

TFH E07: Memoir of a Hilo Waterman: The Amazing Life of Hawaii Swimmer, Author & Educator Richard “Sonny” Tanabe

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SPEAKERS

Richard Sonny Tanabe, Phoebe Neel, Tony Vega

Tony Vega 00:01

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TFH intro 00:41

Transmissions from Hawaii!

Tony Vega 00:54

Producer Tony Vega here, and as some of you may be aware, this podcast is essentially a spin off of Wasabi Magazine. So Wasabi is a magazine published in Hawaii, we started publishing in 2018, and it ran until 2020 when we put it on indefinite hold due to the pandemic. So after we did that, we started looking at other things we could do and that eventually led to the creation of this podcast. So we had already worked on a whole lot of stories about Hawaii and people here for the magazine, and so I couldn't help but think about how I could adapt some of these into this new audio format. So I looked around a bit, and eventually settled on the story that you're going to hear today. So today you're gonna hear some audio clips from an interview that we did in 2018 and in these clips, you're also going to hear the voice of one of our writers - her name is Phoebe Neel. She ended up writing an article that ran in the February/March 2019 issue of Wasabi based on the interview that you're going to hear clips from.

Now, I won't say anything else because.. I don't want to spoil the story. So here it is, memoir of a Hilo Waterman.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 02:11

I got to tell you a little story. When I was a kid, I was fascinated with water. Hilo rained all the time, we had beautiful sunny days. When I was a little youngster I used to put out, Japanese call tarai, it was an iron tub, I'd pull it out of the garage and take it out into the front yard where we have a dip and get the garden hose, fill it up. I was a nudist from the time I was a child. And I was black. I was dark, really, really dark.

Tony Vega 02:47

That's Richard Tanabe Jr, better known as Sonny. Born in 1934, Sonny is a former Olympic swimmer, educator and author from the Big Island.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 02:59

But anyway, someone – parents' friends – were looking for Tanabe, Dick Tanabe's house. And so, our neighbor down the street, this guy was mowing his lawn, this guy's driving, he's looking around, he says - stops by - says to this guy "Hey! Where's Dick Tanabe's house over here?" He said "Oh, just go down the street, it's on right hand side." He said just what do you call "G down the next block. You see a dark little kid in the water, in the pan, that's the house.!" That's the kind of reputation I got.

Tony Vega 03:44

Like many other kids at the time, Sonny spent his childhood playing in the water, fishing and running around barefoot. However, the start of World War II would bring with it difficult times, especially for those of Japanese ancestry like Sonny; no longer was Sonny able to go fishing with his uncle or swimming with his friends. Nevertheless, Sonny and his friends found ways to still enjoy themselves, even during these trying times.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 04:14

We had Martial Law and black outs, so.. they had military marines patrolling our streets. And well, you know, with rifles and everything. And I remember when we're kids, we used to like to play especially in the summertime when the day was long and hot the kids used to play and the military used to march down the streets but what we would do is wait until the guy passed us and we'd cross the street over to a friend's house and play in the yard, talk story. And they, I think the marines knew that we were doing that but they let us do it. Yeah. And all the windows were either painted black, black out. We had to have curtains. They had wardens come around – civil defense wardens – come around to check for lights, anything like that.

Tony Vega 05:20

It wasn't until after the end of the war when Sonny would enter into the world of competitive swimming, basically by accident. Even though he was a self-described waterbug, Sonny was never particularly interested in swimming competitively. But in the summer of 1949, when Sonny and his friends were getting together as part of a summer league to play sports, one of Sonny's friends proposed the idea to him.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 05:44

All the kids around the neighborhood all gathered together and we had different activities playing different kind of ball games with different groups and so forth. And the whole summer we met there during the day played. At the end of the summer in August they said "We're going to have a swimming meet. Would anyone like to come out for to try and go in the swim meet?" Nobody wanted to do that so they were all interested more softball, baseball type of game. And so one guy told me, he said "Sonny, let's go do that. Let's go swim."

