Controversy in Stockholm: Duke Kahanamoku and the Olympics

By David Davis

Water was his métier: Duke Paoa Kahanamoku, who became the fastest swimmer in the world and made surf-boarding popular.

Duke Paoa Kahanamoku is revered in Hawaii, where he was born in 1890, and with good reason. His swimming career is legend: he won three gold and two silver medals at three successive Olympic Games (1912, 1920, 1924); his head-to-head rivalry with Johnny Weissmuller helped transform competitive swimming into an important part of the Olympic programme. He was arguably the first superstar athlete from the Pacific Rim. His contributions to the development of modern surfing (which may yet become an Olympic sport) are unarguably wide-reaching.

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By all accounts, Kahanamoku was a gracious man who took pains to avoid controversy, at least publicly. He praised opponents and their efforts and, according to several sources, slowed down during races so that he would not humiliate the other competitors. Even when he was upset with someone, he tended to keep his thoughts to himself.

"We used to say, '*Mahape a ale wala'au*,' and," said Sargent Kahanamoku, one of Duke's younger brothers and "that means 'Don't talk – keep it in your heart.' And that's what [Duke] did."[1]

And yet, his Olympic career, which spanned from 1912 to 1932, was filled with controversy. For instance, there are conflicting reports about whether he did – or did not – compete for the United States water polo team in Los Angeles in 1932 when he was almost 42 years old. Although several historians have asserted that he was a member of the team, those who played on the team deny that it happened.

This article focuses solely on the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, the first of Kahanamoku's storied career where, remarkably, controversy found him before, during, and after the competition.

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The Duke's First Controversy

In 1910, around the time Duke turned 20, he was an unlikely candidate for Olympic glory. He was then a high-school dropout who enjoyed surfing and other water sports in and around his childhood home of Waikiki. The organisation that regulated Olympic sports in the United States, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) under the leadership of James Sullivan, did not yet extend to Hawaii, which had become an American territory in 1900. *Hui Nalu*

One year later, however, the situation had changed. The local chapter decided to hold the first ever AAU-sanctioned event held in Hawaii: a swim meet. Kahanamoku's surf club – *Hui Nalu* or "club of the waves" – was one of the teams that were registered to participate in the event.

On 11th August 1911, twelve days shy of his 21st birthday, Kahanamoku's life changed forever. He won the 220-yard event by 30 yards and was part of the victorious 300-yard, six-man relay team that cemented the points competition for *Hui Nalu*.

In between those races, in two sprints contested in the warm waters of Honolulu harbour, Kahanamoku swam to history. His winning time of 55.4 seconds in the 100-yard event was 4.6 seconds faster than Charles Daniels' American record of one minute flat.

Then, in the 50-yarder, Kahanamoku was the third man to hit the water before overtaking the leaders to win by five yards. His time of 24.2 seconds was faster than the American mark, also held by Daniels, by 1.6 seconds.

All of Hawaii was jubilant about its local hero, but two months later that joy turned to consternation after Kahanamoku's coach, Bill Rawlins, had sent Duke's times to AAU officials in New York City. Then a lengthy response arrived in the form of a letter from Otto Wahle, James Sullivan's chief aquatics advisor and the official record-keeper for swimming.

In the response, Wahle was bluntly suspicious about records set far from AAU oversight. A renowned swimmer in his own right, Wahle had taken second in the 200-metre obstacle course at the 1900 Olympics and third in the 440-yards freestyle in 1904. At that time he competed for his native Austria. After he immigrated to the United States, the prestigious New York Athletic Club hired him. Together with Italian-born Louis de Breda Handley, he guided the NYAC to national championships in swimming and water polo, helped develop the "American crawl" stroke, and coached superstar Charles Daniels, who, coincidentally, held the very records that Duke had now purportedly smashed. Wahle couldn't fathom Kahanamoku breaking Daniels' 50-yard record by nearly two seconds or his busting the 100-yard mark by almost five seconds.

Wahle went on to chastise Hawaiian officials about every aspect of the process, beginning with the timekeeping.

