Saluting Our “World Champion” Housekeepers

Over the next two weeks, we, in Outrigger and OHANA hotels across the Pacific, will take some time away from our regular duties to honor our Housekeepers. We will give well-earned recognition to those who work tirelessly every day of the year to keep our rooms and public areas looking as great as they do, and we will thank them for everything they do.

Even though they work quietly, far from the limelight, the job our Housekeepers do is magnificent. They perform their duties flawlessly 24/7/365 – all day, every day of the week, throughout the year, even on Christmas Day.

Regular readers of Saturday Briefing are probably aware that I have a special place in my heart for our Housekeeping staff. I am sure this has something to do with the fact that I started my hotel career 62 years ago folding towels in the Housekeeping department of our company’s first property, the five-story Islander Hotel located at 351 Seaside Avenue, a block off Kalakaua Avenue in the heart of Waikiki.

The Housekeeping department of the Islander was not much to talk about at that time. There was just a small storage area behind the main building. Storage racks with linen and towels lined three sides of the room. A 4-foot by 8-foot sheet of plywood mounted on “saw horses” in the center was used as a table to fold the towels that had been washed in a row of residential-quality Kenmore washing machines purchased from a Sears Roebuck department store.

That experience left a lasting impression on me.

Readers may also recall that during Housekeepers Week, I often seek a metaphor for the vital role that Housekeepers play in the success of our hotels. This year, I believe the phrase “World Champions” really captures the spirit of our Housekeepers.

In my mind, a world champion is a person whose skills and dedication far exceed the norm.

Some world champions are just fictional characters who appear in novels, movies and, today, in Internet games. Fortunately, there are also many real-life world champions who accomplish extraordinary feats in a wide range of pursuits during their time on earth. These are the people who improve the quality of life on our planet year after year.

Last week, in Saturday Briefing, I wrote about the legendary Duke Kahanamoku. Hawaii was a remote speck of real estate in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean in those days, yet Duke was able to develop and improve his natural athletic skills to the point that he suddenly achieved international fame at the Stockholm Olympics in 1912 by breaking the Olympic 100-meter freestyle record.

In 1920, he proved his achievement was no fluke, when he swam in the Antwerp Olympics and set a world record in the same event.

In all, he won three Olympic gold and two silver medals.

Later, he became an icon of sportsmanship and “ambassador” of Hawaii, leading a long and active life as a proud example of the best in character, honesty, compassion, dedication, integrity, personal sacrifice, and, when appropriate, humor.

In my mind, those admirable qualities also are found in the members of the Outrigger and OHANA Housekeeping teams and that is why I feel that, like Duke Kahanamoku, they are also world champions!

Every day our Housekeepers demonstrate:

- A strong work ethic
- Top skills
- A sense of responsibility
- A willingness to help others
- Honesty and integrity
- A sense of humor

Duke would not have been a great champion without a combination of a strong work ethic, exceptional skills, and a sense of responsibility. Our World Champion Housekeepers have the same qualities.

Every morning they go forth to tackle up to 16 rooms or the equivalent in public areas. By the end of the day, everything has to be perfect and ready for guests arriving from all parts of the world. There are thousands of details that need attention. Only people with a strong work ethic and top skills can do this job with consistently high performance day after day, month after month, and year after year.
Our Housekeepers also have a great sense of personal responsibility for their jobs, their company, and fellow workers. Like Duke and other top athletes, dedicated scientists, or brilliant authors, they often work alone, focused only on the job at hand. Housekeepers take full charge of their assigned guest rooms or public areas. They are proud of what they do and do not need a supervisor looking over their shoulder to make sure they do it right.

Duke’s life was full of examples of helping others achieve their goals. Our Housekeepers are known for similar traits. They often make personal sacrifices by working odd hours and irregular shifts. They are also willing to tackle the really tough jobs that no one else wants to do. Many of these jobs cannot be postponed to another day.

Think how guests would react if we told them, “We’ll make up your room tomorrow and touch up the lobby later this week!”

Along that line, our Housekeepers, like Duke, are compassionate and show it in many ways. They help others in our community through volunteer service and fundraising. Every year, they enthusiastically turn out in large numbers for the annual Visitor Industry Charity Walk.

Duke was known for his honesty and integrity, and our Housekeepers are legendary in this area too. Every day, our guests leave valuables and personal effects in the care of our Housekeepers. In my more than six decades in the hospitality business, I have hardly ever seen that trust violated.

Finally, if you examine the details of Duke’s life, you will discover a great deal of subtle humor that helped him through the most critical of times.

For example, in 1961, when Duke was a participant in the Hawaii International Billfish Tournament off the Kona Coast of the Big Island, he hooked a spectacular 441-pound Pacific blue marlin. After fighting the fish for some time under the broiling August sun from the open deck of the Nadu-K, he had almost brought it to gaff when his rod broke, disqualifying the catch under tournament rules. Some people would have pitched a fit, cursed the deckhands, berated the equipment manufacturer, and everyone else who came to mind. However, being the gentleman that he was, Duke calmly remarked, “If you can’t break the record, break the rod.” (Sports Illustrated, September 4, 1961)

Likewise, our Housekeepers know that humor is an important quality to keep at the ready. In the hotel business, things often do not go as planned. Guests check out late. Groups arrive early. The plumbing clogs up. Fresh linen from the laundry fails to arrive on time – or perhaps not at all. When this happens, our World Champions usually approach the situation with a great deal of patience sprinkled with lots of humor.

So, are our Housekeepers World Champions? Absolutely!

To accomplish everything they do, they must turn in Olympic-quality performances day after day. The only difference between them and world champions in sports, business, politics, and the arts is that our Housekeepers do not get their stories, photos, and achievements reported on the nightly TV news, on the front page of the Honolulu Advertiser, or in an Internet “tweet.”

However, once a year, we do pause for National Housekeepers Week to recognize what great people they are and everything they do for our company, their fellow workers, and our guests.

So, to all of our Housekeepers … Domu Arigato, Fa‘afetai, Kamahamhina, Mahalo, Mauruuru, Salamat, Si Yu’us Ma’ase, Thank You, Tika Hoki, Vinaka Vakelevu, Xie Xie! Have a great week! You’ve truly earned our respect!