

Soichi Sakamoto and the Three Year Swim Club “The World’s Greatest Swimming Coach”¹

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1930s, at the height of the Great Depression, a young Nisei from Pu‘unēnē, Maui embraced the improbable dream of transforming a multiethnic group of young plantation children into Olympic-class swimmers in an unprecedented three years’ time. Lacking any swimming training or expertise, Soichi Sakamoto, a former science teacher and Boy Scout troop leader, failed to be daunted by these professional odds or the racial barriers that existed on the plantations. Sakamoto directly challenged dominant perceptions that Japanese Americans were not successful athletes and coaches in part due to their diminutive size—one that still partly exists today. By contrast, Sakamoto’s athletes proved to be physically comparable to their Caucasian counterparts and made up for their financial disadvantages growing up on a plantation through hard work and dedicated training.² Lacking formal swimming facilities that were reserved for only wealthy white men, Sakamoto would train his swimmers in the nearby irrigation ditches on the plantation and in the process develop revolutionary training techniques still in use today in competitive swimming. Defying formidable odds, Sakamoto would bring his swimmers to local, national, and international prominence, defying the racial odds stacked against them.

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“IT WAS MUCH LIKE SLAVERY”: PLANTATION LIFE
IN PU‘UNĒNĒ, MAUI³

Traveling east along Hāna Highway from the city of Kahului, two sugar mills can be seen among the cane fields that dominate central Maui. The first to come into view is Pu‘unĒnĒ Mill, which is located two miles from Kahului and owned by the Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Company (HC&S). Surrounding the mill area are the remains of a plantation camp that once housed many of the company’s employees. As one of the world’s largest plantations at the time, Pu‘unĒnĒ Plantation consisted of 33,220 acres, 16,000 of which were cane land in 1935, employed approximately 4,000 individuals and supported a plantation population of around 7,600.⁴ Next to be seen along the highway are traces of what was once the town of Spreckelsville, the site of three of HC&S’s 26 camps that dotted the area. Among the plantation camps stood four public schools, three Japanese-language schools, ten churches, one large hospital, twelve nurseries, three theaters, and a gymnasium.⁵ Born and raised in Pu‘unĒnĒ, Soichi Sakamoto would attend and later teach at the schools in this area.

Like many Hawaiian plantations, Pu‘unĒnĒ was home to different ethnic groups that the planters brought in to fulfill growing labor needs with the increasing profitability of sugar. In the 1930s, the majority of workers in Pu‘unĒnĒ were overwhelmingly Japanese, who outnumbered Filipino, Portuguese, Hawaiian, Puerto Rican, Caucasian, and Korean workers combined.⁶ Many of these workers had arrived looking for a better life and economic opportunities in the Islands. However, life on the plantations was difficult, even for those used to agricultural labor, as workers toiled from sunup to sundown in field operations such as *hoe hana* [weeding] or *hole hole ko* [stripping dried cane leaves], *oki ko* [cane cutting], and even the strenuous and backbreaking activity of *hapai ko* [cane loading] for minimal pay. Exhausted and sometimes suffering from malnutrition, workers would often be at the mercy of *luna*, or overseers, who plantation managers hired to maximize their labor. As Kenichi Itakura, a camp store worker at Spreckelsville recalled, “They would get sick. Plenty of them used to get sick, see? Plantation people—I mean, they would call ‘em *lunas*, before—the foremen. He come with a whip. They used

to whip you up and then take you to the working field. How many of them died.”⁷ Minoru Hayashida, a retired fish market owner of Lower Pā‘ia, remarked how plantation life in the Islands paralleled life living under slavery in the South: “After the American Civil War, when [Abraham] Lincoln [abolished slavery] . . . It was a long time after, but the law didn’t allow [physical violence]. But it was still in the hearts of men. It was much like slavery . . . The overseers were very strict.”⁸ Bound by labor contracts and lacking legal rights in Hawai‘i, many workers were at the mercy of white bosses.

To resist their physical exploitation, laborers attacked *luna*, engaged in arson, used drugs and alcohol, ran away from the plantations, or were deliberately inefficient much to the consternation of *luna*, who were responsible for maximizing the productivity of their workers. Yaichi Noda, a former Maui peddler and plantation worker recalls his truancy on the job that the overseer tried to regulate:

Luna stay watch, but if the *luna* no stay, we go hide and play. All the time can. (Laughs). ‘Hey! Noda, you goddamn you, moloa [lazy] you.’ (Laughs) Everytime, he scold me. (Laughs) Some *luna* good, some *luna pilau* [bad]. (Laughs) ‘Hey, you! Noda, every time you all play, play and [talk] story, and big laugh. ‘Ha, ha, ha, ha,’ you laugh.’ I no can forget, though, damn *pilau luna*.⁹

While resistance was often conducted on an individual basis, plantation owners were most worried about collective action by laborers. To prevent workers from organizing together against management for higher pay and better working conditions, different pay scales existed among various races and workers lived in camps organized by ethnicity. Pu‘unēnē’s 26 camps had colorful names like “Mill Camp,” “McGerrow Camp,” “Alabama Camp,” “Spanish Camp,” “Green Camp,” and “Ah Fong Camp,” all of which separated racial groups and housed rows and rows of plantation workers. According to planter policy, individuals were segregated by ethnicity to reinforce hostility and increase suspicion among different groups. By segregating workers, encouraging competition, and promoting cultural diversity, planters hoped to eliminate the possibility of a united labor force crippling the economy by strike or riot. Using this strategy known as “divide and rule,” white planters, who constituted a minority in Hawai‘i, ensured that they maintained a dominant position in society by pitting differ-

ent groups against one another.¹⁰ Author Milton Murayama described the organization of plantation towns like Pu‘unēnē as a “pyramid” with the white bosses on top and workers organized below in a strict hierarchy.¹¹

Despite attempts by plantation owners to racially segregate their workers within plantation communities like Pu‘unēnē, interaction occurred between different ethnicities as bathhouses and plantation stores often served as informal gathering places for the community. Sakamoto’s own family owned a general store and at a young age he was likely exposed to different ethnicities who patronized the store. Store employee Yasunari Hamai described how workers often lingered, even after their business was conducted: “They talk story. Some, they buy the soda water, and they outside the porch. They drinking and talk story, smoking.”¹² Many socialized at the community store sharing news, indulging in community gossip, and relaxing after a hard day of work. While adults conversed with one another at these informal community gatherings, their children attended school with one another, and participated in club activities like Boy Scouts and team sports like baseball that created community relationships.

“THE OLD WATERING DITCH” AND THE DITCH KIDS¹³

Sports and other after school activities were particularly important in Pu‘unēnē, as children often went unsupervised from the time that school ended until their parents returned home from work in the fields.¹⁴ As historian Gaylord Kubota explains, “Back in those days, the recreational options were extremely limited. In fact, in talking to some of those folks who lived there in those days, you’d probably say sports was *the* thing.”¹⁵ Baseball was particularly popular among school children as it simply required an open field, bats, and balls. By the 1920s, a number of American of Japanese Ancestry (AJA) leagues, as well as the Hawai‘i Baseball League (HBL), had formed throughout Hawai‘i and interisland playoffs would determine a champion.¹⁶ Segregated leagues were common in the 1930s, providing Japanese and other non-whites the opportunity to participate in sports that were otherwise restricted to them. Those who did not participate in baseball, however, needed to find an alternative form of entertainment to pass the time.

