

1968: Littlefield praises 'Prince of the Waves' Duke Kahanamoku

History
EDITOR'S NOTE: *The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past. Skip Littlefield, a longtime resident of Santa Cruz, was an acquaintance of the late Duke Kahanamoku. He relates the ways of "The Duke" here in this article from February 15, 1968.*

By SKIP LITTLEFIELD

Late last month the Hawaii of yesteryear — with muted pomp and pageantry of a proud Polynesian past — paid final tribute to its most illustrious personage.

His name was Duke Paoa Kahinu Makoe Hulikohola Kahanamoku.

We knew him when he was the undisputed "Prince of the Waves" — the world's and Olympic Games swimming champion.

He came from the generation of Jim Thorpe, Charley Paddock, Paavo Nurmi, Big Bill Tilden, Jack Dempsey, Bobby Jones, Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth.

When he was born in 1891, the art of aquatic natation and the sport of competitive swimming was in its infancy. When swimmers were mentioned they talked of Britain's Capt. Matthew Webb who swam the English Channel in 1875.

They pointed to Arthur "Red" Wallace of Santa Cruz — the "Flying Fish of the 80s" — the first man to paddle 100 yds. in a minute flat.

A new century splashed into being. News notes of 1907 placed the internationally renowned Arthur Cavill, originator of the Australian crawl stroke, at the Santa Cruz Beach plunge where he was trying to hit 59 seconds for the classic distance. But Charles M. Daniels of Alameda beat him to the record books.

Suddenly the sports world was aghast. Honolulu reported that a mighty Hawaiian natator was churning white foam

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 over the course in 53 seconds.

Duke Kahanamoku was on his way to perhaps the most amazing record of longevity in the chronicles of Olympic Games competition. He swam for America in the Games of 1912 (Stockholm, Sweden), 1920 (Antwerp, Belgium), 1924 (Paris, France), 1928 (Amsterdam, Holland) and 1932 (Los Angeles).

Hawaiian stars of this era did not like to swim distance events. The longer races required training. Consequently they concentrated on sprints. Here they could win on natural ability.

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The Duke was no exception. He loved the sport but not the rigors of training. His favorite was the half century dash. For more than a decade he held this marker at 23 seconds flat.

Then in 1923 Johnny Weissmuller of the Illinois Athletic club posted the record at 22.8 — a sensational achievement.

Now in his 30s and thought to be washed up the Duke opined that several weeks training was needed at this point. He placed himself under the care of Fred Cady of the Los Angeles Athletic

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club. The Far Western championships were to be held shortly.

We talked to Duke prior to the finals of the 50-yard dash. His competition, with exception of Weissmuller, were the fastest sprinters in the country. They included Lester E. Smith and Jack Robertson of

San Francisco Olympic club and Colin Smith of New Orleans — men who hovered around 23.2.

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Five minutes later the officials announced a new world's record. The time was 22.3. The legend of duke Kahanamoku continued into another generation.

Santa Cruz beach hosted Duke and the Hawaiian swimming team on July 18, 1938. It proved to be his aloha visit to the Plunge Water carnival. Although greying at the temples and nearly 50 years-old he concluded a half hour's exhibition by thrashing through 50 yds. in 24 seconds flat. He said he must be "out of shape."

Duke swam an eight-beat crawl. His legs described a radius of 18 inches under the water. He wore a size 13 shoe and his flat feet were the biggest paddles in competition. It is ironic that the world will never know how fast the Duke could actually travel. He often told this writer that when he was young he never swam for time — only fast enough to win. If modern scientific training standards had been applied to the Hawaiian in his prime the record book would have been a discouraging outlook for future swimmers.

Due to the tremendous popularity of the sport of surfing the name of its founder is on the tongue of any youngster of today who enjoys the salt water pastime. Duke Kahanamoku — first, last and always — was surfing's champion of champions.

For more than 60 years Duke remained an amateur athlete. Despite tempting offers he never surrendered his status as a simon pure.

Last of his line — Duke was a symbol of a vanishing race — a way of life that is no more. As a Rotarian, a Shriner and the official greeter of the Islands, he remained in the spotlight of human appeal.