For most of
the twentieth century,
some of the world's greatest
swimmers and coaches
hailed from the Islands.
Olympic Games are always emotional, but the 1948 contests in London had the glow of the miraculous about them. With wars raging in Europe and Asia, the games had not been held for twelve years. Now a record number of nations (fifty-nine), in a peacetime show of solidarity, sent their best athletes. The captain of the United States swim team was Bill Smith Jr., a champion middle-distance freestyler. Taking the anchor position for the US eight hundred-meter relay bid, he powered the team to a gold medal in a screaming, nail-biting final lap. The next day he swam the fastest four hundred-meter freestyle event of his life. He hadn't been seen as a top contender—at age 24, having served as a navy officer, he was considered old—but when he touched that final wall, he broke the world and Olympic records and won a second gold medal.

Bill Smith was Native Hawaiian; the haole name came from a dollop of Irish genes in the mix. He was born in Honolulu, and at the age of ten he suffered an attack of typhoid that left him temporarily paralyzed. His father cured him with kukui nut oil massages and workouts in the sands and waters of Waikiki. Swimming began as Smith's therapy and then became his life—a life that spanned the golden age of swimming achievements in Hawai'i.

Hawai'i's swimmers were not always contenders. At the beginning of the 1900s, when the Islands became a US territory, the general focus was on the land—planting, ranching, life in the plantation camps. Over the next decades, though, these Islands produced forty-five Olympic competitors, won over fifty Olympic medals and placed eighteen athletes in the International Swimming Hall of Fame. Despite all that, Hawai'i has not sent a contender to the Olympic Games since 1976. Even here, aquatic sports have had their ebb and flow.

In this sense, flow is the mission of the Hawai'i Swimming Hall of Fame. HSHOF, right after the turn of our present century, began celebrating and cataloging the international achievements of Island aquatic athletes throughout the twentieth century. Some of the greatest swimmers of the twentieth century came from Hawai'i, athletes like Duke Kahanamoku and Bill Smith. Here the Islands' finest are at Honolulu Airport, en route to the US Olympic Swimming Trials circa 1952. Sonny Tanabe is kneeling far right; above left, he's swimming the butterfly. Above right: the medallion of the Hawai'i Swimming Hall of Fame. Opening image: Antique bamboo goggles.
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**When Hawai‘i Ruled the Pool**

The Hawai‘i Swimming Hall of Fame grew out of the Hawai‘i Swimming Legacy Project, which was founded in 1999 to keep alive the Islands’ rich history of swimming and diving feats. The hall has now inducted 120 honorees, exceptional women and men who made their mark in the water. At right, coach Harvey Porter Chilton (an inductee in 2015) is seen in suit and tie with swimmers bound for the 1924 Olympic Games. Chilton coached many of Hawai‘i’s greats, including Kahanamoku and (above right) Buster Crabbe (who is seated right). Above, swimmers from the 1954 International Invitational Swimming Meet at the Waikiki Natatorium. It was Hawai‘i’s swimmers (standing) versus Japan’s (kneeling). Top, swimmers from Hui Makani.

"We don’t want to lose our rich heritage in swimming," says Richard “Sonny” Tanabe, the 81-year-old O‘ahu swim coach and former Olympian (1956, Melbourne) who has helped lead the volunteer organization of HSHOF. Joining him in this work—inspired by retired University of Hawai‘i professor Hiroshi Yamauchi and his Hawai‘i Swimming Legacy Project—were a number of other Island Olympians: Evelyn Kawamoto, Gary Hosaka, Keith Arakaki and Bill Smith himself.

HSHOF is not a physical site and as of now exists only on paper and online. At its awards banquets, which are always packed, each inductee receives a gold medallion in a rosewood presentation box. (A three-foot-diameter replica stands on display at Honolulu International Airport.) The medallion, designed by Tanabe, bears three iconic images: Duke Kahanamoku, who astounded the world in the Olympic Games of 1912 and 1920; the Waikiki War Memorial Natatorium, former site of world-class competitions; and the profile of Diamond Head.

Of the 120 honorees HSHOF has inducted so far, almost all are athletes. But some of those who made the greatest contributions were coaches. Everyone has been essential to the Islands’ rich swimming legacy.
heard of Duke Kahanamoku, who in 1911, swimming in Honolulu Harbor, broke the world record in the 100-yard and 220-yard freestyle—a feat that the Amateur Athletic Union simply refused to believe. (Skeptics changed their minds one year later when Kahanamoku easily qualified for the US Olympic team, then took gold and silver medals in Stockholm.) On the other hand, few remember Harvey Porter Chilton, who took on the role of trainer for Kahanamoku and other Honolulu champions, founded Hui Makani Swim Club and gave forty-five years to nurturing a sporting environment that people today think of as the “first wave” of swimming greatness in Hawai‘i.

Chilton scarcely looked the part. With his bow ties, too-tight suits and tubby physique, he seemed at first glance more film noir than tropical waterman. But he was devoted and demanding. The first Hawai‘i Olympic contenders had no pool. They trained in Honolulu Harbor alongside Pier 7, where Aloha Tower stands today.
Chilton would walk back and forth along the pier, checking his pocket watch and shouting instructions. He did long-distance workouts in front of the Moana Hotel, and when cargo ships came in, he had his swimmers offload sacks to build upper-body strength. He fed them meals at his house while explaining techniques and goals. In 1920 Chilton, along with another famed coach, George “Dad” Center of the Outrigger Canoe Club, traveled to the Olympic Games in Antwerp halfway around the planet, with a dream team.

Kahanamoku diving into a swimming pool. Kahanamoku, famed as the father of modern-day surfing, was also an extraordinary swimmer who competed in four Olympic Games and took home gold, silver and bronze medals.

