Sports Tourism
Builds Marketing Muscle for Hawai‘i

By Dr. Richard Kelley

At press time officials are trying to decide whether to hold the Quiksilver Eddie Aikau big wave surfing tournament at Waimea Bay on Oahu’s North Shore. If it’s a “go,” Hawai‘i will benefit as images of amazing waves, sunny weather, and gorgeous scenery are broadcast around the world. What better marketing could there be for our state, as so many potential visitors live in areas now suffering from blizzards, bone-chilling cold, or, elsewhere, record flooding?

Then, as if “The Eddie” weren’t exciting enough, the Pro Bowl follows just a few days later. These are just two examples of how sporting events play a really big role in Hawai‘i’s Travel & Tourism industry.

Focusing first on the Eddie Aikau contest, I’m reminded of the saying, “Every cloud has a silver lining.” Indeed, the enormous waves that make this contest so mesmerizing are set in motion by the unusually severe storms that have been hammering the Northern Pacific recently.* These conditions are exceptional and don’t happen every winter. In fact, “The Eddie” has taken place only eight times in the 26 years since it was first held. The waves it requires bring flocks of visitors and news reporters to Hawai‘i to watch exceptionally skilled and courageous young men and women trying to catch a ride on these towering, swift-moving watery slopes. The waves’ shoreward faces, according to NOAA’s Chief Surf Forecaster, Pat Caldwell, can reach up to 50 feet – the height of a five-story building! The publicity value for Hawai‘i’s Travel & Tourism industry cannot be calculated, but it is certainly as huge in its own way as the waves themselves.

“The Eddie,” if it happens, will boost our local economy, from the hotels that house those who fly in for the event, to surfboard manufacturers, clothing outlets, eateries, and even Matsumoto’s, the North Shore shave ice mecca.

This year we also welcome back the Pro Bowl! Hawai‘i lost this major event last year after hosting it for three decades, from 1980 to 2009. An agreement with the National Football League returns the Pro Bowl to Honolulu for 2011 and 2012. As it was last year, the game will again be played a week before the Super Bowl, when the public’s interest in football is peaking. Spending by visitors drawn here by the Pro Bowl is estimated to exceed $28 million and, like the Quiksilver Eddie Aikau event, the publicity is priceless.

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But wait! There’s more! Both these events come on the heels of two prestigious golf tournaments held every January. This year, the Hyundai Tournament of Champions was played at Kapalua, Maui, January 2-9; it was followed by the Sony Open at Waialae Country Club on O‘ahu, January 10-16. Although there were some soggy, rainy days, there were also days with beautiful views of Hawai‘i, rolling greens, and the bright blue ocean seen on high-definition TV across America and in a number of other countries. These events bring $25 million more into Hawai‘i’s economy.

Nor is that all. As I have written in recent articles, the Honolulu Marathon, just over a month ago, brought some 23,000 runners to Honolulu. And the Ford Ironman World Championship Triathlon, held every October in Kona, brings still more amazing competitors, fans – and publicity.

All these events inspire people to travel. Before every major event, ads begin drumming up viewership. Then, as people watch the live coverage, they see beautiful Hawai‘i backdrops, and commentators fill in slow moments with anecdotes and talk of local culture and activities. This plants the seeds of desire to travel here. It’s an idea that grows with time, perhaps years, until one day that potential visitor is finally in a position to take that trip of a lifetime.

In discussing the contribution of sports to Hawai‘i’s visitor industry, I want to recognize the wonderful job that former Hawai‘i hotelier Tom Kiely has done to bring more and more top-quality sporting events to the Islands. After a successful career in the hotel industry, he formed TEAM Unlimited LLC, a lifestyle sports marketing company.

In 1990, the O‘ahu Visitors Bureau challenged Kiely to generate additional marketing exposure. So TEAM Unlimited designed and produced the Hawaiian OceanFest, a featured event on ESPN. That launched the company into the event and television business and led to the creation of XTERRA, now the world’s leading off-road multisport brand with more than 100 events in 16 countries. Included in its portfolio are the XTERRA World Championship and XTERRA Trail Run held at Makena, Maui, every October.

Based on his hotel and tourism marketing expertise, Tom decided to make television an important segment of his business. As a result, TEAM Unlimited LLC is Hawai‘i’s most prolific television producer, with more than 265 shows, 35 Telly awards, and five Emmy Awards to its credit.

Outrigger and OHANA Hotels & Resorts have always supported developing sports events for both Hawai‘i residents and visitors. Well over 40 years ago, Outrigger hotels were hosting visiting college basketball teams, polo teams, and even a rugby team or two. CEO David Carey has taken our involvement with sports tourism to new levels through a close affiliation with the University of Hawai‘i Athletic Department.

Many members of the Kelley family are also involved in Hawai‘i sporting events. In my younger days, I took part for many years in the Hawai‘i International Billfish Tournament in Kona, alongside notable anglers including Hawai‘i Olympic legend Duke Kahanamoku and Hollywood celebrities such as Richard Boone and Lee Marvin. I also played twice in the pro-am section of the Hawaiian Open (now the Sony Open). My daughter, Kathy Kelley Carey, David’s wife, is a long-time volunteer soccer coach at University of Hawai‘i. My daughter Linda Jane Kelley has worked for the Ironman Triathlon for years. My son, Dr. Chuck Kelley, is a competitive surfer and paddleboarder. Outrigger CEO David Carey has played in the Sony Open pro-am for many years. And my daughter Bitsy Kelley has a company that brings hunters – also sportsmen and -women – to Hawai‘i.

Many members of our ‘ohana are also avid athletes, but there is no space to acknowledge them all. I should, however, single out Michele Nagamine who, until last month, coordinated the needs of sports teams and those accompanying them who were staying at Outrigger and OHANA properties. Michele was recently named head women’s soccer coach at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. In making the announcement, Athletics Director Jim Donovan called her “driven, passionate, and a proven winner on every level she has competed.” He said “She’s been integral in the development of soccer in the state of Hawai‘i and understands its importance to the community. I believe she ... will bring much success to our soccer program.”

This is a great opportunity for Michele and we wish her the best. Her new role opens up still more opportunities to further develop sports tourism in Hawai‘i. And that’s important because whether you are talking about sports tourism or any other type of tourism, In Hawai‘i, Tourism Is Everybody’s Business!

*(For a detailed explanation of how Oahu’s big waves are generated, See http://tinyurl.com/BigSurfHi)*