For many, financial considerations weighed heavily on their options. According to a former resident of Alabama camp, “we used to make up our own game . . . it’s all homemade toys, you know. We never bought toys, because our parents couldn’t afford toys those days.”¹⁷ Many children, left to their own devices, created ingenious if not outright questionable ways of entertaining themselves. John Tsukano recalled playing a game called “who has the hardest head” when he was younger: “we would bang each other on the head and the guy who lasted the longest was the champion.”¹⁸ According to Tsukano, the children christened the victor with the nickname “Hard Head.” Looking back on their antics, Tsukano added with a laugh, “I wonder how we survived.”

During the hot summer months in Pu’unēnē, many children of plantation workers also looked for places to swim to escape from the oppressive heat. “Every day, go swimming, you know. Go swimming,” recalled Spreckelsville resident Modesto Palafox. “Not so far from the town. Because that’s not beach, but they call it river. You just go over there and swim all day until lunchtime, you go home. Especially when *pau* school. Nothing to do. Only play, play on the yard. Sometimes, you go swimming. That’s all we do.”¹⁹ Kubota recalled how their options were limited by boundaries of race as formal swimming facilities were reserved for wealthy white men:

Now swimming, in the case of Pu’unēnē, there was a swimming tank built across the way over there, as early as 1910. But that tank was built initially for the single white men who lived in the original Pu’unēnē club house . . . and later on it was used as a private club, Pu’unēnē Athletic Club.²⁰

Swimming was not only a sport of affluent whites at that time, but in Pu’unēnē segregation existed in fact for ethnic workers who were separated by race and class from their plantation masters and overseers even in recreational activities. Swimming pools were often racially segregated throughout America during the 1920s and 1940s as African Americans and others were segregated and excluded from white pools. Patterns of discrimination varied with the culture and size of the city as pool segregation was officially mandated in southern pools; in contrast officials in northern areas encouraged *de facto* regulation by locating pools within racially homogenous neighbor-



FIGURE 1. The Swimming Tank in Pu'unēnē, Maui (1925). Image Courtesy of the Hawaiian and Pacific Collections, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library.

hoods. One or two pools would be built in black neighborhoods with the rest in white neighborhoods. African Americans who sought admission to pools earmarked for whites would be discouraged by white attendants, and were harassed and assaulted by white swimmers who enforced segregation through violence. Segregated recreational facilities also existed for many Asian Pacific Americans prior to World War II as they were denied access to white designated pools.²¹ Additionally, class contributed to racial segregation as poor working-class whites, blacks, and other immigrant groups were seen as “dirty and prone to carry communicable diseases.”²² As a result of these racial and class sentiments, the swimming pool in Pu'unēnē reflected prevailing national and local sentiment with the complete exclusion of ethnic working classes and their children.

Denied a pool and miles from the ocean, many Pu'unēnē children would utilize the three and a half foot deep plantation irrigation ditch that ran parallel to the school, shedding their clothes for an impromptu swim because they also lacked the funds for proper swimming suits. “We called it ‘the old watering ditch,’” recalled Sakamoto who often observed young students frolicking in the water. “The only

drawback was no swimming was allowed,” he added.²³ Subsequently, plantation policemen on horseback would gallop over with whips and chase the kids out. “Old Man DeLima [was] the camp policeman,” Takashi “Halo” Hirose recalled. “He rode a big horse and he had a big whip. Mr. DeLima would wait for us by our clothes, so we had to ditch our clothing. We swam all natural.”²⁴ Tsukano similarly remembered “a hundred nude boys scattered all over the countryside of Puunene, some even running through the campus of the Japanese School, for dear life, with the policeman at their heels.”²⁵ After watching this event unfold countless times, Sakamoto devised a plan that would enable these plantation children to swim in the irrigation ditches under his supervision, appealing to the paternalism of plantation owners who likely tired of the task of monitoring the ditches for trespassing swimmers. He was not only driven by concern for the children of the community, but also by an unlikely, and seemingly impossible dream of transforming these children into a group of talented swimmers. Unlike the segregated teams that characterized the sport of baseball, Sakamoto embraced an egalitarian racial ethic, training swimmers of different nationalities. Sakamoto himself was an unlikely swim coach; he lacked formal training or expertise and was guided only by a dream to create the world’s best swimmers from the humble origins of Pu‘unēne plantation.

“COACH” AND THE “MISSUS”

Sakamoto’s rise to fame began inauspiciously as a young Nisei born in 1906 on Maui whose life and experiences were characterized by defying expectations. When he was nine-years-old, a truck hit him from behind while he was riding his bicycle to school. At the time, Sakamoto was pronounced dead but miraculously recovered after three months in the hospital. “[God] must have wanted me to live,” he said in hindsight.²⁶ As a loner much of his life, he would often hike, fish, and camp alone, and he struggled to graduate from high school due to an illness that lasted during his junior and senior years. To his parents’ chagrin, he also became a self-taught musician and learned to play the Hawaiian steel guitar, despite his mother’s efforts to confiscate and destroy his instruments.

In 1927, Sakamoto began teaching at Haikū School, eventually

transferring to Pu‘unē School the next year, where he found his calling mentoring young students. He eventually became a track coach and a famous Boy Scout leader, embracing distinctly American values and activities.²⁷ Supporting him in his endeavors would be his wife, Mary, affectionately referred to as the “Missus,” whom Sakamoto met and married in three days after meeting her at a benefit church dance following a performance at a wedding. “In those days,” Sakamoto recalled, “it was shocking for a Japanese to marry outside the race,” as mixed marriages were uncommon especially in a plantation community where different races were separated into different camps.²⁸ It was such a surprise to his parents, who upon returning home from Japan to find their son married to a Hawaiian girl, responded to the news with dead silence and hesitated to acknowledge their new daughter-in-law. Mary Sakamoto, however, proved to be a valuable asset to the Sakamoto general store in Waikapū. Due to her friendly and cheerful nature, customers returned again and again. Young marines stationed on Maui who patronized the store christened her their “mother hen.” She worked not only in the store, but at home too, where her chores involved burning firewood for the *furo* [Japanese bath]. Before long, she was accepted into the Sakamoto family with open hearts. Mary Sakamoto’s hard work and perseverance amplified Sakamoto’s love for her. “She brought a lot of harmony into the family. I think it was very noble of Mary,” he says.

Despite living with the prejudice of a mixed marriage, Mary Sakamoto provided boundless support for her husband that spanned the entire 64 years of their marriage. According to Sakamoto, “God sent Mary to me, to stabilize me, in his master plan,” enabling him to pursue his unheard of dream of creating Olympic-class swimmers out of the poor plantation children he saw daily swimming in the irrigation ditches after school.²⁹ As Sakamoto explained, “I used to be a dreamer and then meditate almost and deliberate thinking, you know, how much I could obtain . . . if you aim high you bound to get there if you keep on working at it. But you have to aim high and that way if I started the program, I should aim high.”³⁰ Thus, as Sakamoto watched the plantation children in the irrigation ditches, he began to formulate a remarkable plan that would dramatically transform the lives of these youngsters.

