Duke

Duke Paoa Kahinu Mokoe Hulikohola Kahanamoku, the man honored by Duke’s OceanFest (see adjacent article by Dr. Chuck Kelley), was a personal friend of Outrigger founders Roy and Estelle Kelley, and I, too, have always felt a close tie to him. But today, 119 years after his birth in 1890 and 41 years after his death in 1968, it’s possible that for some readers, Duke Kahanamoku is little more than a famous name. So here is a bit of background on this towering icon of Hawaii.

An Olympic swimming champion and world-record holder, Duke is also the man who introduced surfing – the ancient sport of Hawai’i’s ali’i – to the rest of the world. He is a member of the Swimming Hall of Fame and in 1965, was the first person inducted into the Surfing Hall of Fame.

Of 100 percent Hawaiian ancestry – and with lineage going back to Kamehameha the Great, he inherited his name from his father, Halapu Kahanamoku, who was christened “Duke” by Bernice Pauahi Bishop in honor of Prince Albert, Duke of Edinburgh, who was visiting Hawaii at the time of the elder man’s birth in 1869. This name was passed on to his son, the Duke I knew.

That Duke burst upon the national and international swimming scene at the Stockholm Olympics in 1912, where he broke the Olympic 100-meter freestyle record. He set a world record in the same event in 1920 at the Antwerp Olympics. In all, he won three Olympic gold and two silver medals.

Between and following the Olympics, Duke competed and gave exhibition performances across the country and around the world, also demonstrating surfing in places that had never witnessed the sport, from the U.S. East Coast to Australia. In the 1920s, he began a series of movie appearances, something he pursued for nearly three decades.

Duke turned in the surfing performance of a lifetime in California in 1925, when he paddled his longboard out to a ship that had lost power and capsized in heavy surf. He made three trips to the sinking vessel and single-handedly rescued eight of the 29 people aboard. The Newport Beach police chief called Duke’s performance “the most superhuman rescue act and the finest display of surfboard riding that has ever been seen in the world.”

Later in life, he took on the role of Hawaii’s “ambassador,” greeting and hobnobbing with visiting personages of every kind. As an article in Sports Illustrated (September 17, 1990) put it, “Through the years, in photos, we see Kahanamoku in a boat with Babe Ruth; on the beach with a young Shirley Temple; holding a clean-shaven Groucho Marx on his shoulders; comparing canoe paddles with Joe DiMaggio; chatting with President John F. Kennedy; and giving an impromptu hula lesson to Queen Mother Elizabeth of Great Britain.”

I can remember Duke from when I was growing up in Waikiki. He was a permanent fixture on the beach and kept his surfboard and a koa canoe in the sand under the dining room of the Outrigger Canoe Club, on the present site of the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel. He would swim there every afternoon. A striking but gentle man, he was an outstanding role model for so many of Hawaii’s youth, showing them that coming from our Islands need not be limiting in any way.

I can also remember the worried look on Duke’s face when our company acquired the lease on the Outrigger Canoe Club site in 1963 and was planning to build the Outrigger Waikiki. He was in his 70s at that point and was quite concerned about where he could conveniently keep his surfboard and canoe once construction started. I remember accompanying my father as we walked onto the property we now had under lease. As we were standing on the beachfront boundary, Duke came up and said, “Mr. Kelley, I’ve had my canoe stored on this land for years. Would you mind if I continued to keep it here until you start construction?” Roy replied, “I would be honored if you would do that.” And he made sure there was always a spot for Duke’s canoe through and beyond the construction period.

I would also see Duke at the Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament (HIBT) in Kailua-Kona. I participated in that tournament for a number of years in the 60s and 70s. (Dr. Chuck Kelley, then 9-years-old, accompanied me once.) Duke would fish from his own boat, which I recall was named the Nadu-K, (a melding of his wife’s name – Nadine – and Duke). HIBT founder Peter Fithian recalls that in 1961, when Duke was 71-years-old, he hooked a potentially tournament-winning 441-pound Pacific blue marlin and had almost brought it to gaff when his rod broke, disqualifying the catch under tournament rules. “If you can’t break the record, break the rod,” said Duke afterward, according to an article recounting the battle in the September 4, 1961, issue of Sports Illustrated.

HIBT, now celebrating its 50th year, honors Duke’s memory by annually presenting the Duke Kahanamoku Memorial Award to the angler boating the heaviest qualifying billfish in the tournament.

It gives me great pleasure to know that Duke’s memory continues to be honored in many ways, not least of which is Duke’s OceanFest, a living – and lively – memorial to this exceptional man, which our company supports and in which we enthusiastically participate.