

With all of the great people of history having their foibles put in the newspaper so that we can have no confidence in them or their activities, some still remain clean. I give you Duke Kahanamoku.

If you say, “Who?” that is understandable, but you really should know about him because he was very, very special. He is a real hero to the Hawaiian people, and he is someone that everyone can look up to. He died in 1968 so he is a modern hero.

A legendary Hawaiian Beachboy, and the best surfer of his time – and possibly ever – Duke was unknown outside of Hawaii. That is, until he entered his first organized swimming competition, the first AAU swimming and diving championship, and smashed the 100 meter world record by five full seconds! He broke two more world records in the same meet – at the age of 21.

Suddenly, the world of sport knew his name. The newspapers in the early 1900s didn’t just perk up about his swimming, they suddenly discovered this was a major athlete and, more importantly, a great personality.

Tall and handsome, built like a Greek god, quiet and unassuming – as Cary Grant was soon to copy – Duke was already a legend with his 125-pound, 16-foot redwood surfboard, both at the pipeline on North Oahu, and on the beaches of Waikiki. His swimming put him on the world scene as a major competitor, but the sport of surfing never gave him up. Duke and just a few of his friends kept the dying sport of surfing alive when it was virtually unknown in the early 1900s. Duke reportedly had the longest ride in surfing history, more than a mile, and he “owned” the Pipeline in the old days. Surfer Magazine named Duke “The Surfer of the Century.”

This tall, tan, quiet and unassuming Hawaiian competed in both the 1912 and 1920 Olympics, winning many gold medals in swimming in world record time – and the New York press took him to its own.

But Duke was not to quietly go back to Hawaiian obscurity...despite his quiet manner. He worked in 30 movies. Then, surfing on the California Coast with his friends, he saw a large boat capsize in the high surf. Twenty-three people drowned, but Duke personally saved 17 others. Using his huge surfboard and his prodigious swimming ability, Duke made three trips through the high surf to save those 17 survivors.

Returning to his homeland, he was elected the Sheriff of Honolulu, and when the tourist ships were feeding the Hawaiian economy, he became the unofficial “greeter” for the famous Matson Lines ships that came calling. When Hawaii became a state in 1956, he was named as the Official Greeter. He was Hawaii’s most famous son.

Duke was a businessman as well. As the Aloha shirt, first made from Kimono cloth by Japanese-Hawaiians in the mid 30s, became the visual symbol of Hawaii, not just his name but his ideas were used by Hawaiian shirt manufacturers. It was Duke who

suggested cutting off the tails of the existing Aloha shirts because they were often worn outside the trousers. His line of Aloha shirts was carried by Sears, among other retailers.

As the most famous Hawaiian, and as a handsome and gracious person, Duke was a constant guest on radio (particularly Arthur Godfrey) and early TV programs – having his own “This is Your Life” episode featuring some of the people whose life he saved.

When Duke died in 1968, his ashes were scattered on the waves of First Break on Waikiki by Beachboys on surfboards. A fitting end for a man about whom no known person ever spoke a bad word.

In an age when everyone really needs untarnished heroes, the Duke fills the bill. He was larger than life.