knew it would be tough, but I just treated it as no different to any other down-wind race; just a bit longer (quite a bit in reality).

I was also fortunate to receive support from Stellar Skis for this race. Dave Thomas from Stellar Surf Skis America had a Stellar SEL Excel sent from mainland US for me for the race (and an SES Advantage for Jeff and an SES Ultra for Matt O'Garey). Thanks Dave. This support was invaluable and hugely appreciated.

As I have trained and raced on a Stellar Ski over the last 3 years, I was really keen to use one in the race. I love paddling them as I feel they are really fast, yet very stable (which becomes important when it gets rough or you are tired); they run beautifully, and the foot strap and seat set-up is really comfortable for me and the closest I have found to my kayak.

You often see paddlers end up on a craft that is different to what they train on and like to paddle and their experience of the race (and performance) suffer as a result.

We picked up the skis earlier in the lead up week and had a chance to train on them make sure they were right on race day. I had trained on an SEL Advantage (14kg approx) and was given an SEL Excel (11kg approx) model to use in Hawaii so having a ski a few kg's lighter was very nice.

We (Jeff, Sarge and I) were very nervous and 'toey' on the morning of the race. We just wanted to get out there and paddle. But we had a long morning ahead – including a light plane trip to Molokai preceded by a taxi ride with the most moronic taxi driver who, courtesy of a bike race blocking the usual entries to the airport, turned a short 20-30 minute trip into an hour and a half adventure through half of Honolulu. Needless to say we were more nervous about making it to our plane than the race at this stage. On arriving to the plane however the pilot was nowhere to be seen?? 10 minutes later this bloke arrived looking like he had come straight from a night club. He ended up being the pilot, and had forgotten money to put fuel in the plane which was even more of a worry. Our worries ended there. Jeff paid for the fuel and the trip was great. We got to study the race course at 1500 feet and conditions looked good – a light to medium (10-15 knot) cross tail breeze blowing over our right shoulder. Not epic conditions, but good. And the tide was perfect for the race, so we were to have fun and not too long a paddle on the day.



Sarge, Sweens and Tim – transport to Molokai

Given it was my first attempt at this race, I would have been very happy with a top 10 overall finish and top 3 in my age group (40-49 years). It is not a race that you generally do exceptionally well at on first attempt. There is definitely a 'learning process'. It had taken the greatest surf paddler I had seen or competed against, Clint Robinson, 4 attempts at this race before he managed to win it.

However, in the week leading up to the race, the field got considerably hotter. Given the forecasts were predicted favourable conditions (down-wind), a few competitors including Martin Kenny, 11 time winner Oscar Chalupsky and 9 time winner Dean Gardiner decided to have a paddle.

It was one of the best fields ever to enter this race. I felt that my pre-race predictions or desires may have just become a whole lot more difficult. In those circumstances, the usual self-doubt begins to creep in.

'What if I can no longer compete at that level?'

'I've never done anything like this before. Am I kidding myself thinking I can be competitive?'

'I was never great at endurance events any way (I was better at 500m than 1000m in a kayak when younger)'

Etc. etc. etc. It's funny how irrational the mind can become when it is allowed too much time and scope to process things. Indeed, very small things can be turned into very large problems.

I decided the best strategy was to just go out and do my own race, enjoy running swells and focus on my breath. The rest could look after itself. I have also learned that this nervous energy is not a bad thing or a hindrance. It is just the body getting ready for battle and, if you have this perspective in mind it can be your friend, and help you perform above the levels you do in training.