

PADDLER PROFILES 2009 FENN CUP OCEAN SERIES

DEAN GARDINER

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How do you define the qualities that make Dean Gardiner arguably the greatest downwind paddler that's ever donned a Speedo?



Dean doing what he loves best - Perth World Cup 2007 (Pic: Greg Kitto)

I, for one, have no idea but I can tell you that a few years ago I was heading into the final leg of a 34-mile relay race on the windward side of Kauai. The wind was howling; the swell, frighteningly big -- at least for a flat water paddler just off the plane from Brooklyn, NY. I hadn't planned on doing the race. I was in Hawaii for Molokai, still a week away but Oscar Chalupsky told me that Rod Taylor, a terrific paddler from Oz, needed a partner and, besides, he felt it would be criminally negligent to miss this warm-up event hosted by a beer company.

With the finish in sight, I made sure I stayed outside the jagged line of breakers. I was a solid kilometer out to sea when a large wall of water reared up and crashed on my head, snapping my paddle leash and nearly cracking my ski in half. I swam for what felt like forever, cursing as my ski washed ever closer to the break zone. That's when Dean Gardiner paddled past. "What are you doin' mate?" he asked as if we'd just sat down at

the bar. He'd been on the beach sipping his second Steinlager when he saw me floundering in the drink and saved my water-logged backside.

I mention this not to illustrate my incompetence but to highlight how utterly relaxed Deano appeared in big breaking waves. No big deal? At the 2004 World Cup in Cape Town, a field of world class paddlers headed out of Hout Bay towards a famed break called Dungeons. Dungeons was going off when Herman Chalupsky led the mob out to sea, making the shorter inside line a disaster waiting to happen. Everyone followed Herman. Except Deano, who slipped through the crashing walls of white water like a kid skipping through a forest filled with chain-saw wielding lumberjacks.



Massive swell near Dungeons - Cape Town 2004

Afterwards, Dean was ecstatic about the win but as low-key about his treacherous line as he'd been when he saved my skin on Kauai. Add nine Molokai wins to his paddling resume -- including the course record that he set in 1997 -- and you understand why the 43-year-old former commercial fisherman from Perth is considered such a master in the bumps. Other paddlers may be faster or fitter into the wind (in fact, Deano has less than no interest in such conditions these days), but few can match him run for run when the conditions get dicey.

Witness Molokai in 2003. Oscar and Dean were deadlocked at nine wins apiece. But with Herman Chalupsky, Grant and Marty Kenny, Clint Robinson, the Mercer Brothers and Lewis Laughlin on board (and flying) many self-professed know-it-alls wondered if either would make the podium. And yet after roughly 50 kilometers in big downwind conditions, Dean approached the cliffs along Oahu alone. That's when Oscar made first

contact. Only when they turned the point and headed into a howling wind, did Oscar win a record 10th title.



Molokai 2006



Molokai 2006

That classic duel, and more than a few others, is why a long-standing debate resurfaces each May: Who is the greatest Molokai paddler of all time? Oscar supporters point to 11 Molo titles and recent wins in Perth and Durban. Deano fans point to his course set on an old Burton and argue that he's the best pure surfer the sport has ever known. Whichever side of the fence you fall on, it would surprise virtually no one if the two met again late on the morning of May 18, side by side in the raucous water along Chinaman's Wall.



Coming 3rd in Durban, 2007 (Pic: Gamplan Media)

Apart from his Molokai training, Dean has been facing a new (and possibly more frightening) challenge - his newly arrived twin babies...

Firstly, which is more challenging - Molokai or feeding the twins?!

Twins by a long way.

How old are you?

43

What does your training week look like (assuming you've been allowed any time off)? Do you follow a three week on, one week off regime?

I do what I can. Saturdays is the biggest one for most of us here. We bash ourselves up a bit on that day. I am basically getting 4-5 sessions a week on the water. I am trying to do slightly longer sessions due to the infrequency of paddling. Occasionally I will fit in something else swim, run surf etc.

Although you haven't won Molokai for a while (2002), you've been up there at the front every time there's been half-way decent conditions - you came 3rd in Durban

last year in classic downwind conditions. Do you reckon you've got a tenth Molokai title in you?