"The fact that four watches, two of which are handled by the same person, should on two occasions agree absolutely is a very rare, almost unusual occurrence," Wahle wrote, adding: "Some information regarding the anchoring of the floats should have been given. If they were not well secured they may have floated nearer to each other with the tide and a course which measured 100 yards may have been considerably shorter an hour or two later."[2]

He presumed to lecture Hawaiians about the effect of the tides in Honolulu harbour – a place he had never visited. "The information that the swimmers had the tide against them is based on the reasoning that the tide was coming in whereas the swimmers swam from shore towards the open [water]," he asserted. "No

Otto Wahle (1879-1963) was adviser to the US Olympic swimming team in 1912. He came from Vienna and took part in Paris in 1900, where he finished second over 1000 m freestyle and in obstacle swimming. In 1901 he immigrated to New York. He joined New York AC and competed in 1904 at the St. Louis Games, at which he won bronze over 440 yards freestyle.

Duke Kahanamoku, 1.90 m tall and weighing 86 kg. In Stockholm's Djurgårdsbrunnviken swimming was done in a 100 m pool. The Hawaiian had set his first world record a year before over 100 yards in the salt water of Honolulu harbour.

Photos: Volker Kluge Archive

The US swimming team in 1912 on board the S.S. Finland during the crossing. Standing third from left: American Commissoner to the Olympic Games, James E. Sullivan. Next to him Otto Wahle, second from right Duke Kahanamoku, far right Harry Hebner, who won the 100 m backstroke in Stockholm.

greater mistake could be made than to accept this supposition as a general rule. In a bay with inlets and channels the current runs in irregular directions."[3]

The most incriminating evidence, according to Wahle, was Duke's anonymity. "The fact that an absolutely unknown swimmer should swim 100 yards considerably faster than the world's champion is still more rare or to be correct it is unheard of," he noted. "If his 55 2/5 sec. were accepted and he should afterwards compete in the United States or Europe and be beaten by swimmers whose best times are considerably slower, the correctness of his 55 2/5 sec. would be strongly questioned as well as the good faith of the A.A.U."[4]

Wahle declined to accept Kahanamoku's times. But he also dangled hope, intimating that the AAU would validate the records were Duke to travel to the mainland and race against the nation's best swimmers. "If Kahanamoku really can do 100 yards straightaway or even in a bath [indoor pool] in 55 2/5 sec. he is a man whom the A.A.U. needs to replace Daniels in the Olympic Games, 1912."[5]

Racism

The blabber about tides and floats masked overtones of racism. Kahanamoku was controversial because he looked different. He was a dark-skinned man who represented the athletic hopes and dreams of a predominantly white nation, most of whom could not locate Hawaii on a map. The number of non-white athletes who were allowed to compete at the elite level was minimal; at the time, African-American athletes were barred from playing Major League Baseball.

Although Sullivan banned women swimmers from the 1912 US Olympic team, he was relatively progressive in terms of race. The team that sailed from New York to Stockholm on the *Finland* featured one African-American sprinter, Howard Drew, and three Native American Indians, Jim Thorpe, Lewis Tewanima and Andrew Sockalexis.

This attitude was brought home to Kahanamoku after he journeyed to the mainland in early 1912. His presence at private, all-white athletic clubs broke ground in race matters. He was accepted at these clubs because of his ability and his gracious nature, but that did not shield him from hurtful and unseemly comments. He was repeatedly mistaken for an American Indian or an African-American. He was refused service at one restaurant in Pittsburgh because of his skin colour and reportedly on other occasions.[6]

Kahanamoku never publicly complained about the demeaning treatment he encountered. He realized early on that the best possible retort was to win in the pool.

And win he did.

He proved himself to Wahle, Sullivan, and other naysayers with victories at pools in numerous cities along the East Coast. He emerged as America's best sprinter and was named to the 1912 US Olympic team in the 100-metre freestyle and the 4x200-metre freestyle relay events.

The Duke Comes Up Missing

Thanks to Otto Wahle and James Sullivan, controversy found Kahanamoku once he arrived in Stockholm. Local organisers there had scouted several bodies of water for the swimming events before selecting a bay in central Stockholm called Djurgårdsbrunnsviken, at the foot of the hill called Laboratoriebacken. They built a temporary facility along a 100-metre straightaway, framed by pontoon bridges some 20 metres apart that offered decent protection against the currents from Nybroviken bay.[7]

The American freestyle relay, which lost to Australasia (from left): Kenneth Huszag, Duke Kahanamoku, Harry Hebner, and Perry McGillivray.