3YSC: THE THREE YEAR SWIM CLUB

After receiving authorization to monitor and instruct students in swimming in the plantation ditches, Sakamoto decided to create a goal to motivate his young charges. The 1940 Olympics, just three years away, presented the ideal incentive for excellence. At that time, Sakamoto asked, "With Russia being a 5 year program why not a program here" to train swimmers for the Olympics.³¹ He called an assembly in his homeroom class in June 1937 and announced his dream of the "Three Year Swim Club." According to Olympian William "Bill" Smith, who trained with Sakamoto, "Our motto was always: 'Olympics first, Olympics always.' He made you believe that if you set your goals high enough, you could achieve anything."³² Sakamoto encouraged young plantation children to pledge three years of training to the Olympics and asked them to sign contracts that demanded abstinence from liquor, tobacco, gambling, and profanity. They were also encouraged to cultivate loyalty, bravery, good sportsmanship, and other virtues. Sakamoto's ten rules, similar to the Boy Scouts code of honor, stemmed from years of dedicated scouting.³³ "He led by example," explained protégé Tsukano, to whom Sakamoto gave the name "John" after one of the swimming greats of the era, Johnny Weissmuller.³⁴ "He taught not only swimming but good sportsmanship and good citizenship." As a result of the high standards that Sakamoto demanded from his swimmers, Tsukano remembers others mocking their Olympic dreams: "We were kids from this small town in Maui, so we believed anything was possible. We would tell all the teachers and our friends that we were going to make it to the Olympics. They would just laugh."³⁵ While others ridiculed Sakamoto's Olympic aspirations, that high goal encouraged his swimmers to train even harder. Swimmer Fujiko Katsutani explained that Sakamoto's goal created disciplined swimmers: "It's the incentive he gave us. You want to be a champion, you train hard. You want to be a champion, you come out and train everyday . . . And because you know, it's an individual sport. It's up to you, you know."³⁶ Sakamoto's emphasis on discipline and achievement helped to motivate many of his young students.

To achieve the improbable goal of creating Olympic athletes out of nearly 100 plantation children, Sakamoto began to research the latest in swimming scholarship and found that nothing had been writ-

ten on coaching or technique. “There were no books on swimming,” Sakamoto recalled to his surprise and dismay.³⁷ Additionally, Sakamoto himself had no formal training in aquatics. His only experience consisted of teaching himself a few strokes of “survival swimming” in order to qualify for an Eagle Scout badge.³⁸ “I knew nothing about the sport,” he said, “but I came from the old school of thought that believed in common sense. So I took a common sense approach to coaching.” This practical approach involved watching the children swim and refining their strokes to remove inefficiencies. As Sakamoto explained, “I watched their progress and tried to eliminate haphazard movement,” maximizing their movement in the water.



FIGURE 2. Members of the Three Year Swim Club. Photograph taken at Radio Bay, Hilo (1940). Front L-R: Bunmei Nakama, Unknown, Keo Nakama. Back L-R: Charlie Oda, Bill Smith, Unknown, Halo Hirose, Jose Balmores. From the Sakamoto Collection, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

Sakamoto's lack of training and swimming expertise, as well as the unavailability of formal swimming facilities, created opportunities for Sakamoto to challenge traditional swimming practices and techniques as well as to create unique methods of training that later became widespread. In 1937, when Sakamoto began training his swimmers, many believed that swimmers were born, not made, and that the youngest acceptable age for competitive swimmers was eighteen. Sakamoto, however, had other ideas. "I thought that if they started young they could really develop. I was criticized for that," he recalled. "I heard through the grapevine that the public didn't like it. And [Olympic swimmer] Buster Crabbe didn't like it too much. They said I was starting them too young and burning them out."³⁹ However, as *Honolulu Advertiser* sports editor Rick Woodson noted, "the only thing that got burned out, though, was the competition," citing the fact that in a mere two years, children from Yong Hee Camp, which consisted of only 150 families, had swimmers ranked second nationally in three events.⁴⁰

Additionally, Sakamoto also defied conventional swimming coaching by insisting that his swimmers master all the swimming strokes, rather than focus on one specialization. Sakamoto recalled a particular conversation he had with other swimming coaches who criticized his approach:

And they also said, 'I heard you trying to have them swim all the strokes, you know. Don't you think you're doing the whole thing wrong? You should specialize . . .' And Buster Crabbe said, 'just freestyle and freestyle, breaststroke and breaststroke and don't mix them all up like you're doing.'⁴¹

For Sakamoto, this strategy of teaching his swimmers all the strokes in defiance of convention was driven not by innovation but rather by necessity, especially because of the limited number of competitive female swimmers. "If a girl is sick who's going to take her place in another stroke?" he asked in response. "But if she's prepared in another stroke she's going to, you know, be able to pinch hit," and thus fill in for the team.⁴² Although Sakamoto's explanation mollified critics, it failed to stop the questioning of his training tactics. For inspiration on how to train his swimmers, Sakamoto simply looked to the cane fields that surrounded him and the plantation workers

who labored under the harsh Hawaiian sun and asked them for the key to their success:

I said to myself, 'What makes a swimmer go fast?' It struck me, why not go to some of these people who are practical people. So I went to the workers, the plantation laborers, who worked from 5 a.m. to 5 in the evening. As the workers were coming home from their work, I would stop some of them and ask them. 'How do you manage to work so long during the day?' And they would say 'steady, not hurry up, but steady.'⁴³

This same advice would be shared by the leader of the cane-cutting gang who earned a bonus for his extra work who also added: "Work harder, harder. Don't give up." From those conversations, Sakamoto realized that, "those things were teaching me a lesson" and he applied these principles of discipline and hard work into instructing his swimmers.

To increase the swimming strength and endurance of the plantation children, Sakamoto developed a technique called interval training. Sakamoto observed children swimming in the ditch and noticed how the currents related to the swimmer's movements. He then developed a stroke and breathing pattern to correlate with the currents. Swimmers would then alternate between low and high intensity workouts as they swam down the irrigation ditch with the current, and then would need to swim back up against the current. Sakamoto explained this new method that maximized workouts with his swimmers:

In that ditch, the current coming down offered them natural resistance, and when they swam up, they were developing a stroke that was very efficient and practical. If they had done it in entirely still water, I don't think it would have developed. Drifting down in the current gave them very relaxed movement, gave them a very beautiful style. Gradually, everything started to fall into place.⁴⁴

Smith, who occasionally trained in the ditch with Sakamoto, recalled how Sakamoto would mark off a point fifty yards ahead and the swimmers would sprint to it, fighting the 15 mph current. Once they would reach it, they would float back and start over, swimming next to goldfish and catfish and bumping into a dead chicken or two being flushed out of the fields.⁴⁵ As Benny Castor explained, "the ditch runs right by the camp and they used to throw dogs and everything chickens."⁴⁶

In hindsight, Smith jokingly added that “one thing it taught you was to keep your mouth closed though, when you swam” to prevent the inadvertent consumption of dead animals.⁴⁷

As Sakamoto’s swimmers improved in speed and endurance, he would later add in a regime of weights and pulleys in a series of supervised exercises to further increase their strength in a strategy he carried over from his days as a track coach.⁴⁸ “So I found out in track I would be able to, you know, relate between track and swimming,” explained Sakamoto. “[With] swimming there are no [exercises] because they said keep the muscles loose and limber . . . I should try the idea of it putting strength in them, you know.”⁴⁹ Smith marveled at the innovative ideas that Sakamoto introduced into the sport of swimming explaining, Sakamoto “had a strength program that we worked on . . . We had a sled that we pushed against . . . that kind of helped to develop our strength [as well as the] machines that he put in the water to practice turns.”⁵⁰ In hindsight, Smith recognized the effectiveness of these “gimmicks” in improving the strength and speed of the swimmers.

