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An Ocean of Challenges

Her drive and savvy have propelled Miki David '92 to the top of Hawaii's competitive open water racing scene.

Story by **TIM OBERMILLER**



David warms down after racing in the Aloha Kai Open Water Swim in April. "If you are a swimmer in Hawaii, you compete in the open water," she says.

The first times Miki (Yoshida) David '92 raced her way through pounding ocean waves, she found the experience, in a word, "terrifying."

As a member of Illinois Wesleyan's first women's varsity swim team back in 1989, David logged in countless laps at Fort Natatorium. However, she quickly found that "being a good pool swimmer meant absolutely nothing in the open water, where there is sharp coral and rocks under your feet, waves crashing over your head, and undertow and currents that keep you from going in the direction you want to go" — not to mention obstacles to dodge, from surfers to speedboats.

The popularity of open water swimming is growing around the world, and Hawaii boasts some of the most challenging and scenic open water competitions, such as the annual Waikiki Roughwater Swim that draws some 1,000 participants.

"If you are a swimmer in Hawaii, you compete in the open water," says David, who embraced the challenge not long after moving to Honolulu at age 27. Now 45, she competes with the 200-member Waikiki Swim Club, and last fall she was named the club's female swimmer of the year. This May, she was featured in *Hawaii Sportmagazine's* special swim issue.

At five feet, two inches tall, David may not tower over her competitors. But she compensates with the tough mental attitude and savvy racing strategies that include negotiating the mass start, jockeying for position and navigating buoys — all without losing her goggles or composure.

"Going into any race, my goal is to place among the top three women," she says, "no matter how unlikely that might be. It's a race, after all — not a knitting class!"

David races distances as short as 500 meters and as long as 7,000. “Here on the island of Oahu, during the winter months, we swim the south shore while the surfers take over the north shore for world-famous surfing competitions. Then, in the summer, we swap sides, and we swim the calm north shore waters.”

Though she is at the top in her age group, she’s used to seeing younger swimmers finish ahead of her. “I will usually concede to placing among the top 20 women, but that’s usually good enough to win my age division [45-49]. But the fun part about open water swimming is that there are many variables that come into play, and this can work in my favor on occasion.” That was true at the 2014 Aqua Sphere North Shore 5K Swim, when the lead female made a navigational error on the last third of the race.

“That costly mistake for her became my opportunity to capture the women’s title by a mere 0.6 seconds. We raced for 5,000 meters in the ocean for over an hour, and the top two women battled it out at the end to the tenths of a second!”

Preparing for that level of competition is hard work. She arrives to practice at 6 a.m., is the last to leave the water, and never misses a workout. “Miki has both talent and drive in her wheelhouse,” says one of her coaches, John Flanagan. “While many adult athletes often settle into a comfort zone, Miki continually pushes through barriers. That’s impressive.”

That drive was instilled in David as a child growing up in Singapore. “My mom was the original soccer mom. She carted me and my siblings around to swim lessons, Japanese lessons, ballet, tap, gymnastics, piano, violin, Camp Fire Girls.”

David loved ballet, but settled into gymnastics as a teen. During this time, she began a struggle with anorexia that lasted years. “As a result, I am now very conscious and vocal about the importance of maintaining a healthy self-image, especially among female athletes.” She sees a disturbing trend among athletes “who do extreme exercise followed by binge eating and then purging on ‘detox shakes’ for weight loss.”



David sprints to the finish line. Open water races typically end with a run up the beach.

It was correspondence with former dean of students Glenn Swichtenberg that drew her to Illinois Wesleyan. “I felt that the values that he embodied were those that I aspired to live up to myself. I came to IWU as an international student, and Glenn and his wife, Annette, took me in as my host parents. We have continued to stay in touch over the decades, and I still remain close to both of them and their granddaughters.”



David (middle row, left) was part of history as a member of IWU's first-ever varsity women's swimming and diving team. The photo was taken in 1989 at recently opened Fort Natatorium.

A business administration major, with a French minor, David swam for relaxation until her talents were noticed by former Titan swim coach Joe Shehan. She became the team's co-captain and lettered all three years that she competed. “We were just starting out as a brand-new varsity sport to IWU so we were practically invisible and definitely overshadowed by the top-performing basketball team. But we were a small, close-knit group, and we had a blast just being a team.”

After graduation, she pursued a marketing career in Tokyo, but after six years of working the corporate life “packed full of international travel, business suits and customer dinners, I just got burned out.” Deciding she might like teaching better, she moved to Honolulu to earn her master's degree in second language studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

“I never did go into teaching, but Hawaii became my new permanent home,” says David, who now works as executive assistant to the president at Honolulu-based Referentia Systems.

At the age of 38, David was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease in her lower back. “The doctors said I had the spine of a 60-year-old woman. I was in constant, excruciating pain that rendered me barely able to walk for several months.” She was forced to give up yoga and also ballet, which she took up to fulfill a childhood dream. She was also on the verge of retiring from competitive swimming, but was buoyed by “huge support from my husband, Jason, and encouragement from friends and family.”

“Balance and moderation in my workouts definitely helps manage my symptoms and lessens the occurrence and duration of my flare-ups. Overdoing any one thing — even swimming — can't be good for anyone.” She varies her workout distances and takes two days off a week from swimming to rest. On those days off, she works on “core strengthening, light weight training, some running as well as hiking, snorkeling and gardening.”

David says her boss has given her a flexible schedule so that she can get in her 6 a.m. workout. “He's also okay with me having a yoga mat, stretch cords and lacrosse ball at my desk for mini-stretches and exercises throughout the day. I run up and down the stairwell at the office; my coworkers call this ‘Miki's StairMaster.’”

David also tries to eat healthy. Rarely dining out, she and Jason cook at home with “fresh ingredients,” sometimes catching those ingredients themselves in the ocean, like the tako (octopus) they use for making traditional poke salad.

“Despite having had an eating disorder in my teens, I recovered well from it and I’m not afraid of carbs, caffeine, gluten, dairy, meat or fat. I never do fad diets, and I don’t touch fast food. My favorite foods are vegetables and fruit. And tofu. And steak. And fish.” She laughs. “Okay, I basically eat everything — but in moderation and in balance.”

David feels physically up for the challenge of facing another season of competitive open water swimming this summer, but there are still some doubts she will need to conquer.

“At times I feel like I have no business being at the front line with top swimmers, and self-doubt overcomes me. My coaches help me to work on this because they know what I can bring at practice and want to see me deliver that in my race performance.”

“I feel like I haven’t quite peaked yet and still have at least a few more years left in me,” David adds later.

Or perhaps more than a few. She takes inspiration from the story of Mieko Nagaoka, a 100-year-old Japanese woman who in April became the first centenarian to complete a 1,500-meter swim in a 25-meter pool.

“I plan to keep swimming at least until I break that record,” David vows. “And I’ll do it in the ocean.”



David was named 2014 Female Swimmer of the Year by the Waikiki Swim Club.