Kahanamoku's first event was his best: the 100-metre freestyle. His main competition was expected to come from Australians Cecil Healy and Bill Longworth and Germany's Kurt Bretting. The latter had recently set a world's record of 1:02.4.

The first round involved eight heats. In the fourth heat, Chicago's Perry McGillivray established a new Olympic record of 1:04.8. Kahanamoku swam in the next heat and immediately asserted himself. His time of 1:02.6 bettered the opposition by more than two seconds and shattered McGillivray's mark.

The next afternoon, in the quarterfinals, Duke won his heat in a restrained 1:03.8. Two other American swimmers, McGillivray and Ken Huszagh, also qualified for the semi-final round.

Kahanamoku's fast times and exotic heritage made him "the talk of the town not only for what he does," according to the *New York Times*, "but for the easy way in which he does it. He has caught the popular fancy."[8] The president of the British Life-Saving organisation promised Duke a splendid gold cup if he were to break the 60-second barrier for the 100 metres.

Suddenly disaster befell Kahanamoku and his American teammates. The three had repaired to the *Finland* to rest, having been told that the semi-finals were scheduled for the next day. They were misinformed. The actual schedule, printed on both a preliminary version given to the US contingent on the ship as well as the daily program at the venue in Stockholm, stated that the semi-finals were to be held on the same day as the quarterfinals – Sunday, 7th July – at 8 p.m.

The trio should have been alerted to return to the swim stadium for the semi-finals. They were not. In their absence, Healy, Germany's Walter Ramme, and Longworth finished one, two, three in the first semi-final heat, while Bretting paced himself to victory in the second semi-final.

Kahanamoku, McGillivray and Huszagh faced immediate disqualification for their non-appearance. Coach Wahle protested that the mishap was due to a "misunderstanding" over the programme times. Sullivan stated the problem was due to "ignorance of the Swedish language."[9]

These were, frankly, weak excuses, and Olympic and FINA officials met to decide the fate of the Americans. It appeared that their chances for the gold medal had vanished – that is, until the spirit of Olympism prevailed. None other than Cecil Healy of Australia, himself a gold-medal contender, argued that disqualifying the three Americans for a scheduling snafu did not demonstrate good sportsmanship. He gallantly insisted that the trio be given another chance.

Kahanamoku, McGillivray and Huszagh waited in limbo as the swim jury, along with Australian and German representatives, debated. Finally, a compromise was reached. An extra heat was scheduled for the three Americans as well as Italy's Mario Massa, who had also missed his heat. To qualify for the finals, they would have to beat the time of the third-place finisher from the first semi-final (Longworth in 1:06.2). If all four managed to beat the time, only the fastest two would advance.

The King above, the Duke below: crowning of an Olympic champion by Gustaf V.

On 9th July, the athletes returned to the swim stadium. Kahanamoku swam as if he did not want to waste this second chance. He clocked a personal best of 1:02.4 to tie Bretting's world's mark. Huszagh nipped McGillivray to qualify for the finals.

The field for the 100-metres freestyle finals was now set: Kahanamoku, Huszagh, Bretting, Healy, and Ramme. An ear infection forced Longworth to the sidelines.

Kahanamoku had escaped disqualification, but he had not escaped controversy. The following evening, under a northern sky that was summertime bright, the stands along the 100-metre straightaway were packed, with King Gustaf, Queen Victoria, the Crown

The second Olympic victory in 1920 in Antwerp. Adjacent: the changing of the guard followed on 9th July 1922, when Johnny Weissmuller broke Kahanamoku's world record over 100 m freestyle and was the first to go under a minute with 58.6 seconds.

Prince, and the Crown Princess seated in the Royal box, joined by Lord Desborough, the mastermind behind the successful 1908 London Olympics.

Only ... Duke was missing. Again.