Another element that contributed to Sakamoto’s training was music. Using self-taught music skills as a ukulele and guitar player, Sakamoto applied the same concepts of rhythm, harmony, and discipline to swimming. “There is a good correlation between swimming and music,” he said. “There is a need for harmony and lots of discipline.”⁵¹ Thus, Sakamoto would carefully analyze the stroke and movements of his swimmers; later he filmed his swimmers in action, carefully studying their strokes for signs of weakness or progress. “He could hardly swim,” recalled Chow Shibuya, “but you swim the way he picture you.”⁵² Shibuya remembered how Sakamoto used to study the strokes of his swimmers and go over details of their stroke: “He used to take picture[s] of me . . . [H]e [would] tell me.. ‘You see that, right there, stop, how your arm come, that’s wrong. Come like this, see.’ You have to swim the way he like[s].” A fellow coach marveled at Sakamoto’s attention to detail and swimming innovations, recalling Sakamoto “used the metronome, in a lot of his training techniques, and was just a meticulous man as far as the technique of the stroke, and how it should be done [to pace] races. [He really got] into the science of the sport.”⁵³ With his attention to detail, one contemporary observer wrote, “Sakamoto coached swimmers can be

recognized anywhere because of his adherence to the principles of good swimming form” and impeccable technique.⁵⁴

“YOU GUIDE THE KIDS”: SAKAMOTO’S COACHING APPROACH⁵⁵

To achieve his improbable goal of sending swimmers to compete in the Olympics, Sakamoto established a strict regime of swimming for his students, joining them immediately after school was let out for the day. Through his efforts, a pool was later built at Baldwin Park that virtually became his home. “Seven days a week until the sun went down, he was there,” recalled Tsukano. “That’s how much he loved it.”⁵⁶ An article published in *Swimmer* magazine on Sakamoto detailed the regime that he prescribed for his swimmers:

Soichi Sakamoto’s training program is indeed a vigorous one. He believes in hard work and concentration. Starting in October, three months are devoted to body building, using weights, pulleys and many other devices which fill out his program of supervised exercises. Sometime in December, the swimmers will enter the water and from this time on, a minimum of five days a week will find his swimmers in the water from four until seven each night. Some may work later, but as long as there is a swimmer present, ‘Coach,’ as he is affectionately known, will be at the edge of the pool.

The day’s work starts with a stroke check which is mandatory before the swimmer enters the water. By this procedure, ‘Coach’ feels that he is getting his swimmers to repeat over and over the correct way of doing each stroke. All swimmers must do all four strokes, and they must work equally hard on each. In this respect, the thought is that most young swimmers are too young to specialize. The day’s assignment will vary, but it usually includes a minimum of a half mile all the way up to several miles depending on the age and state of training. A basic assignment will be given in all strokes followed by extra laps in certain strokes.⁵⁷

During the summer, Sakamoto also scheduled double workouts, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, to train his swimmers for competition. Despite this grueling regime and intense training, Sakamoto was loved and revered by his students, inspiring almost fanatical devotion and confidence in his teaching. “He was very strict, but a very kind person inside,” recalls Kiyoshi “Keo” Nakama, former resident of Camp 5 at Pu’unēnē and later inductee at Ohio State Univer-

sity Athletic Hall of Fame. “He was always taking kids home who lived far away and feeding them so they could get to practice. He was like my second father.”⁵⁸ Bill Smith, the son of a Honolulu policeman, even lived for two years with the Sakamotos to train and swim on Maui after being stricken with typhoid fever, which left him unable to move his arms and legs.⁵⁹ Sakamoto’s teaching was so successful that Smith became one of Sakamoto’s most famous swimmers.

Many of the swimmers would return home late at night, after swimming for hours at the pool with Sakamoto, to try to complete household chores and homework. Kubota explained, “You have to remember that hard work was . . . [an] accepted way of life. In fact it was valued back in those days. So this is all part of central discipline and hard work.”⁶⁰ Kubota speculated that Sakamoto’s emphasis on morals, values, and discipline may have come from the importance placed on ethics (*shūshin*) in the Japanese-language schools. “So aside from learning to . . . read and write” Kubota explained, “you also have some moral education . . . In this area some of the traditional values of self discipline . . . were taught.”⁶¹ Although not all of Sakamoto’s swimmers were Japanese, many were familiar with the Japanese school that was next to the irrigation ditch and some of the values that were imparted to the students. Thus, most swimmers accepted the long hours that Sakamoto demanded of them without complaint, although there were early misunderstandings. When Katsutani first started training in 1937, she would return home after practice at 8:00 at night only to be kicked out of the house. Katsutani would be the last to come home every night and her older brother Isao would lock her out because he thought she was into some kind of mischief.⁶² Despite the long practice hours, many parents knew that Sakamoto would take care of their children, teaching them to swim while they were at work on the plantations where work lasted from sun up to sun down. “He take[s] care of the kids,” Shibuya explained, “and he see[s] to them that we come home safe . . . that’s why the parents they trust him, and they know they [are] in good hands [and] let [them] go.”⁶³ Although many children lived a mile away from the pool, Sakamoto would take them home and ensure their safety, thus winning the appreciation and support of their parents who committed their children to swimming.

For the Sakamotos, coaching became a family affair, with his wife

providing critical support to her husband and his young charges. Boarding swimmers like Bill Smith, who grew up in the Sakamoto household, was a responsibility that Mary embraced. While her husband was at practice, she took care of their growing family at home and prepared lunch and dinner. However, when she delivered hot meals to him, Sakamoto would wait until she left and then he would give it to the swimmers. "The swimmers need to eat also," he said when his wife caught him giving the food away.⁶⁴ The following day, she brought a cart full of food and helped to feed the swimmers as well as nurture her husband. She became a mother to many of the young boys and girls whose parents entrusted them into their care.

"You don't just coach swimming," explained Sakamoto of his teaching technique. "You guide the kids. You try to help them become better human beings. You try to teach reverence and respect and good citizenship. Swimming was never number one, it was just the focus."⁶⁵ Sakamoto became a father figure to many of his young swimmers, often spending more time with them during the day than their own parents. According to Sakamoto, "I always thought it was more important to teach them to do their best and not quit." He used swim lessons as a vehicle to teach his students morals and values and to create goals in life.

In adherence with the demands that he placed on his students, Sakamoto would also strictly follow a set of guidelines that he developed for himself as a coach, as he believed that "I musn't show the swimmers all of these things which . . . will be very negative to them."⁶⁶ Thus, he never sat down nor talked with others while he was coaching so as to give his undivided attention to his swimmers. Sakamoto never wore a jacket or sweater, despite the cold, as "I didn't want them to feel cold." Finally, he also believed that his role was "to reveal God at all times. And then have God constantly be your partner." With these rules, Sakamoto hoped to serve as an example to his swimmers and communicate to them his commitment to them and their goals.

Before many practices, Sakamoto would meet with his swimmers to discuss their techniques, individual goals, and their collective effort as a team. Charles Oda recalled weekly meetings with Sakamoto to motivate his swimmers: "What Coach used to do, is . . . weekly we had a meeting with him . . . We went through all the routine about

training as well as . . . building character, and . . . discipline.”⁶⁷ Smith remembers one team meeting where Sakamoto pulled out a bamboo pole and made the thirty or forty older swimmers each grab hold. He talked about team work, common goals, and unity. The pole was a symbol, a “stick—as in ‘We stick together,’” said Smith. “Coach wasn’t a great one for making long speeches. But what he said was effective,” he recalled.⁶⁸ To inspire his swimmers to compete and strive for excellence, Sakamoto also carved pieces of wood, formed into a small shields or plaques, for the 1940 and 1941 “Monthly Boys’ Improvement Point Contest,” which he displayed poolside. Clearly visible are the straight-edged pencil lines that Sakamoto used to guide his hand as he painted in the names of his swimmers: Jose Balmores, Charles Oda, and Bill Smith.

