



The Three-Year Swim Club: The Untold Story of Maui's Sugar Ditch Kids and Their Quest for Olympic Glory

Julie Checkoway

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The *New York Times* bestselling inspirational story of impoverished children who transformed themselves into world-class swimmers.

In 1937, a schoolteacher on the island of Maui challenged a group of poverty-stricken sugar plantation kids to swim upstream against the current of their circumstance. The goal? To become Olympians.

They faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The children were Japanese-American and were malnourished and barefoot. They had no pool; they trained in the filthy irrigation ditches that snaked down from the mountains into the sugarcane fields. Their future was in those same fields, working alongside their parents in virtual slavery, known not by their names but by numbered tags that hung around their necks. Their teacher, Soichi Sakamoto, was an ordinary man whose swimming ability didn't extend much beyond treading water.

In spite of everything, including the virulent anti-Japanese sentiment of the late 1930s, in their first year the children outraced Olympic athletes twice their size; in their second year, they were national and international champs, shattering American and world records and making headlines from L.A. to Nazi Germany. In their third year, they'd be declared the greatest swimmers in the world. But they'd also face their greatest obstacle: the dawning of a world war and the cancellation of the Games. Still, on the battlefield, they'd become the 20th century's most celebrated heroes, and in 1948, they'd have one last chance for Olympic glory.

They were the Three-Year Swim Club. This is their story.

Includes Reading Group Guide

The Three-Year Swim Club: The Untold Story of Maui's Sugar Ditch Kids and Their Quest for Olympic Glory Details

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From Reader Review The Three-Year Swim Club: The Untold Story of Maui's Sugar Ditch Kids and Their Quest for Olympic Glory for online ebook

Rosa says

I picked this up at BEA this year and was really unsure about it. I was unsure of how I'd gotten it and was sure it would either lead to tears or boredom. While I admit to a couple of sniffles here and there about the unfairness of it all it was a pretty amazing story and well worth the read. I've always wondered about the 1940 and 1944 cancelled Olympic Games and this gives you insight into the hopefuls lives. It's also an amazing underdog tale.

Jill says

Let me introduce this year's first book to make "my favorites list" on Goodreads.com, it is "The Three-Year Swim Club: The Untold Story of Maui's Sugar Ditch Kids and their Quest for Olympic Glory" by Julie Checkoway. Overall I would rate this book five stars out of five. Where do I begin? Wow, what an amazing story! This book is a true story of a group of Japanese-American children and their coach. It is a story of a coach a Japanese-American who was trying to find himself and found himself in a group of Japanese-American children. These children had nothing, they lived in poverty living as "slaves" on sugar plantations. The coach found a ditch and taught them how to swim. It is about the struggles during this fragile time period of World War II and particularly the struggles that of Japanese-Americans faced. It is a story of will, of never giving up. It is a story of strength and courage in the face of adversity.

Before reading this book, honestly I did not know anything about it, and never mind not knowing that this story existed or happened in the first place. But boy, oh boy am I glad I read it. I am kicking myself in the butt that I didn't read this sooner, and wishing this book never ended. The way the author narrated this story was magical. Reading it, I felt as if I was there watching as a bystander the events that took place. I truly felt apart of this book and definitely connected to it from the first paragraphs. I almost want to go as far as to say that I wish they would make a movie out of this book. However, I am also weary of wishing for this, because hardly ever are the movies are as good as the book. And when this happens it leaves you disappointed, frustrated and upset, and I don't want to look back feeling this way. So as they say better safe than sorry. I would like to point out that for those people who shy away from reading nonfiction, I would highly consider reading this book. I would read it because of the way the author told the story. This is not your typical nonfiction book, you are going to be hooked from the very first word.

I literally was holding my breath and sitting on the edge of my seat while reading this book. It was such an amazing story, I could not wait to turn the page to see what happened next. There are not too many books out there where it is difficult to find anything to critique. Reading this book took you on a journey of experiencing the full spectrum of emotions. And this book was a very pleasant change, since recently I have been reading books on the more depressing side. I would again highly recommend this book, for those of you who would like to purchase a copy of this book [CLICK HERE](#).

I would like to thank The Reading Room, Julie Checkoway, and Grand Central Publishing for giving me the opportunity to read this book in exchange for an honest review.