The swimmers were told to get ready for the race, but Kahanamoku was nowhere to be found. They called his name: no response. Desperate teammates scrambled to search for him. Finally, breaststroker Michael "Turk" McDermott found Kahanamoku "stretched out under the bleachers sound asleep. We hustled him to the starting line just in time for the race."[10]

Kahanamoku stripped off his bathrobe and hurried to the platform. He stood at the center of the pool, flanked by McGillivray, Bretting, Healy, and Ramme.

A nervous Bretting caused a false start. Kahanamoku stood motionless, gathering himself. At the pistol's retort, the field set off cleanly. Duke dove deep and surfaced, grabbing the early lead over Huszagh and the two Germans, with Healy trailing the pack. He surged ahead at the halfway mark, his closest rival ten feet behind him. He seemed to let up after that and cleaved leisurely through the water in complete control. He won by two metres in 1:03.4. A late surge brought Healy to second with Huszagh to third.

Healy and Kahanamoku, dripping wet, shook hands. The Australian congratulated the Hawaiian on the victory, the Hawaiian thanked the Australian for his gentlemanly conduct. Officials and teammates grabbed Duke and wrapped a blanket around him and then, with the crowd roaring its approval, they used the blanket to toss him in the air three times.

King Gustaf indicated that he wanted to meet the victor. Kahanamoku was escorted to the Royal box. The monarch congratulated "Duke de Crawlstroke" and the two men shook hands. He received yet another ovation as he exited to the dressing room with the other competitors patting him on the back.

Ten days after his Olympic victory in Stockholm, Kahanamoku competed in Hamburg. The high point was the duel with Kurt Bretting (left in the photo), who on 6th April 1912 had beaten Charles Daniels' world record with 1:02.4 min, but in Stockholm was only fourth. Kahanamoku beat the German's best time in Hamburg by eight tenths of a second. Right: R. Max Ritter (1886–1974), 1908 co-founder of the International Swimming Federation (FINA) and President from 1960 to 1964.

Waikiki Beach boys: Young Hawaiians called their surfboards after their idols "Duke" and "Pua" (at the 1920 Olympic Games Pua Kealoha was second to Kanahanoku over 100 m freestyle). Kahanamoku used a traditional surfboard from the wood of a koa tree. His board, which he called "papa nui", was 4.90 m long and weighed 52 kg.

The Specter of Professionalism

After the excitement of Stockholm, Kahanamoku's services were in high demand. He was invited to swim in Moscow, Algiers, and Sydney. Germany's swim association wanted revenge after the 100-metre finals, so Kahanamoku journeyed to Hamburg and, over a straightaway course, out-dueled Bretting again. In the process, he lowered the world's record to 1:01.6.

Kahanamoku returned home a celebrity. Everyone in Hawaii wanted to celebrate "Our Duke." Local newspapers editorialized that he was "a credit to his race." Territory leaders hastened to set up a fund to reward him, urging Hawaiians to donate money for the cause. Hand-painted postcards of him were printed and sold for ten cents apiece, with the proceeds added to the collection. The fund soon topped $2500.

In that era, there were rules in place that barred amateur athletes like Kahanamoku from earning money from their sports. This issue generated headlines in January of 1913, after it was discovered that Duke's Olympic teammate from Stockholm, Jim Thorpe, received money for playing professional baseball in the minor leagues during the summers of 1910 and 1911. Once the facts were verified, James Sullivan voided Thorpe's records and ordered his trophies and medals to be surrendered and sent to Sweden.

Thorpe's humiliation did not deter Hawaii's citizens from using the money they had raised to reward Kahanamoku. Some supporters wanted to use the funds to pay for his college education. But the talk in Honolulu was that Kahanamoku had been promised a house and property in Waikiki. If that promise were kept, Duke presumably would be declared a professional and forced to leave the amateur ranks.

There was precedent for this: Canada's Bill Sherring, the winner of the marathon at the 1906 Games in Athens, was given several thousand dollars. Sherring thus relinquished his amateur status.

Hawaii's sport officials and tourism boosters wanted Kahanamoku to remain an amateur, for reasons both selfish and altruistic. Kahanamoku was valuable to them "as a promotion asset,"[11] because his prowess in the pool and his endearing personality helped to publicize the Islands at swim meets and appearances around the world. They also reasoned that, with Duke's inexperience in business matters, turning pro might not yield the lasting fortune that fast-talking promoters were whispering about in his ear.