Tony Vega 06:29

Though hesitant, Sonny agreed to participate in two events in his first swim meet, and much to his own surprise, he won both.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 06:37

I swam in this meet. I swam the 50 backstroke and 50 odd freestyle. I was really fortunate - I won both events against swimmers that were swimming at the club. So immediately, the swimming coach Sparky Kawamoto asked me to come up. I said, I'm not a swimmer, I said, I don't like swimming, I like basketball, you know baseball, that kind of thing, I said I don't wanna swim.

Tony Vega 07:08

Even after the unexpected victories, though Sonny wasn't fully convinced that swimming was for him. But Richard Tanabe Sr, Sonny's dad, seemed to be of a different perspective, because he proposed a deal to Sonny, and it was that deal that would end up changing Sonny's mind.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 07:24

My dad said "You go out for swimming for three months. End of the year, if you don't like swimming, you can quit, play other sports." I said "Ok, good." Then I won't have anybody on my back so I did that and in the process I really enjoyed it

Tony Vega 07:47

While attending Hilo High School, Sonny was selected for the prestigious National Interscholastic All American team, and it wasn't long before he was competing at the highest levels alongside top class swimmers from Hawaii, such as Ford Konno, Yoshi Oyakawa and Bill Woolsey. When it came time for college, Sonny found himself in a pretty good position. His times in the pool had attracted the attention of more than one school, and they were all vying for his attention.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 08:14

I graduated in 1953 and I was I signed my verbally a contract to go to University of Florida.

Tony Vega 08:24

Oh really?!

Richard Sonny Tanabe 08:24

And I went to Indianapolis to swim – nationals – I did real well. I was on the national team and we swam in Bermuda but while I was there the swimming coach from Florida at the nationals grabbed me by the hand, led me all over the place so I wouldn't be able to talk to coaches. It was that

Tony Vega 08:46

So they don't take you somewhere else.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 08:49

And they were all trying to talk to Bill Woolsey and myself.

Tony Vega 08:55

In the end, though, it was the promise of a full scholarship and his desire to attend the same school as fellow Hawaii swimmer and future roommate Bill Woolsey that convinced Sonny to pick Indiana University. There, Sonny would be named to the NCAA All American team from 1955 to 1957. And it was also during this time that Sonny would be selected for the US swim team that would compete in the 1956 Summer Olympics in Melbourne, Australia.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 09:26

During the Olympic Games, I think the biggest thing was that we were representing our country and swimming against the rest of the world.

Tony Vega 09:39

In Melbourne, Sonny swam in the preliminary round of the 4x200 freestyle relay.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 09:47

When I got to Melbourne, we had a swim off and the fastest 4 got on there. And guess who was the fifth person. Me.

Tony Vega 10:01

The US team which included two members from Hawaii, Ford Konno and Bill Woolsey, ended up taking home the silver medal, coming in after Australia. Unfortunately, though, due to rules that have since been changed, Sonny was not awarded a medal for his team's victory.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 10:18

So I swam in the preliminaries in the morning. We swam against Japan in the relay and we qualified and we all got into the finals. But the final event that afternoon or evening, I was out. Because my time was slow.

Phoebe Neel 10:37

How did that feel?

Richard Sonny Tanabe 10:39

Oh it hit me, because, you know, I had my goals pointed for the Olympic Games and I was hoping that there would be 3 Hawaii swimmers on that relay team and I didn't make it on there for the finals. That kinda hurt.

Phoebe Neel 10:58

Did it sour you on swimming a little bit?

Richard Sonny Tanabe 11:01

No, it didn't, it didn't. Well, maybe, I should, I take it back. It did from the standpoint that you know you reach a goal you achieve the goal. It's kind of a letdown after not getting to the finals and I was coming into my senior year at the NC double As and the big 10 and I kinda gave up swimming at that point from the standpoint of I achieved the goal that I was pointing for. My senior year in '57 it was kind of a letdown because I didn't have the drive as I did in the past.

Tony Vega 11:47

After all the time and sacrifice that Sonny had put into swimming, it's understandable that he would be disheartened. He had come so close to taking home a medal, and yet due to a technicality he hadn't. But life went on.

Phoebe Neel 12:05

But then, did you find more meaning then in kind of changing direction and instilling swimming into other people?

Richard Sonny Tanabe 12:14

Yeah, then my direction changed from the standpoint, I was always seeking small goals, short term goals. Once you achieve a goal, move on to the next and so on

Tony Vega 12:28

After graduating from university, Sonny was drafted into the US Army where he served until 1960.

