

WHO SAYS I CAN'T SWIM? MILT CAMPBELL, PROVES 'EM WRONG!

By Bruce Wigo, President, International Swimming Hall of Fame

Last spring Richard "Sonny" Tanabe, the legendary Hawaiian spear fisherman, author, member of the 1956 US Olympic swimming team and Indiana University great stopped by the Hall of Fame with his wife Vicki and took a tour of the museum.



Photo: ISHOF Archives

"I always wondered why there weren't more black swimmers," Sonny told me, after reviewing our Black swimming history exhibit. "But I knew an African American who was an All-American swimmer back in 1951."

That swimmer was Milton Campbell. In 1953, as an eighteen year old, Milt was named by *Sport Magazine* as the best H.S. athlete in the world and it's hard to imagine any high schooler on the planet who has ever had a superior claim to that title. As a junior, not only had Campbell won the silver medal in the decathlon at the 1952 Olympic Games, but he had also finished fifth in the open high hurdles at the U.S. trials. He scored 180 points for his high school's football team in one season and subbing once for a sick heavyweight wrestler, he took only a minute and a half to pin the boy who would go on to be state champion. On top of that, he was an All-America swimmer. After high school, Campbell went on to star in both football and track at Indiana University, won a few national titles in the high hurdles and capped his amateur career by winning the gold medal in the decathlon at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia.

Sonny Tanabe learned about Milt's swimming skills in the fall of 1953 when both were freshmen at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. One day, when Sonny was swimming some laps with his teammate, fellow Hawaiian and future Olympic swimmer Bill Woolsey, Milt Campbell walked into the natatorium.

"When Milt saw us he walked across the pool and jumped into the lane next to me," recalled Sonny. "He knew Bill and me because we had some classes together and he asked if he could swim a few laps with us. 'Sure,' we both said. You didn't see any black swimmers in those days, so we weren't sure if he was joking or not. Anyway, I told him we were going to do a couple of 50's and he said 'OK.' On my 'go' the three of us pushed off the wall and to our amazement Milt was right there with us at the 25. 'Wow! I mean here were two future Olympic swimmers and he was matching us stroke for stroke. 'You're a damn

good swimmer,' I told Milt when we finished. That's when he told us he had been an All-American swimmer in high school."

Amazing! When I told Sonny I'd like to talk to Milt, he said he'd track him down. True to his word, he emailed me Milt's number and here's the story as told to me by Milt Campbell, in his own words:

"I got interested in swimming when I was a freshman at Plainfield H.S. in New Jersey. I had just finished playing J.V. football and we had an undefeated season. My brother Tom was a junior and a three-sport star in football, basketball and track. He was the star running back for the varsity; I was the star running back for the J.V. squad. Everybody was always comparing me to Tom. While that was flattering I wanted to step out of his shadow and find my own identity. So after football season, I was determined to do something other than basketball. My plan was to see what the other sports had to offer. I had some friends on the wrestling team, so I knew what that was like, so my first stop was to check out the swim team. I knew how to swim because when I was young my dad

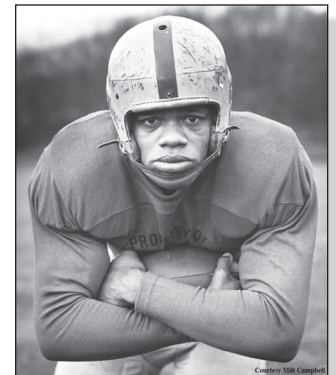


Photo: Courtesy Milt Campbell

would take our family out to a canal. He'd swim across, back and forth while my brother and I played in the shallow water. I remember my dad taking us once to the community pool. There weren't any laws preventing us from being there, like in the south, but it was clear we weren't welcome. That's why we went swimming with other black folks in the canals and rivers. Anyway, it wasn't until I was a little older and went to summer camp that I learned to swim. I learned from watching the older boys and when I tried to imitate them, they would encourage me by moving their arms and yelling, 'Stroke your arms! Stroke your arms!' I was a good copycat and that's how I learned to swim. So, there I was sitting in the stands when one of the swimmers, a white boy, comes up to me and asks me what I'm doing in the pool. 'I'm thinking about joining the swim team,' I replied.

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'We've never had a colored boy swim for us,' he said. 'I don't think you can swim.' I asked him why he thought that. He said, 'because all the waters in Africa are infested with crocodiles so your people never took to the water.' I looked at him and said, 'what the hell does that have to do with me? I was born in Plainfield.' I'm not African, I thought to myself. There aren't any crocodiles in the waters of New Jersey. What did he mean, 'your people?' My father knew how to swim and so did I. Whenever someone has told me I can't do something, it has be-

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First row (left to right): Bill Dryer, Carl Snell, Howard Keller, Ronnie Andrews, Tony Borton, Ted Eckerstrom, Kirby Fowler. Second row: Dave Carlston, mgr.; Richard Sutton, Al Fitts, Denton Seybold, Don Fort, Carlton Vail, Jack Townley, Ted Lutz, Coach Liske. Third row: Ted Bernsten, Larry Bartlett, Marty Dreyer, Milt Campbell, Bill Dreyer, Ted Bremble, Pete Lawson.