The delay made Kahanamoku "peeved" and "good and mad," according to published reports, as he was getting "nothing but the small bits doled out by tourists for his service as a steersman in the canoes on the beach." A plaintive Duke asked one reporter, "Is it best to be an amateur without a house or would it be better to turn professional and have at least a house of my own?"[12]

On 14th March 1913, a group of prominent civic leaders that included Honolulu Mayor Joseph J. Fern and US

District Attorney of Hawaii A.L.C. Atkinson convened at the office of attorney Bill Rawlins, Duke's chief advisor and the president of Hui Nalu. The purpose of the meeting of the Duke Kahanamoku Fund Committee was to make arrangements "for the purchase of a suitable home at Waikiki [for Duke] and to see that the property was put in proper shape."[13]

The proposed house belonged to attorney William R. Castle, a *kamaaina* (longtime resident) whose family had amassed considerable wealth and power in the Territory. (His son, Alfred, was a member of the Fund Committee.) The location was near where Kahanamoku grew up, on the southeasterly side of Ala Moana Street, near the corner of Kalia Road, next to land owned by the Paoa family. Castle fixed the price at $1800. In May, Castle granted the 6500-square foot property not to Kahanamoku himself, but to the Henry Waterhouse Trust Company. The purpose for setting up the trust arrangement was two-fold. The Fund Committee wanted to make it impossible for Kahanamoku to sell the property for a quick buck. The primary factor, it was later revealed, was to preserve his "status as an amateur athlete to the end that he would not, by reason of acceptance of the gift, be deemed a professional athlete for purposes of national and international athletic competition."[14]

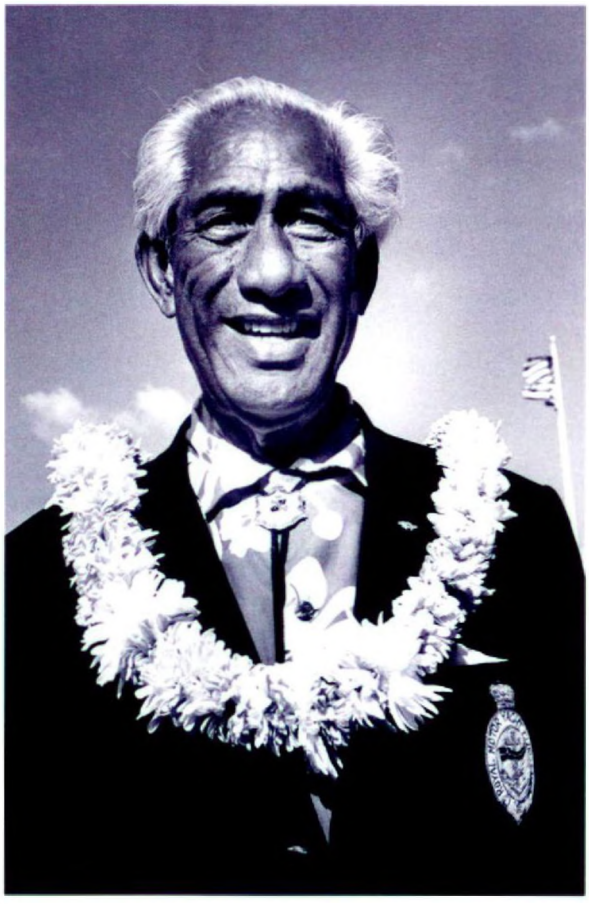
This contrivance was openly discussed. The money raised by the contributions, the *Star-Bulletin* newspaper noted, was "a suitable reward for Kahanamoku in representing Hawaii at the Olympic Games last year and his work in winning the World's Championship." The newspaper reported that the committee had "finally gained the consent of the champion and his father to accept the house which has been chosen."[15]

"The people of the islands have been very generous to me," Kahanamoku himself told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1913. "They gave me a handsome house when I got back from Stockholm."[16]

It is impossible to criticize Duke over this matter; he was simply looking after himself and his family's needs as best he could. But the specter of professionalism – perhaps the most controversial issue among elite amateur athletes of that era – would linger for the remainder of Kahanamoku's competitive swimming career, a span of nearly 20 years.

