



Watch Contestants Pucker Up for Key West's Conch Shell Blowing Contest

More than 50 contestants tested their "seashell musicianship" in Key West Saturday, but none succeeded better than David "Bat" Masterson.

Masterson, who lives in Key West, took top honors in the competitive men's division of the 57th annual Conch (pronounced "konk") Shell Blowing Contest presented by the Old Island Restoration Foundation.

The director of the county sheriff's office's aviation division, Masterson impressed the judges by playing excerpts from a classical melody and the 1958 hit "Tequila" on his fluted, pink-lined shell.

"I learned to play the conch shell just by picking it up and trying to learn to play it," said Masterson, who taught himself the unusual "art" when he lived on a sailboat.

"There are no rules," he said. "You hold it any way you want, you play it any way you want, you just get a tone out of it and you just have fun with it."

The quirky contest included divisions for men, women, children and groups. Judges evaluated them on the quality, duration, loudness and novelty of sounds they made.

Other winners included 6-year-old Audrey Van Aken of Key West, whose surprisingly strong blast drew cheers and applause from the standing-room-only crowd.

The Florida Keys tradition of blowing a conch shell began centuries ago. In the 1800s, when the local

economy was largely based on salvaging shipwreck cargoes, sailors attracted attention by blowing piercing blasts on the shell.

As well as an offbeat musical instrument, the conch shell is an enduring symbol of the Florida Keys, whose native-born citizens call themselves "conchs."

The island chain is nicknamed the Conch Republic.

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