Come and read my blog at <http://turnthepagereviewsbyjill.blogspot.com>

Pamela says

Unfortunately I only made it to the halfway point. It's an interesting book, one I might finish at a later date when my time isn't so limited. The Sugar Ditch kids - and all they overcame to reach for Olympic Glory - deserve to have their story told. I'm in awe of their tenacity and strength to rise above their unjust circumstances.

However, I found the book itself a bit tedious.

Checkoway casts a wide net into many arenas: regional and national politics, labor relations, Japanese culture, Japanese history and politics, Olympic history, Hawaiian culture and politics, the history of swimming as a sport, Olympic games in relation to global politics.... These things are certainly important coinciding factors. Checkoway is to be commended for her research prowess and her ability to connect the dots. However, I would have enjoyed way fewer dots; something concise, streamlined, and more finely-tuned.

Maybe at a later date, with less time constraints, I'll have a more positive reading experience. Until then, I'm opting to omit a star rating.

Christina Dudley says

A good, solid read for history and Olympic sports buffs. Having been recently to Maui for a swim meet, this had me reaching for the road atlas and Googling places to see what still could be seen. I knew nothing of Maui's "ditch swimmers," their unlikely coach Soichi Sakamoto, or the Three-Year Swim Club's storied legacy. The passages about discrimination the Japanese-American and mixed-race Hawaiian swimmers faced, and the effects of WWII on the members of the community were well covered.

As a member of the swim subculture, I would've appreciated more discussion on how swimming in the 1930s and 1940s was different from today. The winning times are pretty slow by today's standards, with no explanation why this was the case. Discussion of strokes and techniques and venues is vague, often raising (unanswered) questions for me. One example: how do you swim a 220-yard race in a 25-yard pool? Why were there even now-unswum distances like 220- and 440- and 880-yard races? My son theorized that those distances might have approximated the meter distances, but I still didn't know how they swam them. And some pools were only 20 yards in length. In that case, how did they race 50s? Or did each pool only offer races for which the length was suitable, i.e., a 220-yard race in a 20-yard pool? Many more questions like that plagued me.

While this book won't captivate my 14-year-old swimmer son the way GOLD IN THE WATER did (he read that one twice), it's a great introduction to a forgotten chapter of history.

Thank you to the publisher for the opportunity to read this book. Because the edition was not finalized, there were a number of proofing errors that the final edit will probably clean up, like a race time being given in

minutes and seconds, instead of seconds and tenths of seconds. (57 minutes would be a snail-like 100!) The author also says "mauna" means "toward the sea," but at the meet I was at, they used the word "makai" to mean toward the ocean (e.g., "the makai side of the pool").

Susan says

An insightful look at what it was like growing up in a sugar cane picking family, working hard to move past your expected destiny, and being a Hawaiian during WWII. Though in some ways, this book was just as much about Soichi Sakamoto as it was about the kids and their work towards competing in the Olympics. Having been a swimmer and now a runner, I was easily able to understand some of the training information, though Checkoway does an excellent job of explaining it. And her portrayal of the people involved along the way felt very true. This book would appeal to fans of swimming, sports, Hawaii, race relations, or history.

I received a preview of this book from NetGalley in exchange for an objective review.

Teresa says

I went to an ARC (Advanced Reading Copy) book meeting at a local book store, The Curious Iguana, last month and was invited to select a couple of ARC's to read and review for the store. They had numerous titles to select from - many authors had received early buzz from the publisher. I chose Colum McCann's "Thirteen Ways of Looking" and this selection to read.

I loved that the book, "The Three-Year Swim Club" was promoted as similar to "The Boys in the Boat" which I had recently read and loved. And, I am a former lifeguard & swimmer. So, this seemed like a natural choice for a book that would hold my interest.

This thoughtfully told true story depicts the unusual beginnings of an Olympic swim team on the Hawaiian islands, specifically Maui in the late 1930's. Minority, impoverished children were recruited by a local science teacher/boy scout leader to form a commitment to a 3 year swim club. Their coach, Soichi Sakamoto, had no prior coaching experience and limited swimming capabilities himself. The children trained in ditches in the beginning years. Slowly, their skills evolved and Sakamoto began using interval training and observing technique for the various swim strokes, filming opposition at meets. The 3 year swim club began to win meets and set records. The coach began to dream of competing nationally and eventually attending the Olympics.

