

Swimmers, daredevils were the stars in Plunge's heyday

Boardwalk

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Boardwalk celebrates its centennial this year. In an occasional series, the Sentinel will examine its cultural, political and economic role in the community. This article first appeared Oct. 18, 1998. It features a host of aquatic performers who wowed the crowds at The Plunge including "The Mighty Bosco" Don Patterson, a former Santa Cruz Sentinel press foreman who earned fame for his daring feats at the Boardwalk.

By **ROSS ERIC GIBSON**
THEN AND NOW COLUMNIST

The Boardwalk's Plunge, an indoor swimming pool was once the showplace of Olympic talent, record-breaking swim events and comic diving, all in an annual show that ran 50 years as the Plunge Water Carnivals.

It was acclaimed that the world's finest amateur swim show and the grandfather of Billy Rose's Aquacade.

The annual Santa Cruz Vene-

tian Water Carnival began in 1895 as a festival on the San Lorenzo River featuring decorated boats, stage shows, dances, fireworks and a water Olympics. The water Olympics moved into the Plunge in 1898, a building replaced in 1907 with the West Coast's largest indoor pool outdoor pool outside San Francisco. The Plunge Water Carnival was held to show off the new building, with a dozen plunge instructors as performers. These included Arthur Cavill, who invented the Austra-

lian Crawl; Jack Hannah and his brother Frank, the police chief; and George Birkenseer. The star was "Mighty Dodo" Dabadie. He closed the show in three pairs of long Johns, igniting the outer pair (soaked in gasoline) and jumped as a human torch unharmed into the pool.

With the inspiration of Plunge founder Fred Swanton, the plunge and river water carnivals became more elaborate each year. Skip Littlefield grew up in awe of stunts like the double parasol

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dive, where an aquabelle slowly glided to the pool on the forerunner of the hang-glider.

The Pacific Amateur Association held meets here, often breaking American or world records in the men's and women's heats. Athletes believed the heated salt water increased performance. Hawaiian Olympic champion Duke Kahanamoku, who came in 1911 and 1918, revolutionized swimming with his powerhouse

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Hawaiian Crawl.

The Boardwalk hired Littlefield as lifeguard in 1927, when he became world breaststroke champion for the Golden Gate swim, and American champ for 440 yards.

Funding for the elaborate river carnivals collapsed with the Depression, but Littlefield turned the Plunge carnivals into major events that always played to standing-room-only crowds. He opened the season in May with Red Cross learn-to-swim classes, followed in June by the mile-long open water swim on the bay. The Plunge shows at that point ran most weekends throughout the summer, featuring talented student performers. Bands performed pool-side.

In 1928 he featured Ben Lomond's Johnny Weissmuller, who'd just become an Olympic champ. Ernie Kiff raced Weissmuller for \$1,000. Johnny "The Human Motorboat" was in exceptional form, but every time he glanced at Kiff he was dead even! Soon Kiff was pulling ahead, and the crowd went wild! Weissmuller was astonished when Kiff beat him, until Kiff revealed a cable attached to his belt that had towed him to victory!

When Kahanamoku later appeared in the plunge carnival, Malio Stagnaro played the challenger. Malio was told to keep

his hands above water, but forgot, and was pulled the rest of the way submerged, "making a record for swallowing water!" Local surf enthusiasts (mostly connected with the plunge show) brought their handmade boards, and Duke and his companions joined them in an exhibition.

Every year the carnival included a "Human Submarine." Ruth Kahl swam nearly two lengths of the pool underwater, a world's record 303-foot swim. She was featured in Ripley's "Believe It Or Not" as "the greatest underwater swimmer of all time." Count Hanley was named the world's best comic diver. One routine had him flying from trapeze to trapeze, until he got to one that turned to rubber, dropping him to the surface of the water then snapping him into the rafters. He'd just invented the first bungee jump!

The star was "Mighty Bosco" Patterson, who each year dove a little higher until he was doing the "Stratosphere Dive" through a hole in the roof, 80 feet above the pool. He ended each show with a fire dive.

Audiences were stunned when 207-pound Bosco did a routine of a trapeze held by 82-pound Harry Murray hanging upside down from his knees 40 feet in the air! The "Slide for Life" consisted of a wheeled tram on a cable suspended between the casino dome and the end of the Pleasure Pier. Bosco and Murray hung from a trapeze as the tram traveled 20 mph down the wire, where they

dove into the bay before the tram hit the pier. The act even frightened tightrope star Karl "Flying" Wallenda.

Billy Rose launched a follies version of the Plunge carnival, offering big money to plunge stars, with some accepting and others refusing for the sake of their amateur standing.

Rose's Aquacade appeared at San Francisco's 1939-40 World's Fair, featuring Weissmuller and Esther Williams. It introduced the water ballet, or synchronized swimming, which the plunge carnival soon added.

The Boardwalk approved Littlefield's Aquacade-style plans to increase plunge seating to 2,200, put a large art deco stage across one end and install a pipe organ. But the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor put plans on hold, and blackout restrictions covered the buildings skylights, turning the plunge into a dark cave. The show continued through the war, but most stars left for war duty until the show was mostly children, and the state issued orders against children performing dangerous stunts.