

## **OLYMPICS FIRST, OLYMPICS ALWAYS**

February 20, 2010

The 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver is underway. Millions of viewers around the world, including those in Hawaii, are experiencing the thrill of competition among elite athletes from around the globe. Small state that we are, both in size and population, Hawaii has itself produced its share of champions, a fact that should inspire our young people and their parents and coaches.

Honolulu Theatre for Youth's first offering for 2010 is coincidentally, the true story of Olympic swimming champions from Puunene, Maui. On the opening night for "The Three Year Swim Club," Hawaii Olympian Bill Smith proudly showed his two gold medals to the audience. More than 150 original "Swimming Club" members, their families and friends attended the performance. Albeit, swimming is a summer Olympic, not a winter one, but the play reminds us of the incredible achievements that can happen with hard work, encouragement, a spirit of belonging, and focus on a goal.

Teacher Soichi Sakamoto, founder of the "Three-Year Swimming Club," did not have any of the niceties that coaches on the mainland had. With no swimming pool in the sugar cane town of Puunene, he appealed to plantation managers for the right of his swimmers to train in the irrigation ditch. He had no formal swimming training himself, though he coached other sports after teaching school all day. An incredible man of vision, he set out to prove that a three-year, conscientiously worked out period was sufficient time to develop swimmers of Olympic caliber. He wanted to instill Americanism and give a sense of unity to these second generation children of Territorial Hawaii, and give young swimmers an ultimate goal towards which to work.

In June 1937, speaking to plantation laborers' children in a humble classroom in Puunene Grammar School, "Mistah Sakamoto" told boys and girls who had never even been to Honolulu, of his dream to build up swimmers for the American team that would compete in the 1940 Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland. The "Three-Year Swimming Club" motto was "Olympics first and Olympics always." Twelve-year old Fujiko Katsutani promised Coach Sakamoto that she would train and train hard, saying "when you train, you train because you want to become a champion." Two years later at 14, she became the country's best breast stroke swimmer, and at 15 became a member of the 1940 U.S. Olympic women's swim team.

Every day after school, barefoot children scampered across the cane fields to the plantation irrigation ditches. About 120 children trained for one to three hours a day in waterways three feet deep by four feet wide. Coach Sakamoto ran alongside, shouting instructions as they swam downstream and encouragement as they swam back upstream. The children were poor and had to rely on support from the community to be able to afford getting to competitions in an era when the trip to the mainland was via a seven-day trip by ship across the Pacific Ocean. The championship record his swimmers accomplished is truly a miracle.

Soichi Sakamoto's swimmers went to the National Championships 12 times and won the national title six of those times. His boys team captured the National team championship in 1939, 1940, 1941, 1946, 1949. In his time he developed more national champions than any other coach: 14 National AAU individual titlists, six National AAU champions, and several world record holders. One of his swimmers, Kiyoshi Nakama (who later became a Hawaii legislator) held 27 national titles in distances from 110 yards to 1,500 meters as well as world records.

The Three-Year Swim Club dominated the 1941 Nationals in what observers called a blitzkrieg. Bill Smith shattered a dozen world and American records, and captured the title in the 200 and 400 meter. Kiyoshi Nakama reprised his 800 meter victory and won the 1500 meter. Jose Balmores won the 200 meter breaststroke and 300 meter individual medley. Takashi Hirose placed first the 100 freestyle. Maui won the club relay for the third consecutive year.

The Swim Club's achievements opened the door of opportunity for these poor plantation youth. It was well known that Coach Sakamoto's ground work was directly responsible for many of Ohio State University's championship teams as his swimmers joined OSU's team. Coaches across the U.S. began adopting his unorthodox methods.

The 1940 Olympics for which the "Three-Year Swimming Club" was formed, was canceled because of World War II. Had the Games been held, the swimmers "Mistah Sakamoto" trained would have formed the backbone of the American team.

After Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941, boys who he taught in school and who trained under him in swimming, football, track and field, baseball and basketball, or in his Boy Scout troop – all were sent off to war. He wrote to them long, inspiring letters to let them know they were not forgotten and to encourage them.

In the 1948 Olympic Games in London, former Three-Year Swim Club member Bill Smith was the underdog who fought his way to victory. He captured two gold medals, for the 400 meter freestyle and 800 meter freestyle relay. As the band played the Star Spangled Banner, and the crowd cheered wildly for Bill at the medal presentation, Coach Sakamoto stood quietly in the bleachers, his face full of emotion.

Sakamoto became the assistant coach to the U.S. Swim Teams for the 1952 Helsinki and 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. Among his Olympic champions: Bill Smith, Jr. and Thelma Kalama (1948), and Ford Konno, Yoshi Oyakawa and Bill Woolsey (1952). Anyone interested in seeing how many star athletes Hawaii has sent to the Olympics and other championships can peruse "Hawaii Sports: History, Facts, and Statistics" (1999) written by local librarian Dan Cisco.

Mahalo nui loa to Honolulu Theatre for Youth for commissioning and producing "The Three-Year Swim Club" to honor Coach Soichi Sakamoto of Puunene, and his championship swimmers. Their true story gives Hawaii's youth the hope that, even kids from a small state or without any of the advantages, can shoot for the stars and make their dreams come true. The play runs at Tenney Theatre Feb. 20 and 27 and March 6 at 4:30 pm.

1937	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takashi Hirose - first in 100 meter freestyle in National, Pan-American, Big Ten NCAA and World Championships</li> </ul>
1938	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takashi Hirose - second in 100 meter freestyle in National, &amp; world record in 400 meter freestyle relay in Germany</li> <li>• Kiyoshi Nakama - second in 400, 800, &amp; 1,500-meter freestyle races in National</li> </ul>
1939	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kiyoshi Nakama - 220 yard freestyle National champion</li> <li>• Kiyoshi, Nakama, Benny Castro, Jose Balmores, and Bill Neunzig, 800 meter relay and first National team championship.</li> <li>• Fujiko Katsutani – 200 meter breaststroke champion, National</li> </ul>
1940	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fujiko Katsutani, age 15 - first place, 200 meter breaststroke, National; as nation's best breaststroke swimmer, selected to 1940 U.S. Women's Olympic Team</li> <li>• Chic Miyamoto, age 13 – women's 300 meter individual medley champion, National</li> <li>• Kiyoshi Nakama - five gold medals, Pan American</li> <li>• Maui team – second championship, National and four other titles: the 800 meter relay team, 400 meter and 800 meter (Kiyoshi Nakama), and 1 mile (Bunmei Nakama)</li> </ul>
1941	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fujiko Katsutani - first place, 200 meter breaststroke, National</li> <li>• Chic Miyamoto – women's 300 meter individual medley champion, National</li> <li>• Bill Smith - electrified the swimming world by shattering records in his events</li> <li>• Takashi Hirose - first place, 100 meter freestyle, National</li> <li>• Takashi Hirose, Jose Balmores, Kiyoshi Nakama and Bunmei Nakama - first place, 800 meter freestyle relay in National; first place in eight out of 10 swimming championships</li> </ul>