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Warren Kealoha—A Champion

Warren Kealoha!

To the old-time sports fans it is an honored name.

Many a toast was offered in Hawaii in honor of Kealoha in the early 1920s.

Warren Kealoha!

It was a household name.

Kealoha is one of the greatest backstroke swimmers the world has ever known. He won the 100 meters backstroke at the Olympic Games in 1920 and 1924.

"Warren is the only backstroke swimmer to win at two consecutive Olympic Games," Gay Harris, also a great backstroker and a member of the 1924 U.S. Olympic team, said as we sat swapping stories with Kealoha at the Out-rigger Canoe Club.

"Not only that; Warren was undefeated from early 1920 to around 1926. His victories included triumphs not only at the Olympic Games but also at the U.S. National championships.

Old-timers will tell you Warren was as great a dorsal swimmer as the late Duke Kahanamoku was a sprint swimmer.

Warren and Duke were teammates at the 1920 and 1924 Olympics. Warren was also a proficient freestyle swimmer and made the American Olympic relay team, but his forte was the backstroke.

His accomplishments were great and he was admired by the swimming fans of his day, but in recent years very little has been heard from him. He became a forgotten star.

This was due to his retiring and reserved nature. He was rarely seen in the public. And he hardly talks about his swimming days except when he meets up with an old buddy like Gay Harris.

Kealoha does not want anyone to make any fuss over him. He likes to be left alone. Hence, he gradually faded out of the picture. That's why the young sports fans don't know him.

They Still Remember Him

Be that as it may, old-time swimming fans around the world have not forgotten him. So much so that about two years ago he was elected to the Swimming Hall of Fame.

Officials of the Hall of Fame have written to him for his pictures taken during the days of his greatest triumphs. But he has not answered them. Not because he is discourteous but because he is just naturally reserved and reticent about having the glare of publicity beamed on him. Moreover he does not have a picture of himself in a swimming suit. He did not keep any newspaper clippings.

All through his swimming career he did not seek publicity.

He swam to win and that was it. If he broke a world record, it was OK with him. But he did not take it seriously. It was no big thing, so far as he was concerned.

But his family has been urging him to send his picture to the Hall of Fame committee if he can locate one not for his own glory but for the sake of his grandchildren.

If anyone happens to have a picture of Warren in a swimming suit, he would like to borrow it to make a copy for the Hall of Fame.

His Greatest Thrill

We asked Warren about his greatest thrill in swimming.

"It came in the 1920 Olympics at Antwerp," Warren replied.

"I almost got disqualified because of the stroke I was using," he said. "But after some discussion my stroke was ruled legal. I was greatly relieved. I had been worried for a while. Then I got the greatest thrill of my career when I swam in the finals and won."

What was the argument about Warren's stroke?

Warren, like all Hawaiian backstroke swimmers of the day, used the now conventional alternate stroke with a kick. It is just the opposite of the freestyle crawl.

Most European backstrokers of the era flipped both arms over simultaneously and used the leg scissors to propel them.

In reading over the rules, the officials found that they only called for the swimmer to be flat on his back. So Warren's stroke was judged legal.

Was Warren's stroke peculiar to Hawaii?

"One Belgian and a swimmer from Los Angeles used it," Warren said. "I don't know where the Belgian learned the stroke. But the Los Angeles swimmer learned it from Stubby Krueger, a former Hawaii swimmer who had moved to the Mainland."

After Warren's victory in world record time, all the backstrokers began using the Hawaiian stroke. It was revolutionary at the time.

Warren was just a little over 16 when he won the 1920 Olympic title.

Learned To Swim in Kewalo

Born and raised in Kakaako, he learned to swim in Kewalo Basin in an area called "blue pool." That was before the basin was dredged.

Warren later began swimming in Honolulu harbor and became proficient in both the backstroke and freestyle.

He smashed the world record for the 100 yards backstroke the first time he swam it in practice after he joined the late Harvey Chilton's Hui Makani club.

Nobody would believe it. After the timers were convinced that their watches were accurate, they figured that the course might be shorter than 100 yards. So it was measured by an engineer. The distance was found to be correct.

In the regular meet that followed, Warren again clipped the world record. After that he broke the record or came close to it each time he swam.

And he was unbeaten until 1926 when the judges ruled Johnny Weissmuller the winner over Warren in a close race in the Punahou School pool.

Many who saw the race claim that Warren actually won.

"The timers caught me at a faster time than Weissmuller's, but the judges saw Johnny as the winner," Kealoha said in recalling the race.

Shortly after that meet Warren was invited along with other Hawaiian swimmers, to compete in the All-Japan meet. Warren won his race—the 100 meters backstroke.

He recalled that he was impressed by one Japanese swimmer—Tsuruta, a breaststroker. Warren predicted a great future for Tsuruta.

Tsuruta made Warren a prophet. He won the breaststroke event at the 1932 Olympic Games.

Warren is still in good health— hale, hearty and spry.

But he continues to shun the limelight and unless you know him you wouldn't imagine he is a former Olympic Games champion and star. He is reluctant to talk about his accomplishments except with old friends.

He is just naturally modest and reserved.