

Swimming through the Years

Over the past year or two, OCC members have seen increasing attention given to ocean swimming, a popular pastime of Old Hawaii. So it is interesting to remind ourselves of Hawaii's swimming history.

Half a century ago, give or take a few years, Hawaii was rightly called the "Swimming Capital of the World" -- though Australians may have disputed that title. Duke Kahanamoku, Mariechen Wehselau (Jackson) and other local natatorial greats had won thrilling victories and set new records at Olympic Games in Europe, Australia and the United States. Their names were almost as much "household words" as are the names of modern baseball, football and golf professionals. And....our big swimming meets in Hawaii were held in ocean waters where it all began.

Here in Honolulu, the berthing slip alongside the old Alakea Street Pier was the site of many big swimming meets during the World War I era. The location was almost ideal, with 50- and even 100-yard straightaways possible, and plenty of room on the pier for spectator bleachers and the Royal Hawaiian Band. Possibly the crowds that turned out for those meets would not have impressed a modern-day sports promoter, but they were good.

In the late twenties and thirties the picture changed. Swimming had become at least a minor sport at many high schools, colleges and universities and the then new Olympic-size swimming pools became the favored locations for swimming meets. For a time, the War Memorial Natatorium, now threatened with demolition, was popular with fans and swimmers alike. Only the Outrigger Canoe Club continued ocean swimming as an intra-club sport with annual race meets over a course similar to the one laid out for the Rough Water Swim.

Now, with an active Swimming Committee, our Club appears to be on the way to restoring ocean swimming to its rightful place as a major Club sport.