Motivating many of his young swimmers was Sakamoto’s promises of travel to Honolulu and the Mainland for swimming meets. As Sakamoto did not charge club dues, the team would often host fundraisers in the community in an effort to defray travel costs, which posed quite a challenge in a plantation community in the middle of the Depression where laborers could expect to make a dollar a day.⁶⁹ Sakamoto organized a number of community fundraisers held in Maui on behalf of the swim team, and he recruited his swimmers to raise funds for the \$100 it would cost to send each person to the Mainland via ocean liner. “Every month, we have the public dance, and raise money and we also raffled an auto,” recalled Sakamoto with a laugh.⁷⁰ Unbeknown to Sakamoto at the time, it was illegal to mail raffle tickets to residents on other islands, and authorities threatened to levy a \$10,000 fine and a jail sentence if he did not immediately cease, which he did promptly.

“THE RENAISSANCE IN SWIMMING IN HAWAII:” THE THREE YEAR SWIM CLUB’S LOCAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS⁷¹

The first test of Sakamoto’s swimmers would come in August 1937, a mere two months after starting to train his swimmers, when Sakamoto brought over 30 children to Honolulu to swim at the Natatorium to compete with larger, more established Honolulu swimming clubs. Many of these children had never been away from Pu‘unēnē, and Tsukano recalled how, when strolling down Fort Street in downtown

Honolulu, many of his teammates gawked at the “plenty cars and tall buildings.”⁷² They were also in awe of the unheard of delicacies to be found in restaurants, particularly fruit cocktail. “I never ate fruit cocktail in my life before,” recalled Tsukano with a laugh. That was a real delicacy. We, we relished it.”⁷³ Although his team did not win the team championship, one of his swimmers, Keo Nakama, a skinny youth of 16, astounded the crowd by defeating Olympic swimmer Ralph Gilman in the 400-meter freestyle race. Tsukano remembered the stunning upset:

Ralph Gilman was about over six feet tall and Keo was a skinny little sixteen year old boy at the time . . . nobody gave him a chance to beat Ralph Gilman. But as the race went on, Keo kept the lead and kept going and going and the crowd which was just packed in the [Natorium] went crazy. I mean, they just went berserk. And when he won everybody went crazy. I remember Coach going down, you know, hugging him and everything. And it was just a tremendous experience.⁷⁴

From then on, the hard work and sacrifice of Sakamoto and his swimmers began to pay dividends. Beginning in 1938, Maui monopolized every swimming meet, both in the men’s and women’s divisions, bringing recognition to the effectiveness of Sakamoto’s unorthodox training techniques. That same year, Sakamoto made the astounding statement that two of his teenaged swimmers, Hirose and Nakama, were ready for the Nationals. With the support of Pu’unēnē athletic director A. L. Priest, a committee was formed to solicit funds from the community to enable the two boys to make the trek to Louisville, Kentucky. Nakama took second place in the 400, 800, and 1,500-meter freestyle races and Hirose also placed second in the 100-meter freestyle event.

In 1939, Sakamoto took Hirose, Nakama, Benny Castro, Jose Balmores, and Bill Neunzig to Detroit, and returned with his first national team championship. That same year, he took fourteen-year-old Katsutani to Des Moines, Iowa to take part in the Amateur Athletics Union (AAU) swimming and diving championships. She won the 200-meter breaststroke—the first of a string of national championships as she would win again in 1940. Chieko “Chic” Miyamoto, another female swimmer for Sakamoto also took top honors by winning AAU championship titles in the 300-meter individual medley in 1939 and 1940.

Miyamoto recalled the positive thinking that Sakamoto drilled into her and the strategy that he used to motivate his swimmers to bring in top times:

See before our races, you know, from the timing he took everyday, he'd tell us like in my medley . . . 'I want you to do certain time in your breaststroke and certain time in your backstroke, and certain time in your freestyle, and you'll come out with this record.'

Simply put, Miyamoto explained, "If Coach told me I could do it . . . I know I [could] do it."⁷⁵ Treating all swimmers equally, regardless of gender or ability, and having faith in their individual talent, Sakamoto created athletes who dominated both the men's and women's division.

Sakamoto's Three Year Swim Club continued to capture top honors across the nation, stunning the swimming world with its unique style and speed. By 1940, the Club had earned a national reputation for excellence. Sakamoto, referred to as "the greatest swimming coach in the world" by several publications, dominated the sport of swimming with his competitive young team from Maui. During a three-year period, Sakamoto took 12 teams to national competitions, returning home with six team championships. In addition, swimmers as young as 14 earned a number of national awards. Accompanying them on many trips, especially the female athletes, was Mary Sakamoto who chaperoned the team, cooked, did laundry, comforted the children, and became the team mother. "I was just like a second mother to them," recalled Mary Sakamoto. "I made sure that they weren't sick you know, and all the things that their parents back there in Hawaii and we [were] there to represent Hawaii, so all we had to do was do our best."⁷⁶ She also became the public relations person for the team during Mainland trips as "there was a tremendous appeal to her because she was so friendly," Sakamoto remembered.⁷⁷

During the trips, the team would outfit themselves with paper *ilima* lei, straw hats, and aloha shirts that Smith recalled "had to be the brightest, the loudest."⁷⁸ Thus, upon arriving at meets, they would be greeted by members of the press and the team would be a "big hit" with audience members, especially as Sakamoto also brought along a ukulele and the team would sing Hawaiian songs to Mainlanders. Sakamoto's team embraced a distinctly "local" identity that had emerged

in Hawai'i during the 1930s that celebrated their cultural diversity as a source of their distinctiveness and strength.⁷⁹ Unlike other Japanese American coaches at that time who managed AJA baseball leagues in Hawai'i and on the Mainland, Sakamoto was not limited to a particular ethnicity in discovering talented athletes; he was able to create a world-class team by embracing a progressive multicultural attitude.

Sakamoto's dream of Olympic medals, however, would be deferred as the 1940 Olympics in Finland were cancelled because of war clouds darkening over Europe, crushing the hopes of many of Sakamoto's swimmers who hoped to make the United States' Olympic swimming team. "It was really sad," Tsukano recalled. "Sakamoto had [a] championship team, you know. And Hawaii would have dominated the Olympics," as a number of members of the Three Year Swim Club were expected to make the National Team.⁸⁰ Fujiko



FIGURE 3. Members of the Three Year Swim Club on a Mainland Trip (1940). Front L-R: Halo Hirose, Bunmei Nakama, Jose Balmores, Charlie Oda, Bill Smith. Back L-R: Unknown, Unknown, Fujiko Katsutani, Mrs. Mary Sakamoto, Unknown, Unknown, Chic Miyamoto, Keo Nakama, Coach Soichi Sakamoto. From the Sakamoto Collection, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

Katsutani, for example had made the U.S. Olympic swim team winning the 200-meter breaststroke at the 1940 women's U.S. Olympic swim trials, and was expected to compete before the games were cancelled. As nations prepared to go to war, driven by racist ideologies, the world missed the opportunity to witness firsthand, on an international stage, the remarkable efforts of a mixed race group of youth led by a Japanese American from a small island chain in the middle of the Pacific. When America entered the war on December 7, 1941, prompted by a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Sakamoto could only watch as hundreds of the young men he had trained and mentored—former students, track and field athletes, basketball and baseball players, members of his Boy Scout troop, and of course his swimmers—went off to war, some never to return. In lieu of training, Sakamoto wrote them long, inspiring letters, “just like a doting father.”⁸¹ Although his Olympic dreams were temporary shelved, Sakamoto never forgot about them or the hundreds of young men he had taught over the years.