Duke Kahanamoku— with his powerful arms, his trademark flutter kick and charisma— was only one of many Hawai‘i stars during the 1920s. Eight men and one woman (Helen Moses) represented Hawai‘i in 1920 as Island athletes took gold, silver and bronze in the one hundred-meter freestyle. Four years later seven men and one woman competed in Paris. Buster Crabbe—who later went to Hollywood to become Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers— won that event’s gold, Duke took silver and Duke’s younger brother Sam, the bronze. Warren Kealoha took two gold medals in the backstroke. These and other such successes brought world attention to Hawai‘i and, in particular, to the swimming prowess of Native Hawaiians.

But there was no next generation. In the 1930s Japan’s disciplined swimmers started dominating international competition. There were few or no new Dukes. But as the first wave receded, a second wave came in, and from an unexpected angle. In 1939...
a laid-back teenager named Bill Smith Jr. yielded to his father’s pressure and joined Chilton’s Hui Makani Club. In his first race for Chilton, Smith shattered the territorial record for the mile-long race. Chilton took him almost immediately to compete in the Men’s Nationals in Santa Barbara.

After that, Smith left Honolulu and went to live in a plantation-camp town on the central Maui plain, where hot winds carried the smoke from the Pu‘unēnē sugar mill. He moved into the house of a public-school teacher named Soichi Sakamoto, the son of plantation workers who had emigrated from Japan. Soichi and his Hawaiian wife, Mary, had four children and three bedrooms. They made a bed for Smith in a shed next to the furo (wood-heated family bathtub).

In time Smith would win fifteen national AAU championships and eight NCAA championships. He would hold eighteen American swimming records and seven world records, get inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame and be declared Ohio State University’s Swimmer of the Century. The core training that led to these achievements took place on Maui with Sakamoto.

Sakamoto himself could not swim. He preferred to play the ‘ukulele. But he was an excellent teacher, and he saw that his scrawny students, offspring of the camps, liked to jump into the irrigation ditches near the mill and thrash around until they were chased out by the plantation foremen. These ditches were fast-running and neither clean nor safe, but they were as close to swimming pools as camp children were likely to get. Sakamoto decided that he would focus the kids’ energy and teach them the discipline of competitive swimming. He gave them a goal, a ridiculous one: to compete in the 1940 Olympic Games, which lay three years in the future. He called his kids the Three-Year Swim Club.

If it hadn’t been for Hitler, Sakamoto would have achieved his goal. He devised his coaching techniques based entirely on hunches and results. He painted distance markers on the sides of the ditches. He developed interval training, now a widely used practice, by having his swimmers battle with gut-breaking determination against the current, then turn and ease back with it. He created methods for upper-body strengthening using whatever scraps were at hand: buckets, gravel, pulleys. He set a goal for each kid and used a metronome to discipline individual timing. He was criticized for overworking the kids, but...
good results came quickly. In 1937 a skinny teenager named Keo Nakama managed by force of will to outswim two West Coast champions who had come to perform a four hundred-meter freestyle show race in the Waikiki Natatorium. Another Sakamoto protégé, named Halo Hirose, became a speed demon in sprints. Both of these nisei (second-generation Japanese) swimmers went on to illustrious careers. It was these astonishing early achievements by Sakamoto’s swimmers that convinced Smith to trade Honolulu for a shed by the bathtub in Pu’unene in 1939.

In 1945 Soichi Sakamoto accepted the job of head swim coach at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa. “He was a tremendous motivator,” says Tanabe. “Before we entered the water, he would always shake our hands. He had a grip like a vise. He greeted you every day: ‘Today here’s what we’re going to do.’” Then, with a stopwatch in his other hand, he would squeeze out the beat of the day’s training rhythm. He was a tireless organizer of meets, and he trained both men and women. Two of his most illustrious Olympians were Thelma Kalama (1948, London) and Evelyn Kawamoto (1952, Helsinki). His death in 1997 at age 91 triggered the conversations that led to the founding of the Hawai’i Swimming Hall of Fame.

Kaili Chun represents the Sakamoto legacy in action. Today she is a widely admired sculptor whose work, which focuses on Hawaiian themes, has acquired
Coach Soichi Sakamoto is a legend in swimming circles, and tales of his Three-Year Swim Club continue to delight: Sakamoto took young kids on Maui and trained them to swim in the irrigation ditches that flowed through the island’s sugar plantations, producing champions in the process. Here Sakamoto is seen with Kahanamoku (on the left) and his protégé Bill Smith. At left he is with his swimmers Kee Nakama (on the left) and Kalo Hirose.

international recognition. She was inducted into HSHOF in 2003, primarily for her multiyear run of victories in the Waikiki Roughwater Swim, an annual 2.3-mile power-thrash from Sans Souci Beach to the Hilton Rainbow Tower. (“I won the Roughwater Swim at least seven times,” she says, “then did the Double Roughwater and won two or three times. It was fun to beat the guys.”) Kaili’s earliest swim coach, at Kamehameha School, was Bill Smith.

After winning his gold medals in London, Smith became Honolulu’s water safety director. And for twenty-five years he coached the members of the Kamehameha Swim Club, including Chun. She says, “Mr. Smith was a person who cared passionately about developing the complete person—not just an athlete, but a complete citizen of the world.” She credits that training, plus her experiences in national and international competition, for her successes in college and ability to focus on her self-created career. “Swimming is a solo sport,” she says. “You have to open your mind first to allow your body to exceed its limits. It’s a humbling experience. But if you can find a way to do the very best thing you can, that’s an important life lesson.”

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