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Australia's Mitchell Victorious Again in Quiksilveredition Molokai/Oahu Paddleboard Race

July 30, 2006

HONOLULU – If Australia's Jamie Mitchell had anything left to prove to the international paddling world, he proved it today by winning his fifth consecutive Quiksilveredition Molokai to Oahu Paddleboard Race, overcoming grueling open-ocean conditions that spanned the 32 miles of the infamous Molokai Channel. While tough conditions left all records untouched today, the fact that 29-year-old Mitchell succeeded in warding off 129 other paddlers with adverse winds, waves and tides showed he is without question the master of this sport. Mitchell's winning time was five hours, 19 minutes and 26 second - 23 minutes outside of his 2004 record time of 4:56:03.

Runner-up was highly touted World Ironman Champion Zane Holmes, 25, also from Queensland, Australia - 5:36:38. It was his first time paddling this course. Third place went to California's Gary Fortune, 39, (Malibu) - 6:00:28, who was not tipped to be among the top finishers. La Jolla's Eric Meech was the Mainland favorite, but a run-in with a large fish 10 minutes into the race saw him break the rudder-system on his open class board. The only back-up equipment he could find was a smaller, 12-foot "stockboard". Despite the mishap, he finished second in the stockboard division (6:28:26), even after incurring a one-minute penalty for his change in equipment. The top stockboarder was Keoni Watson (Honolulu, 6:28:03). The first Hawaii paddler over the line was 53-year-old Matt Barnett (Haleiwa), paddling an open-class board in a time of 6:26:44, for 13th place overall.

Only one woman made the solo crossing today, defending champion Kanesa Duncan, 30, (Honolulu), in a time of 6:33:54. Duncan crossed in 21st place overall. Duncan is the defending women's champion and also the women's course record holder. This was her fifth crossing and fourth victory.

Starting out at 7:30 a.m. from Kaluakoi, Molokai, Mitchell and Holmes set a cracking pace and remained neck and neck for the first 10 miles of the course. Minimal wind and waves made for a level playing field at the start with little opportunity for anyone to gain an edge. But as the wind kicked in to chop up a five-foot swell mid-channel, and as an outgoing tide ripped through the course, Mitchell's technical prowess saw him inch his way well clear of the record field of 128 paddlers to take line honors.

"I did everything right today," said Mitchell. "To beat Zane, he's world class, I knew I had to do everything perfect. I started to hurt a little bit, but I think I felt stronger at the end than at the three hour mark. It was hard - light winds, all over the place. Zane and I were pretty close. Then there was about five minutes where I linked up a whole bunch of (swell rides) and I put about 75 yards between us... I didn't look back. I was feeling pretty good, so for him to pass me he would have had to have been going pretty amazing. It's really good when you know you did everything right.

"As long as I keep enjoying the paddling, I'll be back. Molokai is such a challenge. The current... you can't even put into words how hard it is. I knew I was probably in the best shape I've been in in the past four years. You look at the calibre of talent and you've got the best waterman in the world to win out there. That's why it's so prestigious. If it was easy, you'd have everyone doing it. Only the strong survive out there."

For Holmes, who had never paddled this far or this long before, his introduction to the Molokai Channel was a painful one and one he vows never to do again on a paddleboard. As he gingerly set foot on the sands of Maunalua Bay, Oahu, the exhausting toll of the channel was clear on his face and the tops of his feet and knees had been rubbed down to raw flesh.

"It was everything they said it would be and more," said Holmes. "I don't know what Jamie thought the conditions were like, but I didn't think it was good. It was all coming from the side - hard work to get the (rides on the swells). At the half-way mark, that's when I started to feel the current and that's when it went all pear-shaped for me. I'd catch up, (Jamie) would pull away, I'd catch up again, but then I just didn't have it in me. The enormity of the distance... anyone can paddle for two or three hours no problem, but that's when it starts to get really hard. I can't even really remember the last half. I was on another planet I think. Oahu just doesn't seem to get any closer. As you get closer you can see the current's pushing you and you're not even moving. It's the toughest thing I've ever done. I don't think I'll be back, not on a board."

California's Fortune finished more than 40 minutes after Mitchell, succumbing to the physically draining environment as most visitors do in this event.

"It was brutal this year, really sloppy," said Fortune. "It was hard to get any good runs. Seems like every year I decide to do this race it's the worst conditions. We don't get swell like this in California, and the heat of the water.... I usually crack in the heat."

Two-man teams are also a part of this race, and today the first team to cross the line was that of Maui duo Kiva Rivers and John Gangini (5:46:34).

For the second year there was also a "Beachboy" style stand-up paddle division, taken out by Kevin Horgan (Hanalei) 7:23:14.

The Quiksilveredition Molokai to Oahu Paddleboard Race is considered to be the world championship of long distance paddleboard racing. In all, 128 paddlers set out today - the highest number in the 10-year history of the race. Thirty-six paddled solo. Only two teams and one solo paddler did not finish.

Paddleboards are streamlined boards ranging in length from 12-17 feet and are designed to ride open-ocean swells. They are arm-paddled in a prone or kneeling position.

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