Possibly, I think my body can do it I am not sure on how keen my mind is though. I still feel pretty comfortable in bigger runs and have confidence that I can still paddle faster than most in those conditions.

Who have you been paddling with down under? How's the Aussie squad looking? Reckon TJ's on form?

I paddle with Tim and Dave Kissane quite a bit. Others are Mark Anderson Murray and Jamie Stewart and a host of others. Tim is going well I think he is a definite contender. Over the last couple of years he has really improved in the bigger runs. The Queensland guys are also going well I believe. Marty Kenny and Kirk Jarrot, both have placed in the event before so they will be worth watching. Dean Beament is one of the best in big downwind I think he also will be up there.

Who do you rate as the major competition this year?

All the guys I mentioned above plus the SA contingent, Lewis Laughlin and Nalu Kukea if he is doing it.

What's your advice to first time Molokai paddlers when they arrive in Hawaii to do the race?

Ignore all the bullshit that a whole bunch of people will tell you about mysterious currents and dangerous waters. Molokai is really a pretty straight forward race. Try and enjoy the event and don't get carried away too early. The conditions in the channel generally get harder the closer you get to Ohau so have something in reserve. Most of all enjoy the experience. I have been going to Hawaii now for over 20 years and it is not all about the paddling. It really is a great place, so if you get a chance get away from the paddling crew and take in the islands.

What's your advice on tactics? (I've heard that you should head north almost side on to the wind for the first hour.)

That's not really true although in the past I have liked to be higher up than the others. While you are racing others, you have to maintain you own comfortable boat speed. I just try and keep within range of my capabilities and try and keep in touch with the leaders.

How much juice do you take for the race? What do you use?

It varies generally about 2 litres Gatorade or something like that.

What do you eat the night before the race - and for breakfast on the day?

I will tell you then.

Is Molokai your favourite race? Why?

I like going over for the race. It has been a part of my life for quite long time. I have good friends over there and I met my wife there and got married there so I am pretty entrenched in the place.

Which of your Molokai's saw the most hectic weather conditions? Describe!

1992, the first year I won the race. It was headwind for most of the event and it rained constantly so you had no idea on where you were going. You could only see Oahu in the last hour of the race. It was the first time I had raced Nalu. He was pretty awesome that day given that most Hawaii guys don't like paddling upwind or flat. It took me just under 5 hours and there wasn't one single part of it that as enjoyable.

Who would you put on your list of great Molokai paddlers?

- Oscar
- Herman
- Nalu
- Lewis
- Grant
- Marty
- Marshall
- Guy Leech
- Clint P He's only done it once but he is a freak.
- Clint Robinson.
- Kala Judd

And I believe we will be adding Hank and Dawid to the list soon.

You paddled one Molokai in the Fenn Mako6 then caused a stir by moving back to the Millennium. Now you paddle the Mako Elite - what's the difference between the Mako6 and the Elite?

I paddle whatever I can get my hands on. I have used the Elite once in Dubai here I paddle both a M6 and Millennium. It is easier for me to paddle a Millennium because I don't have to sell it.

What paddle do you use?

Fenn 3

Is long distance paddling is gaining popularity in Australia? Why? What should be done (both in Australia and internationally) to boost the sport?

Yes. The Mens Health Series here put the sport on the map. It brought a whole bunch of people to the sport that were not interested in ski paddling as an SLSA sport. The perception was that to paddle skis you had to be in a club and do the SLSA activities.

Now guys can buy a ski and go in races that take an hour or two then go back to their families work or what ever. The skis are better, more stable, adjustable, lighter and faster.

To grow the sport it has to find an identity. I have beaten this drum many times so I won't go too far into it, but we have to be different from other paddle sports. That doesn't just mean the type of craft. The event has to be different. It is not about finding the fastest paddler (marathon canoeing has that) it is about finding the fastest SURFski paddler. The name says it all.

What are the moments in paddling that you most look forward to?

I most look forward to seeing the old blokes give it the young ones in races. I most look forward to rolling up at events in different parts of the world and seeing my mates/rivals from other parts of the world. I most look forward to going to great places and racing especially in great conditions. I most look forward to seeing the sport develop and the changes that have taken place in the sport and feel that in a small way I have contributed to the growth of it.