OLYMPICS

Between writing letters to the young men who were sent to war, Sakamoto continued to train the remaining youth under his care. Immediately after World War II, he received an offer from the University of Hawai'i and moved to Honolulu to become its head swimming coach. Many of the swimmers who trained under him, and several who had survived the war, instead went to Mainland universities, such as Ohio State University and Indiana University. These schools wanted to strengthen their swimming teams and offered them scholarships. “How can we compete with the Mainland schools?” asked Sakamoto years later. “To these local kids, even ones I've coached for years, the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence.”⁸² One protégée who did return to train under Sakamoto for a number of months was Smith, who was scheduled to compete in the 1948 Olympic Games in Wembley, England. Sakamoto “had everything to do with my success,” said Smith, who won gold medals in the 400-meter freestyle and 800-meter freestyle relay in 1948.⁸³ “What was most impressive to me,” recalled Smith, were the opening ceremonies and his achievements that culminated years of training and sacrifice:

When we walked into [Wembley] Stadium there were over 100,000 people in the Stadium in there, and to finally realize that I am at the Olympic games . . . And then to win the gold medal in ah, to have Coach there watching me win that gold medal I think helped to fulfill his dreams ah, as well as mine . . . I, just couldn't say anything for the longest time, you know, because I just couldn't believe that after all these years I'd won my Olympic medal, because I never thought I would make it.⁸⁴

According to Smith, his achievement reflected years of hard work and sacrifice, beginning with his father, who got him into swimming, to his first coach Harvey Chilton in Honolulu, and later to his swimming coaches at Ohio State University. For Smith, the most exciting time for him at the Olympic Games was to have Sakamoto there witnessing his victory “because that was his dream to have someone on the Olym-



FIGURE 4. Soichi Sakamoto instructing swimmers at the Waikiki Natatorium (1954). Swimmer on the left is Richard “Spoofy” Cleveland, world record holder for the 50 and 100 meter freestyle. Cleveland was also a Big Ten, NCAA, and National AAU champion and was part of the NCAA and AAU All-American Swimming team. At the 1951 Pan American Games, he won three gold medals and was part of the 1952 United States Olympic team. In 1991, he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame. From the Richard “Sonny” Tanabe Collection, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.



FIGURE 5. Evelyn Kawamoto Awarded the *Hawaii Times* Award for AJA Athlete of the Year (1949). L-R: Unknown, Coach Soichi Sakamoto, Evelyn Kawamoto, Ford Konno, Coach Yoshito Sagawa, Richard Tomita. From the Richard “Sonny” Tanabe Collection, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.



FIGURE 6. Swimmer Evelyn Kawamoto (1951). At the 1952 Helsinki, Finland Olympic Games, Kawamoto won two bronze medals in the 400 meter freestyle and in the 400 meter relay. In 1950 and 1951, she became the National AAU champion in the 300 individual medley and the 200 breaststroke at the Nationals and the 400 meter freestyle. She was Hawai‘i’s most versatile swimmer of all time. From the Richard “Sonny” Tanabe Collection, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

pic team and also to have an Olympic champion.”⁸⁵ With Sakamoto in the bleachers and gold medal in hand, Smith’s victory was complete.

Later, Sakamoto’s legend crossed international waters. He was an assistant coach for the United States Olympic Swimming Team in 1952 and 1956. Nine swimmers with Hawai’i ties participated in those Games. Four earned medals, including gold by Yoshinobu Oyakawa, Ford Konno, and Bill Woosley. Other swimmers, like Richard “Sonny” Tanabe, Evelyn Kawamoto, Richard F. Cleveland, George Onekea, Thelma Kalama, and Ivanelle Hoe also won national and international acclaim. Kalama, for example, earlier won gold in the 400 meter freestyle relay in 1948. Sakamoto would continue to coach at both the University of Hawai’i and the Hawai’i Swimming Club for 25 years. He was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame and the University of Hawai’i Sports Circle of Honor. Upon his death in 1997, the swimming facility at the War Memorial Complex in Wailuku, Maui was renamed after him.

SAKAMOTO’S LEGACY: “SWIMMING NEVER WAS NO.1”

For Sakamoto, professional accolades in swimming were never his goal in coaching swimming. “I always thought it was more important to teach them to do their best and not quit,” explained Sakamoto. “A lot of them would get frustrated sometimes, but I would tell them, ‘This is one thing you’re going to stick with, and I’m going to show you how to do it.’”⁸⁶ According to Sakamoto, several of his students wrote to him years later to express their gratitude for learning perseverance from him. By teaching respect and good citizenship, Sakamoto’s coaching went beyond success in the pool to impact how many of his protégées lived their lives. “You take away what he did for swimming and you still have a great man,” explained Tsukano. “He put so many kids on the right track. I remember when I was a young rascal he always used to tell me, ‘Don’t drink, don’t smoke, that stuff is no good.’ To this day, I don’t drink or smoke.”⁸⁷ By living his own life in this manner, Sakamoto would inspire generations of young people.

For Sakamoto, who accepted no money for training these young plantation swimmers, mentoring countless youth was a reward in itself: “It’s such a great feeling to see a kid develop as a human being. That’s what kept me in it so long. That was my reward. And I believe that’s

what my destiny was. I just did the job I had to do. There was nobody else there to do it but me.”⁸⁸ Besides mentoring children, Sakamoto enabled children of plantation workers from Maui to travel and see the world—first to Honolulu, later to the Mainland for national meets, and finally internationally to the Olympics. These accomplishments were direct results of the unprecedented opportunities that Sakamoto created for his swimmers. Many were exposed to a different existence outside of the plantation, and through swimming scholarships were able to attend college and enter professions previously denied to them. Nakama, for example, gained a swimming scholarship to Ohio State University and later returned home to become a high school physical education teacher. In explaining his dedication to swimming, Nakama knew that “if I did good then I had a chance to get an education. And my incentive was to go to the mainland to school.”⁸⁹ His fellow swimmers from Hawai‘i, including his younger brother Bunmei “Bunny” Nakama, Smith, Hirose, Ford Konno, Richard Cleve-



FIGURE 7. Reunion of Ohio State University Swimmers (1950). From L-R: Bill Smith, Bill Nuenzig, Yoshito Sagawa, Leo Yassenoff, Jose Balmores, Keo Nakama, Halo Hirose. From the Sakamoto Collection, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

land, Jose Balmores, George Onekea, Bill Neunzig, and Oyakawa also attended Ohio State University on swimming scholarships. Through sports, Sakamoto enabled his swimmers to achieve the upward mobility that would later characterize the entire Nisei generation in the postwar period with the G.I. Bill.

Sakamoto's renowned commitment to his swimmers, however, sometimes came at the expense of his own personal success and reputation as a coach. Many, including Smith, thought he should have been the swim coach for the 1948 Olympic team because of his records and swimmers. The problem, explained Smith, was that Sakamoto was a "swimmers coach."⁹⁰ According to Smith, Sakamoto's "entire interest was in coaching and he would . . . forego a lot of the testimonials." At Nationals, Sakamoto would not attend meetings or events held in his honor, instead staying with his swimmers. "So that when we get into our races we would be so confident that we were going to win," explained Smith. This resulted in Sakamoto being denied much of the recognition that he deserved at the apex of his career.