The Finest Chew

Knowingly or not, Duke Kahanamoku broke the sacred amateur rules on numerous occasions. It is likely that he profited from his surfing appearances in Atlantic City in New Jersey in the summer of 1912, immediately after his triumphant Olympic showing in Stockholm, with payments supplied by either the promoters connected with the Million Dollar Pier in Atlantic City or from the



Kahanamoku once again won Olympic silver behind Weissmuller in 1924. He began an acting career in 1925. His first role was in the filming of the Jack London novella *Adventure*. In 1932 (photo) he was again part of the US Olympic team – in what function is unknown even today.

Right: Hawaii's Official Ambassador of Aloha. From 1934 to 1959 he was Sheriff of Honolulu. He was re-elected 13 times.

Hawaii Promotion Committee. And in the same year that he was deeded the property in Waikiki he took part in one of the earliest examples of sports marketing efforts by endorsing chewing tobacco – even though he neither smoked nor chewed the stuff.

A trading card featuring Kahanamoku was inserted into packages of Pan Handle Scrap tobacco – "The Finest Chew That Has Ever Been Offered" – in a 50-card series entitled "World's Champion Athlete." It featured such Olympians as Mel Sheppard, Lewis Tewanima, Abel Kiviat, and Avery Brundage, Jim Thorpe's erstwhile rival in the decathlon in Stockholm and, later, head of the International Olympic Committee.

Kahanamoku was one of two swimmers pictured in the series. He was photographed in a white bathing suit, his arms clasped behind him. The text on the back reads in part: "Duke Kahanamoku ... is a Hawaiian, and like all his countrymen, has been used to the water almost from his very birth. Caucasians have little chance against the Hawaiians."

It is not known how much money, if any, Duke Kahanamoku received for this advertising plug.

In this case, he courted controversy by openly flouting the restrictive rules of amateurism. And yet, thanks to savvy benefactors in Hawaii who apparently did not report the real-estate deal to the national authorities, Kahanamoku was able to avoid the same fall from grace that beset Jim Thorpe. He was able to keep his amateur standing and, after the cancellation of the 1916 Olympics due to the First World War, return to action in Antwerp in 1920 and Paris in 1924.

Naturally, controversy found Kahanamoku in 1920 and 1924 and even 1932.

But that's a subject for another essay. ■

Aloha! In spite of all the legends Kahanamoku was not of aristocratic origin. His father, a policeman, had the forename "Duke". As far as his image was concerned, Kahanamoku decorated his writing paper with several crowns to project a regal image. Why not? He was after all the "King of Swimming".

Illustration: Volker Kluge Archive

1 Sargent Kahanamoku, *Outrigger Canoe Club Oral Histories*, 18-7.
2 *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* newspaper, 10th November 1911.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Joe Brennan, *Duke of Hawaii*, pp. 40-41.
7 Details about the swimming competition in Stockholm: Published interviews with Duke Kahanamoku; *The Official Report of the Olympic Games of Stockholm 1912*; *What Happened at Stockholm* by James Sullivan, Outing, October 1912; *Olympic Swimming* by Otto Wahle, from *The Olympic Games Stockholm 1912* (Spalding's); *The 1912 Olympic Games*, by Bill Mallon and Ture Widlund; newspaper clippings at LA84 Foundation; and various newspaper and magazine reports.
8 *New York Times*, 8th July 1912.
9 *The Olympic Games Stockholm 1912*, p. 161; *Outing Magazine*, October 1912, p. 22.
10 *Honolulu Advertiser*, 8th April 1958.
11 *Maui News*, 30th November 1912.
12 Ibid and *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 17th June 1913.
13 *Meeting of the Duke Kahanamoku Fund Committee*, minutes kept at the University of Hawaii, Manoa.
14 Information about the trust and the home from contemporary newspaper articles and awsuit filed in Circuit Court in 1964 by Duke Kahanamoku.
15 *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 8th March 1913.
16 *Los Angeles Times*, 15th October 1913.