Phoebe Neel 12:35

So what would you say your goal, overarching goal, was after you stopped swimming?

Richard Sonny Tanabe 12:40

After I stopped swimming was, my goal was to get a job. Going, going to the work field. And I wanted to come home, first of all, sowhich I did. And I spent 33 years at Kamehameha Schools.

Tony Vega 13:00

Following his time in the military, Sonny once again dedicated himself to the water. But this time it wasn't as a competitive swimmer. Instead, it was as an educator. It's been more than half a century since then and the list of all that Sonny has accomplished is far too long to go over here.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 13:17

I realized about myself later on I had to do different projects. Do all kinds of things. I just couldn't sit still. You know, it's like if I sit still am I enjoying life?

Tony Vega 13:34

Aside from is more than 30 years as a teacher and coach at Kamehameha Schools, Sonny has also been an American Red Cross water safety instructor, he has taught scuba, he has served as Chairman Emeritus of the island of Hawaii YMCA corporate board. He's also been the President of the Hawaii Swimming Hall of Fame and he's organized spear fishing and diving tournaments, and so much more. Sonny has also had two books published, "Spear fishing on the island of Hawaii," and "The evolution of free diving and history of spear fishing in Hawaii." Not too long ago, Sonny finished his third book. This one is called "Once upon a time: memoir of a Hilo Waterman." It's basically his autobiography, but he doesn't intend to publish it. Instead, he wrote it because he wanted to leave something behind for his family and future generations. He wrote it so that they have something to look back on when they decide they want to learn more about Sonny and the Japanese side of their family. Today, Sonny lives in

Honolulu and he has many more stories to share, so I decided to call him up and have him share a few more with us. You're going to get to hear that conversation after this quick break.

Tony Vega 14:52

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Tony Vega 15:55

As I mentioned before the break, recently I called up Sonny and we had a little chat over the phone. He told me a couple new stories and we talked a little bit about the Waikiki Natatorium War Memorial. Now, in case you're not aware, the Natatorium was opened in 1927 and it served as one of the most important hubs for swimming here in Hawaii for about 50 years. Unfortunately, for now over 40 years, it has not been open to the public and it seems to be in a state of disrepair and it's unknown what exactly will happen there, if it will be able to be reopened at some point in the future. Nevertheless, Sonny tells us a really interesting story that took place at the Natatorium, as well as a few other things.

Tony Vega 16:47

So what about the Natatorium? Like, could you tell me a little bit about that, like where was it, and like, what was it like?

Richard Sonny Tanabe 16:54

Okay, you know, the Natatorium has a great history. It was built in 1927 and it's down by, you know, where it is down by Kaimana Beach, right next door. Okay. That pool had many competitions available to a lot of international, international swimming people that came to Hawaii to compete. And what do you call, that was 100m pool by 40m saltwater pool, and outdoors and when I swam there in 1950s, the crowds were packed - 7,000 people or more, and both sides of the Natatorium. And those were, where in the swimming heydays. And what 1927, when that was completed, Duke Kahanamoku did

the ceremonial plunge into the Natatorium. You know, the 1920 and 1924 Olympic, US Olympic swimming team was primarily made up of Hawaii swimmers, men, men folks. You know, and those were the dominant days of swimming. And then of course, later on the war came and the Nat was close to for civilian use, yeah.

Tony Vega 18:24

So um, yeah, I've heard you talk a little bit about, like some of the, how it was like swimming back then, for example, like with goggles, right, like people didn't used to use goggles back then?! Or I guess you may..

Richard Sonny Tanabe 18:37

Yeah, no, we didn't use goggles. But you know, in 1949, when I first started swimming, in Hilo, at the Naval Air Station pool, after a month or so of eye burns with chemicals in the water, I had my what do you call, wooden goggles that I used for spearfishing. And I said, you know, I think this will be a good thing to use. And so I started using it, and then they, all the people on the swimming team said, "Hey, kid, take off your goggles. Don't be a whip." So I guess I, I felt that I was pressured out of using it and I thought well, maybe the old people know better than I do, so I took it off and, you know, continued swimming that way. But, you know, it took until 19-, oh 70s, I think about -72, -76, well, this guy Wilkie from Great Britain won the 200m breaststroke, and a 100m breaststroke in swimming, and he used the goggles, and after that, that was, it revol-, revolutionized swimming all the way around. And here I had, I could have had a patent for swimming. But of course, you know, Japan, Okinawa, people were using what goggles, they made it. I believe, yeah, I believe that when the Okinawa people came to Hawaii, that they were the ones that really brought out the goggles to local diving. Yeah.

