

Liberty Call

Electric cars race to checkered flag finish



JOSN Tim Walsh photo

Maui High, #56, leads the pack on one of the final laps of the HECO Electron Marathon March 24 on Ford Island. The race included a 10-lap inter-service race.

Story by J03 Traci Feibel
THIRD NAVAL CONSTRUCTION BRIGADE

Thousands of spectators came out to Ford Island last Saturday for the Annual Hawaiian Electric Marathon. Some came to witness the inter-service rivalries continue as the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force raced their go-carts ten laps around the track for the opening ceremonies.

Others came to cheer for their favorite of the 25 high schools from throughout the state present to compete in the race itself. The goal for the student participants was to cover as many laps possible in 60 minutes.

Officials of the HECO Electron Marathon gave entering teams identical kits made up of an electrical motor to provide battery power and just a few additional parts.

Students were responsible for the designing, engineering, and building of the cars. In the spirit of the race, each service was provided with the same kits, and was responsible for their own construction.

For the Navy, this was the third year Seabees answered Hawaiian Electric Company's call of ingenuity by racing their hand-built, mini electric car at the marathon. The results; a power-packed, excitement stacked day of racing excitement!

The event "sparked" the interest of 25 teams and more than 3,000 spectators, including the U.S. Navy band, local radio station I-94, and a variety of show cars from Oahu's Corvette club. The Electron Marathon, co-sponsored by the State Department of Education and the United States Navy, began with the first event in 1996. The initial race drew only ten applicants. Within the HECO-Department of Defense Energy

Partnership initiative, the Navy agreed to lend Ford Island as the racing ground, and each year, it has become more and more popular.

"This project is designed to motivate students in areas of electrical, mechanical, and environmental sciences," explained one HECO spokesman. "In hind site, students found out that inter-communications and interpersonal relations were vital in achieving their goal. This type of teamwork is what they will be faced with in real life."

Cars were all charged up and ready to go when the 10 a.m. start time came and went, but only one school team would triumph. Entries took on many different shapes, sizes and colors. Some were flat, some were round, some were sleek, but all unique! Drivers coasted through the straits and turns with great precision, taking into account "fuel" or power efficiency and the potential to lose it all in one of the sharp hairpin turns.

A number of teams experienced technical difficulties during the race. Wheels bent, fenders flew, engines died, and cars crashed; but the crowd cheered on. After the allotted time expired and the last car pulled into the pit, the race results were tallied.

The students of Big Island's Kohala High School took the claim to victory, its bullet-shaped car completed 53 laps in a 60-minute race. Kohala also took "Best of Show" by posting the highest cumulative score in the categories of documentation, oral presentation and construction and safety.

Perhaps one of the most anticipated moments occurred when Naval Station Seabees unveiled their "Can Do" car against an Army entry for the enviable Army/Navy "bragging rights."

As history tells, the Seabees were victorious the year before last, but technical difficulties took them out of the running

last year, giving the Army the title. This year, both teams were ready to defend their honor, with the addition of the Marines and the Air Force to compete with as well.

Days prior to the race, Naval Station 1st Lt.'s Office Seabee Constructionman 1st Class (SCW) Joseph Noonan explained why his anticipation is justified. "This is the third year we've participated in the event, and the car we've used for the past two was designed by Engineers from the Naval Facilities Engineering Command," explained Noonan. "It brought us to victory our first year, so we used the same car last year, but we found battery-powered cars are not something that can be left to sit for too long, without accompanying some unexpected problems."

This year, Noonan and his team had scrapped the previous car and started from scratch with an entirely new design of their own. The attempt was to build something worthy of earning back the title from the Army.

"Some of the high school students have engineers helping them with design ideas, as does the Army this year, so the competition will be tough, but our ideas are original. And as long as its all in the name of education, it will be fun regardless of what happens," added Noonan.

Noonan, a native of Cape Cod, Mass., has participated in this event for three consecutive years, with the assistance of fellow Seabees from his shop, who each have their reasons for coming back for more.

Steel Worker 2nd Class David Daniels of CBU-413 Self-Help is no stranger to the Electron race Seabee team either.

"They needed someone to weld the first year we participated, and I was the only steel worker in the shop, so I volunteered," explained the Santa Barbara native, Daniels. "Since then,

I've just become part of the team. It's exciting, working on the car into all hours of the night, trying to make last minute adjustments. The only problem we run into every year is time and money. We get the support we need, there just never seems to be enough."

Among some of the others contributing to the last minute details for the Navy's car, one retired Sailor came out for a piece of the action as well.

Former Self-Help Seabee Kevin Rost lent his artistic talents to the Seabees once again, painting the car this year to look just like a hornet, the most fierce of the bee family.

"Knowing it is not that often Seabees get to build race cars, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. Seabees build a lot of things, but it's quite a challenge to build something we are not taught in school. I wanted to be a part of that again if I could, and they were grateful for the assistance," said Rost.

Race day came sooner than the Seabees accounted for, and although the turnout was spectacular; the yellow and black hornet-shaped car did not do as well as expected.

The Seabees chose Self-Help's Builder 3rd Class (SCW) James Davenport to be the official driver of the "Stinger", since he matched all of the size specifications and weight requirements for the design of the car. But come race day, Davenport was unable to attend, and the new driver, although described as aggressive enough to win, was cause for some needed changes in gearing that were not made in time for the race.

The Army's car not only defended their title at the Electron race, but their car surpassed all of the services with ease. First time contenders Air Force and Marine Corps cars came in close to one another at second and third, and the Navy's car... well, better luck next year.



JOSN Tim Walsh photo

Navy's electric car seems to be leading the Army, Air Force and Marines during the HECO Electron Marathon March 24 on Ford Island.



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(L to R) SW2 David Daniels, Kevin Rost and CM1 (SCW) Joseph Noonan work on the Navy's electric car right up until race time. Noonan led the crew through the production and design of this year's race submission, and are already in the process of making the adjustments to win next year.



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Coreen Pang works on #11, Mid Pacific Institute's electric car, just prior to the race.