Photo: Plainfield Public Library

come my mission in life to prove them wrong. That has always been my strongest motivation. It's a concept I now lecture on: It's not important what you say to me, it's important what I say to me.

Anyway, as the boy walked away and these thoughts were racing through my mind, the coach walked over to where I was sitting. Coach Victor Liske was, at 40 years of age, in the prime of his Hall of Fame coaching career that ended in 1966 with a record of 266 wins, 84 losses, 2 ties and 5 undefeated seasons. As a kid he had lost a couple of fingers and most of his left leg in a train wreck. He walked with a noticeable limp because of his prosthesis. But that didn't hold him back. He played baseball and was a record setting backstroker in high school and was captain of Lafayette College's swim team for the 1932-33 season.

What brought me into the pool? he asked. I told him I was thinking about joining the swim team.

'That's great!' he said. 'You've got big hands, big feet – you're a great athlete - you'll make a great swimmer!' And I could tell he meant it.

'What event do you think you'd like to swim?' he asked.

Well, I'd never seen a meet so I was kind of at a loss for words. Then it hit me.

'You know that boy I was just talking with?' Coach nodded. 'What does he swim?'

'Sprint freestyle. He's our top sprinter.'

'Sprint freestyle! That's what I want to do,' I said.

Now when I say I knew how to swim, I did know how, but not very well. I swam with my head out and knew nothing about racing techniques, or starts

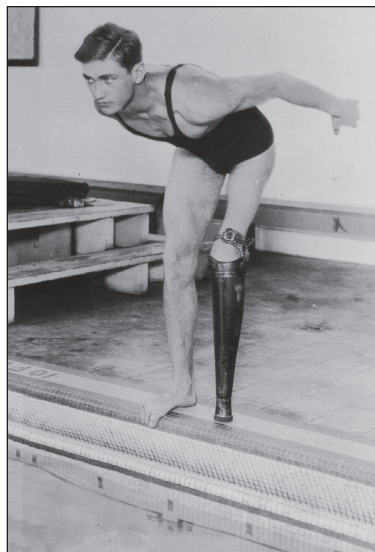


Photo: ISHOF Archives

and turns. But Coach Liske saw my potential and worked with me. I remember he had me do a lot of drills with a board. Progress was slow at first, but he was a good, patient teacher and I was a quick learner.

Our pool at Plainfield was shallow at one end and deep at the other. Sometimes after practice coach would bring out a ball and we'd play water polo. I was pretty big in comparison to the other boys, even as a freshman, and was pretty much unstoppable in the shallow end. Everyone would jump on me; sometimes even my own teammates would jump on me and try to pry the ball out of my grasp. It was really great fun. Finally they figured out the only way to get the ball out of my hands was to drag me to the deep end and hold me under water. I was afraid and panicked when I got dunked and didn't have my feet on the bottom, so I'd let go of the ball. This goes back to an incident when I little. A kid jumped on my back in a canal and I almost drowned. Coach saw the panic on my face and a few days later told me stay after practice.

Coach Liske was totally unselfconscious about taking off and putting on his prosthetic legs. While I waited, Coach got changed and put on his peg leg and joined me at the edge of the deep end. 'Get in,' he said, jumping in after me. When we got out into the middle of the pool he told me to dunk him. 'Go ahead, dunk me!' So I dunked him!

'No, really, tackle and dunk me like we're in a water polo game.' So I tackled him, held him under and then shoved him to the bottom of the pool. When he came up twenty feet away from me, he explained that when I dunked him he just

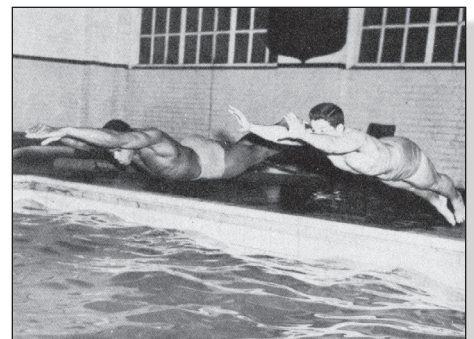


Photo: Plainfield Public Library

held his breath, relaxed and went down to the bottom. Then he pushed off and returned to the surface. 'Don't fight, they're going to sink you,' he said. 'Find another solution to the problem.' It was his way of teaching me about life through sports. Funny thing, after I learned to be comfortable when tackled in the deep water, the team stopped asking to play polo.