Added to this explanation was the fact that during the peak of Sakamoto's career, two Olympics were cancelled because of World War II. According to a fellow coach, "there's no doubt in my mind that he would have been one of the Olympic coaches. And being Japanese and during the second world war that was a pretty radical thing."⁹¹ Despite Sakamoto's personal egalitarian racial ethic, possibly residual racial sentiment from World War II might have played a role in reinforcing the traditional political and racial dynamics in the sport of swimming and denying him a position as an Olympic swimming coach. Swimming had historically been a segregated sport in the United States, both for minority swimmers and coaches, and it would have been unprecedented in the history of American swimming to have a Japanese American coach when efforts to integrate swimming pools across America were often met with determined and violent resistance. Between 1945 and 1955, the height of Sakamoto's coaching career, "groups for and against segregation threw rocks and tomatoes at one another, swung bats and fists, and even stabbed and shot at each other."⁹² Branch chapters of organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Young Progressives, the American Youth for Democracy, and others joined in protests, marches, and legal action to desegregate pools

and challenge entrenched white interests. Thus, Sakamoto's ethnicity could have been the catalyst for protests if he had been appointed.

Sakamoto's unwavering commitment to his swimmers also came at great sacrifice to his personal life with his wife and children. Sakamoto recalled, "My children, when they were adults, told me: 'Dad, you spent so much time with the other children, you never gave *us* enough time.' And that really struck me, because I realized then that there was nothing I could tell them except, 'You're right.'" Sakamoto added, "Out of the 24 hours in a day, I always spent more than half of that with somebody else's children."⁹³ Besides his innumerable sacrifices, Sakamoto never forgot about the invaluable contributions and assistance given by his wife Mary; he spent the latter years of his life caring for her after she became seriously ill. Sakamoto continued to coach his beloved Hawai'i Swimming Club until he was 75-years-old. Then he retired to care for his wife. "I don't think I'll ever go back," he explained. "If I go back, I'll be there all day and she'll be all by herself again. I think I've given enough. And life is so short, isn't it? So why not give the balance of my years to my wife, who sacrificed so much for me? There's nothing that's more important to me than my wife. Swimming's not that important." In retirement, Sakamoto spent the last 12 years of his life caring for his beloved wife, whom he credited with much of his personal and professional success.

SOICHI SAKAMOTO: "A SWIMMING COACH FOR ALL TIME"⁹⁴

When Sakamoto passed away, in 1997, due to complications associated with pneumonia, at the age of 91, many recalled with fondness a man whom they regarded as a teacher, coach, mentor, father-figure, and innovator. As a visionary who saw possibilities in an irrigation ditch on Maui, he defied the odds to create world-renowned swimmers who broke through racial barriers in the sport of swimming. These multiethnic groups of swimmers, led by a Nisei coach, embraced their identities as athletes and in the process challenged dominant ideas about race that had defined their lives and had culminated in World War II. Although the onset of war would cancel the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games, Sakamoto's swimmers would win medals in later Olympics, fulfilling his dream of creating world-class athletes and continuing Hawai'i's tradition of cultivating great swimmers like Duke



FIGURE 8. Soichi Sakamoto Inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1966. Sakamoto is congratulated by University of Hawai'i President Thomas Hamilton upon receiving the National Collegiate and Scholastic Swim Award. Sculptor/artist Joe Brown's *Coach and Swimmer* in bronze symbolizes the vital importance of the coach-athlete relationship. From the International Swimming Hall of Fame Collection.

Kahanamoku. While Sakamoto merely set out to coach great swimmers, his achievements would not only stun the world of swimming, but also shatter class and racial barriers that once divided different ethnic groups in Hawai'i and abroad. Although Sakamoto would win a number of local, national, and international awards and recognitions, "Coach," as Sakamoto was affectionately known by his swimmers, sacrificed countless hours of his personal time and family life mentoring hundreds of Hawai'i's children. Despite his remarkable success, he was driven not to win personal acclaim, but to teach them to "become better human beings."⁹⁵

Sakamoto's greatness would be reflected in the many lives that he



FIGURE 9. Reunion of Famous Hawai'i Swimmers and Coaches (1967). From L-R: Charlie Oda, Halo Hirose, Bill Smith, Mariechen Wehselau, Duke Kahanamoku, Warren Kealoha, Mrs. Ellen Fullard-Leo, Jose Balmores, Richard "Sonny" Tanabe, Ronald Honda, Wally Nakama, Sochi Sakamoto. From the Richard "Sonny" Tanabe Collection, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

touched and transformed, whether they became champion swimmers or not. Even today, memories of "Coach" are fondly held by those who knew him, especially in his hometown of Pu'ūnēnē, Maui. Their success in swimming opened opportunities for travel and education, and later translated into economic opportunities outside of the plantations. For Sakamoto, swimming was as important as cultivating the individual person. Thus, even those who did not achieve swimming fame appreciated the countless hours he spent mentoring and counseling. His success became measured not only in the great athletes he trained, or the awards that were later bestowed on him, but by the personal relationships he formed and the lives he touched throughout his life.

Sakamoto's story and achievements, which have been primarily documented by his swimmers and recorded in swimming annals, offer important insights into a remarkable life. Although his story has been often ignored in larger sports and national histories, Sakamoto cre-

ated a different narrative of the loyalty and assimilability of Nisei during a time of virulent anti-Japanese sentiment before, during and after World War II. He challenged dominant ideas of race not only locally, but also nationally and internationally through the achievements of his swimmers, who remember Sakamoto not for his professional accolades and Olympic victories but simply as their beloved “Coach.

NOTES

I want to acknowledge the invaluable support, assistance, and guidance from two of Hawai‘i’s great watermen and gentlemen who enabled this project to come to fruition: William “Bill” Smith and Richard “Sonny” Tanabe. This article is dedicated to my grandfather, Kiyoji Nakamura, who taught my brothers and me how to swim at Ala Moana Beach Park every summer.

¹ Red McQueen, “Hoomalimali,” *HA*, 7 September 1941, 12.

² In an intriguing paper, Joseph Svinth notes that the average Nisei athlete of the 1930s stood five feet, five-and-a-half inches tall and weighed 132.3 pounds. While these measurements sound small by current standards, this was the 1930s when the majority of Americans were smaller: the average European American freshman at the University of Washington in 1909 was five feet, eight inches tall and weighed 134.58 pounds. Although the numbers are not directly comparable, it seems clear that the relative advantage or disadvantage of size was relatively inconsequential. Indeed, in his study of Seattle-area high-school athletes from 1910 to 1942, Svinth showed that substantial numbers of Nisei earned varsity letters in football and wrestling. Brian Niiya, ed., *More Than a Game: Sport in the Japanese American Community* (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000) 41.

³ Ethnic Studies Program, University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa, *Stores and Storekeepers of Paia & Pu‘unēnē, Maui Volume I* (Honolulu: Ethnic Studies Oral History Project, 1980) 400.

⁴ Hawaii Jubilee Commission, *Hawaii Jubilee* (Hawaii: Advertiser Publishing Co., 1936) 41.

⁵ Maui News, *Haleakala Souvenir Edition* (Wailuku, Maui: Maui Publishing Company, 1935) 70.

⁶ In 1931, the census reported 8,594 Japanese workers, 2,932 Filipino workers, 2,299 Portuguese workers, Hawaiian 724 workers, Puerto Rican 734 workers, 432 Caucasian workers, 264 Korean workers, and 166 Chinese workers. Hawaiian Sugar Planters’ Association. *Census of Hawaiian Sugar Plantations*. Vol. 1930/31 (Honolulu: Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association).