Tony Vega 20:24

So yeah, but did you guys make your own goggles?

Richard Sonny Tanabe 20:28

Well, you know, we could buy it for about a couple of dollars back in those days. But if we didn't have the money, people made 'em out howl wood, because howl wood was blunt, soft and easy to cut with a knife. And, of course, the glass was the hardest part to put in there and at times, when you didn't have the glue, they used, people were using tar from the road, they'd pick up the tar on a hot, sunny day, because it was nice and gooey and pliable. People would put it on the edge, beveled edge and pressed the glass down on top of it, because when you went underwater, the water pressure would push the glass and through the beveled edge with a bar, yeah. That's how they prevented leakage. And they'd use the rubber tires, you know, the old rubber tires, they would cut pieces and tie it with strings to the

what do you call, side of the goggles, too, so that it was pliable and what do you call it, so it could fit the face easier. Yeah.

Tony Vega 21:45

What about, I remember this story that you told about swimming at the Natatorium with, and then there was a barracuda in the pool?!

Richard Sonny Tanabe 21:55

You know, interesting enough, the Barracuda at Natatorium, you know, I never saw that out of all the years I swam there, from 1950s through the -7, -57. But in 1956, after we made the Olympic team in Detroit, Michigan, five Hawaii swimmers came home and plus, we had three more mainland swimmers that swam with Coach Sakamoto. And anyway, what we would do is we would swim there early in the morning from 8 o'clock till about 1 o'clock, and I then would go home for lunch and then take a nap and come back from practice, to the practice from, 4 until dark. And anyway, this went on for several months and you know, you get tired of a routine that goes on. So one day, I decided I'm gonna go up to the diving tower, there's a 10m tower on the Makai side of the Natatorium. So I went up there, a beautiful morning, I'm looking out to sea and looking down at Waikiki and Diamond Head, and then I faced a mauka-facing diamond head actually, and I looked down into the pool, and so I see Bill Woolsey, my teammate, swimming, he dives in water and he starts swimming. And all of a sudden, he's coming towards the middle of the pool, where I'm on top of the 10m tower, I look down and I see this big shadow, 5 ft shadow, you know, swimming, just about 3 feet from his foot, from his kicking. And I watched this, I couldn't believe it. I said I kind of yelled now to Bill, I said, Hey there's a big barracuda swimming, and he just kept swimming because he couldn't hear me. And he swam all the way down to the far end of the pool, the Waikiki end of the pool, and then I saw the barracuda disappear. Then after you pushed off the wall swimming back toward the diamond end of the Natatorium, I see this fish appear on the surface again, following his kick. And that thing didn't look like it was moving its tail, it's just stationary but actually it was moving at the same speed as Bill Woolsey was swimming. And I watched this a couple times and I, I tried to tell the rest of the swimming team members, eight of us were training with Sakamoto, and I even told Coach I said "There is a big barracuda" and nobody believed me. And they, I don't think they wanted to believe me. But anyway, what happens, you know later on, hey Ford, this is Ford Konno, I said, "Ford, you've got to come up and see this." I said, you know, nobody believes me, you've got to come up and so Ford came up and A was the same thing occur, when the guys were swimming the Barracuda was following them, 3 feet, 3 feet in the back. And anyway, which, Ford was, what do you call, tried to tell people, nobody believed him either. So this went on and we figured, oh we'll forget about it, went on to Australia to swim, never thought about the, what do you call it, incident about the barracuda, until, you know, years later, about 2004, I think, or 2008, they asked some of the Olympians to write down some of their interesting stories about swimming. And I, you know, I sent that