At the end of my first year swimming I was second to that boy who didn't think I'd make the team. But the next year I broke all his records. Our team went undefeated and I swam the anchor leg on Plainfield's All-American medley relay that won the Eastern Championship. I didn't swim my junior year because I was preparing for the Olympics trials and my senior year I was focused on getting a scholarship for football and track, so there was no time to swim again.

Sounds like you had a great experience with Coach Liske. Can you tell me more about him?

He was like a guardian angel to me. A fantastic man and I loved him dearly. I felt pretty much the same way about my track coach, Harold Brugiere. I was really blessed by having these two men-

tors. It's funny I would feel that way, because I remember when I was young my dad told us to be careful around white men – that we shouldn't trust them.

I never heard Mr. Liske berate or speak badly of anyone, but if you messed up, he made sure you learned a lesson. Here's one example of what I'm talking about. I had a lot of friends on the wrestling team and after swim practice I would wander into the wrestling room and fool around, wrestle with the guys. One day, the wrestling team had a match against Jefferson High. It was a big match. I wanted to see it so bad that I told Mr. Liske I was sick and couldn't swim that day. He said 'OK, go home and get some rest and I'll see you tomorrow.' Instead of going home, I went up through a back stairwell and entered a back door to the gymnasium so I could watch the match. I was near the locker room and when the door opened I could see our heavyweight throwing up. When coach Rosy came out I asked him what was the matter. 'Oh, he's just nervous. He'll get over it,' he said. 'Well, if he doesn't get over it and you need me, I'll do it,' I told him. 'Thanks Milt, but you'd get hurt. This Jefferson guy's a killer. One of the best in the state.' Well, as it looked like the match was going to down to the last weight class, the coaches were talking about forfeiting the heavyweight class because guy's problem was more than nerves, he was really sick. So the assistant coach starts in on coach Rosy. "Milt's strong as an ox and I've seen him wrestle with the boys after our practice. What have we got to lose?" Finally, Rosy relented, 'Ok, get him dressed.'" Well, I pinned the guy in one minute and 28 seconds and Plainfield won the match. That guy went on to win the state title by the way. When I got to school the next day, I was a hero. Everybody was congratulating me in the hallways on the way to my first class – which was math with Mr. Liske. Unlike everyone else in the school, Mr. Liske wasn't happy to see me. As we took our seats and got out our books, he sternly said: 'put your books away! It has come to my attention that we have a liar in our midst.' He then proceeded to lecture us on the virtue of honesty in a way that I felt obligated to apologize to him before the whole class. I never felt so bad. Here was a guy who had been so good to me and I lied to him. When the bell rang to dismiss the class, I couldn't wait to get out of that room, but Mr. Liske called me over. Oh No! Not more, I thought. But instead of being mad, he patted me on the back and said, "great job!" I was forgiven and at swim practice that afternoon all was well again!

I stayed in contact with Coach Liske over the years and when he was in failing health in 2008 I visited him often and he would cry every time he'd see me. I told him if he kept crying I wasn't going to visit him any more. 'You don't need to cry when you see

me,' I said. 'Think about the good times we had.' 'That's why I'm crying,'" he said. On one of my last visits before he passed away at the age of 98, we had a good laugh over the time we beat the Army Plebes 40 -35, by winning the last relay on which I was the anchor and came from behind to win the race. We sang on the bus all the way home, from the time we left West Point to the time we pulled into the high school parking lot. It was one of those days you, your team and your coach never forget.

We talked a little about why more African Americans aren't swimming and Milt understands the problem. It's all in the mind. We have to change people's mental attitude. I had the example of my father who was a good swimmer and then I had coaches who helped me to believe anything was possible.

As the greatest athlete of his generation, I wondered why Milt didn't receive the same commercial success and public recognition as other Gold Medal decathletes that went before or after him. Milt wasn't movie star handsome like Bob Mathias or Rafer Johnson, but I believe, like many social historians, that it was because America wasn't ready for black man to have the title of the World's Greatest Athlete. Add that to the fact that he married a white woman at a time when half of the states had anti-miscegenation laws and you can see why Milton Campbell is a forgotten hero. I can only imagine what kind of swimmer or water polo player Milt Campbell might have



Photo: ISHOF Archives

been, or the impact he might have made on our culture and the widely accepted stereotype that "blacks can't swim" had he continued swimming. Listening to Sonny Tanabe and Milt tell their stories, and reading what coach Liske told people for over fifty years, I'm convinced that if Milt stuck with swimming he could have been an Olympic Champion in our sport too!