A new addition to ISHOF's archives continued

Among the recent donations to the Henning Library is a rare 1935 Edition of “Swimming in Japan.” This book explains the ancient origins of swimming in Japan and how the Japanese came to dominate men’s world swimming in the 1930’s by blending classical Japanese swimming and training techniques with those of the western world. ISHOF’s Henning Library is the world’s greatest repository of swimming related books, magazines, photos, medals, trophies, scrapbooks and other swimming related memorabilia. Please contact us about the tax advantages and other benefits of donating historically significant swimming memorabilia to the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

The History of Swimming in Japan

The development of swimming in Japan dates from ancient times, when Izanagi-no-Mikoto bathed in the water. According to Shinto mythology, Izanagi-no-Mikoto and Izanami-no-Mikoto were the Primal Ancestors of Japan who, according to mythology, created the eight islands of Japan and sent their descendants to rule over them for eternity. From the time of the Gods through the Ancient Times swimming was as natural to the Japanese as walking, because Japan is surrounded by sea, and in all quarters, there are many rivers, streams, lakes, and swamps. Later swimming became a kind of military art, as a means for developing the body and soul and it was also used in time of battle, in river and sea. Even among the peoples, swimming was respected and studied.

As the result of the encouragement given to the study of swimming by the various feudal clans during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867), swimming as a military art developed. The development of the various schools (Ryu) of military arts swimming was due to the conditions and situations of the rivers, seas, and lakes of the country. Here are a few examples from the book of classical Samurai swimming techniques.

"Kotobu-Gozen-Oyugi" (Technique from the Kobori Ryu) – Most revered form of Samurai swimming and most graceful. The swimmer wears armor and helmet, weighing about 25 pounds and uses and over arm stroke.

"Hira-Oyugi" (Kwan-ki Ryu) – Classical Japanese breaststroke style.

"Itatebi" (Iwakura Ryu) – The fundamental method of jumping while swimming. This was used to disentangle water plants and seaweeds that may be caught on arms or legs, or to jump into a boat.
Every time I recall the past, it makes me think of the marvelous advancement made in girl’s swimming circles. After the Amateur Swimming Federation of Japan was established, the swimming ability of girls became recognized all over the country. In Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Kyoto and all other cities, most girls’ high schools have their indoor pools and swimming is encouraged. The reasons for the growing popularity of women’s swimming are as follows: (1) it has come to be appreciated by the people; (2) the problem of the need of increasing physical strength is understood; (3) the feeling has become strong that every girl should be taught to swim, and it is a mistake for Japanese girls, whose country is surrounded by seas, not to be able to swim.

When I began swimming, everybody used to say, “What a tawdry, swimming!” or, “There is no need of swimming for girls. The only thing they should do is to help with the housework and sewing.” So the girls who started swimming at that time were really very unfortunate. I can understand the real difficulties of that time because I was one of them.

In swimming we think first of the girls physical strength.

Swimming differs from athletic sport in that it exercises the whole body and not just parts of it. It is an ideal sport for girls and helps them become strong mothers in the future. It is the hope of Japanese girls to develop into women with good physical bodies so that they will, not be ashamed before the women of foreign countries.

I will illustrate this by giving the impression I received in the Olympic Games in 1932. I felt that we were so small in comparison with the girls of foreign teams, that we seemed like children to them. You can easily see from this, how Japanese women are physically inferior. In order to keep up with the foreign women we must build up our bodies by training and by the most suitable exercises, especially by swimming.

With my success the breaststroke at the Amsterdam Olympiad in 1928, and with the rise of youthful swimmers such as Reizo Koike and Miss Hideko Maehata, this stroke has regained some of its popularity. Now, Koike and Miss Maehata are among the leading breaststroke swimmers in the world. I am quite sure that the present day stroke has been greatly influenced by the Japanese classic breaststroke.

The modern breaststroke is a speeded-up form of the Japanese classic Hiria-Oyogi of the Kwankai Ryu which developed in the Bay of Ise. Therefore, I believe, Japan has had a longer tradition of skillful techniques in training and coaching than other countries. From this fact and that breaststroke is so popular in Japan, one would naturally think that the Japanese would be superior in the breaststroke swimming circle.

But as soon as the modern crawl stroke was introduced into Japan, most of the Japanese swimmers took a fancy to this new speed swimming, and took it up without hesitation, giving up the old Japanese breaststroke. There were some swimmers who imitated the form of Yldefonso, a Filipino, who had worked out a form of swimming from that of pearl divers of the South Seas.