⁷ Ethnic Studies Program, University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa, *Stores and Storekeepers of Paia & Pu‘unēnē, Maui Volume II* (Honolulu: Ethnic Studies Oral History Project, 1980) 740.

⁸ *Stores and Storekeepers of Paia & Pu‘unēnē, Maui Volume I*, 400.

- ⁹ *Stores and Storekeepers of Paia & Pu'unēnē, Maui Volume II*, 1006.
- ¹⁰ Dennis Ogawa, *Kodomo No Tame Ni: For the Sake of the Children* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1978) 7.
- ¹¹ Milton Murayama, *All I Asking for is My Body* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988) 28.
- ¹² *Stores and Storekeepers of Paia & Pu'unēnē, Maui Volume II*, 928–929.
- ¹³ Fay F. Yokomizo, “‘Coach’ and The Three Year Swim Club,” *The Hawaii Herald* 5:14 (July 20, 1984): 1.
- ¹⁴ *Haleakala Souvenir Edition*, 54.
- ¹⁵ *Coach*, producer/writer, Chris Conybeare, director/editor, Joy Chong, *Rice & Roses* television series, Hawai'i Public Television, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR) University of Hawai'i West O'ahu (1984).
- ¹⁶ Michael M. Okihiro, *AJA Baseball in Hawaii: Ethnic Pride and Tradition* (Honolulu: Hawaii Hocht, Ltd., 1999).
- ¹⁷ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), *Coach* transcripts, *Coach Sakamoto-Reunion at Camp Pool-Grace and Ann*, tape 1, p.3.
- ¹⁸ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), *Coach* transcripts, Interview With John Tsukano, p. 3.
- ¹⁹ *Stores and Storekeepers of Paia & Pu'unēnē, Maui Volume II*, 1106.
- ²⁰ *Coach*.
- ²¹ Joel S. Franks, *Crossing Sidelines, Crossing Cultures* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America) 13.
- ²² Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press) 124.
- ²³ Yokomizo, 1.
- ²⁴ Dan Nakaso, “They Promised to Swim Three Years and Beyond,” *HA*, 16 February 1997, C-1.
- ²⁵ John Tsukano, “Builder of Champions,” *HSB*, 23 April 1955, 4.
- ²⁶ Jim Borg, “Coach Turned Plantation Kids Into World Champions,” *HA*, 20 July 1984, A-3.
- ²⁷ Urban M. Allen, “Men You Know in Sports,” *Maui News*, 31 January 1934, 4.
- ²⁸ Yokomizo, 10.
- ²⁹ Keith Arakaki, “Missus,” *Hawaii Swimming Legacy*. <http://www.hawaiiswim.org/legacy/hscMiss.html>
- ³⁰ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), *Coach* transcripts, *Coach Sakamoto-Coach-Second Interview*, tape 3, p 1.
- ³¹ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), *Coach* transcripts, Interview With Coach Sakamoto, p. 3.
- ³² Dayton Morinaga, “Sakamoto Inspired Greatness,” *HA*, 6 August 1997, C-5.
- ³³ Allen, 4.
- ³⁴ Borg, A-3.

- ³⁵ Morinaga, C-5.
- ³⁶ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Four Women Swim Team, tape 1, p. 13.
- ³⁷ Rick Woodson, "A Swimming Coach for All Time," *HA*, 8 August 1980, C-1.
- ³⁸ Borg, A-3.
- ³⁹ Woodson, C-1.
- ⁴⁰ Woodson, C-1.
- ⁴¹ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Home: June 20, 1984, tape 2, p. 4.
- ⁴² Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Home: June 20, 1984, tape 2, p. 4.
- ⁴³ Borg, A-3.
- ⁴⁴ Borg, A-3.
- ⁴⁵ Nakaso, C-9.
- ⁴⁶ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Reunion at Camp Five Pool, tape 1, p. 7.
- ⁴⁷ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Men Swimmers at Iao Pool, tape 1, p. 3.
- ⁴⁸ "From the Tall Cane, Came His Champions," *Hawaii Swimming Legacy*. <http://www.hawaiiswim.org/legacy/tallcane.html>.
- ⁴⁹ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Home: June 20, 1984, tape 2, p. 5.
- ⁵⁰ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Men Swimmers at Iao Pool, tape 1, p. 12.
- ⁵¹ Red McQueen, "Hoomalimali," *HA*, 5 September 1951, 14.
- ⁵² Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Chow Shibuya, tape 1, p. 7.
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- ⁵⁴ "From the Tall Cane, Came His Champions," in *Jr/Sr Swimmer Magazine*, 1961, *Hawaii Swimming Legacy*. <http://www.hawaiiswim.org/legacy/tallcane.html>.
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- ⁵⁷ "From the Tall Cane, Came His Champions," *Hawaii Swimming Legacy*. <http://www.hawaiiswim.org/legacy/tallcane.html>
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- ⁶⁰ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Kubota, tape 1, p. 7.
- ⁶¹ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Kubota, tape 1, p. 11.
- ⁶² "Fujiko Katsutani," *Hawaii Swimming Legacy*. <http://www.hawaiiswim.org/legacy/fujiko.html>.
- ⁶³ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Chow Shibuya, tape 1, p. 10.
- ⁶⁴ "Missus," *Hawaii Swimming Legacy*. <http://www.hawaiiswim.org/legacy/hscMiss.html>
- ⁶⁵ Koga, C-1.
- ⁶⁶ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach-Second Interview, tape 5, p. 7.
- ⁶⁷ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Charley Oda, tape 1, p. 2.
- ⁶⁸ Nakaso, C-9.
- ⁶⁹ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Coach-Second Interview, tape 3, p. 14.
- ⁷⁰ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Coach-Second Interview, tape 3, p. 13.
- ⁷¹ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Coach-Second Interview, tape 3, p. 5.
- ⁷² Tsukano, 4.
- ⁷³ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-John Tsukano at Natatorium, tape 1, p. 7.
- ⁷⁴ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Men Swimmers at Iao Pool, tape 1, p. 7.
- ⁷⁵ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Chic at Puunene, tape 1, p. 10.
- ⁷⁶ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Mrs., tape 1, p. 3.
- ⁷⁷ Yokomizo, 10.
- ⁷⁸ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto, At Home With Bill Smith, tape 2, p. 6.
- ⁷⁹ John Patrick Rosa, "Local Story: The Massie Case and the Politics of Local Identity in Hawai'i" (Ph.D. diss., University of California Irvine, 1999).

- ⁸⁰ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Men Swimmers at Iao Pool, tape 1," p. 10.
- ⁸¹ Tsukano, 4.
- ⁸² Martyn Chase, "Rainbow Coach Sakamoto Dedicated to Swimming," *HA*. "Sakamoto, Soichi-1956/1975." Microfiche D98050. University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Hamilton Library.
- ⁸³ Morinaga, C-5.
- ⁸⁴ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto, At Home With Bill Smith, tape 3, p. 8.
- ⁸⁵ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto, At Home With Bill Smith, tape 3, p. 7.
- ⁸⁶ Koga, C-1.
- ⁸⁷ Morinaga, C-5.
- ⁸⁸ Koga, C-1.
- ⁸⁹ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto-Keo Nakama at Natatorium, tape 1, p. 10.
- ⁹⁰ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Coach Sakamoto, tape 3, p. 11.
- ⁹¹ Chris Conybeare, University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR), Coach transcripts, Steve B-Punahou, tape 1, p. 7.
- ⁹² Wiltse, 158.
- ⁹³ Koga, C-1.
- ⁹⁴ Rick Woodson, "Á Swimming Coach for All Time," *HA*, 8 August 1980, C-1.
- ⁹⁵ Koga, C-1.