into the USA Swimming, but they never published it, because I don't think they believed it either. But years later, what do you call, I had a, what do you call, a meeting with some divers and we're sitting down talking scores, and I just happen to tell some of the guys on the spearfishing group what I witnessed back in 1956, training for the Olympic Games. And one guy said, "Oh, I work for the City Board of Water Supply and the mayor sent us to Waikiki, this was back in 1997 or 98, somewhere, and he wanted us to check the Natatorium because they're talking about restoration of the pool. Well anyway, what happened was, he said when he went there to try, they said they saw on Waikiki end, they saw swirl and they saw a 5ft shark, 6ft shark, swimming around the white tip." So, you know, they were kind of surprised, they didn't say anything, and so they just left it at that. But he said about four or five years later, they were sent back to the pool so they said, they went to see if that shark was still in a pool and they couldn't find it. And then somebody saw it lying down on the bottom of the sand, and you could see the gills opening. And they faced the current times but the same white tip shark in there. But I believe that someone must have hooked the shark, you know, small, one of the small, and threw it into the Natatorium, because they wouldn't be able to fit coming into the openings because the openings are real narrow.

Tony Vega 27:50

Right, right. Right.

Richard Sonny Tanabe 27:52

But that was the incident of, what do you call, of barracuda.

Tony Vega 28:00

So I guess, you know, like, like you said, there were like narrow openings, kind of basically to let the water in, but, you know, like yeah, I guess the thing kind of narrow fish like a barracuda could squeeze on by?

Richard Sonny Tanabe 28:12

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Like, well, I think the barracuda love still waters, when they come in they are small, and then they can grow big, because that Natatorium has a lot of fish in it.

Tony Vega 28:23

Oh!

Richard Sonny Tanabe 28:25

Yeah and on the, what do you call, Diamond Head end of the Natatorium, you know, you got Sans Souci Beach, and Kaimana Beach. Yeah, that was not a beach like that at all like it is today. It was because of

the Natatorium that jutted out, that collected all that sand to form that beach. Yeah. Before, if you look at the wall, which is right back to where the volleyball courts, basketball courts are, where to park the car, used to run parallel or parallel to the highway before, and that has all, what do you call, accumulated over the years. When I first came to Natatorium, we used to run on the what do you call, Natatorium deck on the side of the rail, and when the salt swells came in the summertime, and dive into it and play, we had to go into the rocky coral sand area to climb up and get out of the wall. Yeah, so, you know, that all the vents, what do you call, holes for ventilation for the, what do you call, water currents in there were covered up by the sand. Over a period of years, and Nat had cracks on the wall and that's where the fish could come in. But it housed quite a lot of fish back in those days.

Tony Vega 30:02

Interesting. Um, and then, like on a personal note, I mean, what would you say, like, all this time you know swimming and fishing, you know, has, has taught you, is there anything that you can say that, like a life lesson or something like that, that you've gotten from all this time?

Richard Sonny Tanabe 30:24

Well, my life lesson out of the ocean and swimming is that I really find getting into the ocean and into the pool, or any form of water, it's really therapeutic for me. In other words, when I get into the water, all my outside worries flow away, you know, it just disappears. And you're in the water, enjoying the element, and also the natural beauty of the ocean. That takes really a lot of load off your mind. And for me, it's really therapeutic.

Tony Vega 31:12

If you would like to read the article about Sonny that we ran in the February/March 2019 issue of Wasabi, please see the link in the show notes or at TransmissionsFromHawaii.com. That article mentions a few other details that we didn't get to cover in the episode today, so it's definitely worth a read. Transmissions from Hawaii is a production of Wasabi Magazine, it's produced in the beautiful city of Honolulu by me, Tony Vega. If you enjoy the show, then please remember to leave a rating and review in your podcast app of choice and don't forget to subscribe or follow in your podcast app, that helps immensely. Another thing that really, really helps us out is if you spread the word on social media or you tell a friend or family member about the show. If you like the stories that we're telling here, then please tell somebody about the show, help us grow, so that this show can be sustainable and so that we can keep bringing you more content like this. Also, don't forget, if you would like to check out full transcripts of each episode you can find them in the show notes or at TransmissionsFromHawaii.com. Mahalo for listening, and see you next time on Transmissions from Hawaii.