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A God Joins His Ancestors

The man known as a god in the world's swimming and surfing circles, joined his ancestors yesterday.

His name was Duke Paoa Kahanamoku, 77, descendent of Hawaiian kings and certainly the best known and most revered named in the history of Hawaii.

It was the Duke who put Hawaii on the map in the world of sports. He was received by kings and conquerors, by presidents and dictators around the globe. He was Royalty in the world of sports with a capital R.

His name was synonymous with Hawaii — and with swimming and surfing. The word "Kahanamoku" was spoken of with awe in all lands and in all languages.

He probably was as well-known in England, France, Sweden, Japan, Mexico, India and Zanzibar as he was on the Mainland of the United States.

Majestic in appearance, with his deeply tanned face topped by a beautiful shock of iron-gray hair, he looked every inch the prototype of Hawaiian royalty.

This only added to his glamor, of course, as one of the greatest athletes the world ever has known.

Idolized By the Surfers

I was with him last year in Los Angeles when he was inducted into the Surfing Hall of Fame.

The greatest surfers in the world were present — all ignored in the crush to crowd close to the Duke, to get his autograph, to touch his arm.

They knew that he had been a great surfer in the days when he used a 116-pound redwood board and that at his advanced age he still was a surfer.

Later that night the Duke and I sneaked away to get a midnight snack of soup and crackers. We immediately were surrounded by admiring youngsters who only could have heard about Duke from their parents or read about him.

"I just want to stand close and look at him," said one young feminine surfer. "I've heard of him all my life. I want to touch him. He reminds me of a Greek god."

The first time I saw Duke was 1932, the year I got out of high school and was at the 1932 Olympics. Duke was a member of the U.S. water polo team — the fourth Olympic team he had been on.

He Was No Ordinary Athlete

I sneaked in to a practice session, just to see what he looked like. He's the only man from that team that I remember. He was the type of man who left a lasting impression on anyone who saw him — either standing still or competing.

The Duke was no ordinary athlete. He was a super-man in the days before they had super-men. His records have been bettered hundreds of times — a tenth of a second at a time. But no one in history ever smashed a record like the Duke did at the turn of the century.

In the days when the record for the 100-meter dash was around 60 seconds, Duke was clocked in 55 seconds in an AAU meet here.

"Preposterous," said the straight-laced AAU officials on the Mainland. "We can't allow that mark. No one can swim that fast. The clockers made a mistake."

So they took Duke to Los Angeles and San Francisco and he showed the haoles how to swim like a fish. He smashed records every place he went and left the best swimmers in the West struggling far behind.

The tour headed for Chicago and the East and it was the same there. More records cracked, more believers and more hero worshipers.

When the 1912 Olympics came around he was on the team for the games in Stockholm, Sweden.

Think back now. That was in the early days of Ty Cobb and Honus Wagner in baseball; Jim Thorpe in football and track; and Jesse Willard and Jack Johnson in boxing.

'A Real Hawaiian'

Duke won his Olympic events, as did Thorpe, who later had all his medals taken away, because he was termed a professional.

Twenty years later Duke was still competing against the world's best in the 1932 Olympic Games — a feat never performed before or since.

What kind of a man was the Duke?

"I swam with him and against him in Island meets," says one contemporary, Francis H. Ii Brown. "And he always beat me."

"Duke was a shy fellow when he was a young man. He really didn't know his own power."

"In international meets he would just play with the competition. If they had had someone to push him his records still would have been standing. That's how much better he was than the rest."

"But all his championships and the fact that he was an international celebrity never went to his head. You'd never know he was a champion. He was nonchalant and a fine character."

"He was a real Hawaiian."

Truly, in the world of sports he was a god among mere mortals.