How this team fared in competitions, how the students were treated when visiting the mainland in the US, how the second World War affected the young potential Olympians and how the Hawaiian swim team ultimately fared at the 1948 Olympics in a post war London really does make for an interesting, inspirational story. I did enjoy this portion of Hawaiian and swimming/Olympic history that I previously knew little about.

However, compared to "The Boys in the Boat" I was simply not as captivated. It is a personal preference probably, but I love to immerse myself in a story when there is a central character that I am really invested in. I cared so deeply about Joe Rantz and his rowing success that I was propelled through that novel to find out what would happen to Joe and his family following his momentous competition. While I did care about Sakamoto, I wasn't as caught up in his story because the author included so little personal history and there were so many changing characters throughout the book.

3.5 stars for me.

Steven says

As a fairly knowledgeable sports fan I thought I knew most of the stories regarding the Olympics but when I first heard about this story it really piqued my curiosity. I first saw the book at my favorite bookstore in Lake Forest Park but saw that the author was going to have a presentation at the University bookstore in a few weeks so I waited to buy it so I could get a signed copy. And thank goodness I went. You can tell that the author put a lot of effort and research into the book. Having met some of the swimmers and their families, you could feel the emotional attachment she had to these swimmers as she almost teared up during the presentation. If you're into the history of swimming, innovative training techniques (aka interval training) and reading about making ordinary humans into Olympic caliber athletes then this definitely is the book for you. I would've preferred to have read more during each day but sometimes a busy life, vacation and holidays just gets in the way. For sure I wouldn't mind rereading this gem.

SundayAtDusk says

Julie Checkoway does a most thorough job of telling the story of Soichi Sakamoto, a teacher on Maui in the 1930s, who started teaching kids to swim in a ditch, because they had no pool. They were the children of sugar cane workers, and Mr. Sakamoto had no experience whatsoever in teaching swimming. But he had high hopes and big dreams, and instilled the same in many of those children.

What he and what his swimmers accomplished was nothing short of astounding, including Olympic wins in 1948. This book goes in great detail about everyone and everything, as well as great detail about swimming competitions. It's not for those vaguely interested. It's definitely for those interested in both swimming and the lives of Japanese-Americans, as well as native Hawaiians, in Hawaii before, during and after World War II. There is quite a bit about Duke Kahanamoku and Kano Jigoro, too.

(Note: I received a free e-copy of this book from NetGalley and the publisher in exchange for an honest review.)

Carol says

To think if it had not been for the curiosity, perseverance and skill of Julie Checkoway, I would never have experienced, nor known about this hiccup of history. I'm not a die hard sports fan of any sort, rarely watch either the Winter or Summer Olympics, don't know the athletes by name but there is something that draws me to stories like [The Three-Year Swim Club: The Untold Story of Maui's Sugar Ditch Kids and Their](#)

Quest for Olympic Glory, in which a group of young people, from poor, hard-working families, with no special equipment or skills, can rise to a challenge. Who are these kids? Did they succeed? Why did the author want to tell their story? And always important for me, who did they then become? Ms. Checkoway answers my questions in this well researched, fascinating, easy to read narrative

From the dedication to the very last page, Checkoway held me captive. Right from the beginning she sets the stage with an overview and description of Maui, and its fertile land, once consisting of 30,000 acres of sugarcane, home to 80,000 persons living in

"13 segregated labor camps in a village called Pu'unene."

Today, only one sugar plantation remains; easily identified by the landmark of the two remaining smokestacks. Checkoway allows me to see it then and to see it now. She resurrects an inkling of a story that had almost disappeared and gives it life. It was 1932 when a schoolteacher, Soichi Sakamoto, a man not able to swim himself, teaches a group of under-privileged Japanese-American camp kids to swim, not in a fancy pool, but in the plantation's dirty irrigation ditch. Imagine this.

She vividly describes what she first sees when she visits the deteriorated property. As she contemplates a wall of signs, a minor remembrance of the past she thinks:

"The plantation owns those signs, but who, I wondered owned the disappearing story that, in part, they tell? The story of the teacher and the children lives now in so few places: on that weather-beaten wall, in scrapbooks filled with photographs. History isn't a sculptured cup; it's more like a sieve through which so many stories pass and disappear."

Checkoway makes me understand the urgency to record these stories, to create a written history of this spirited group of teens. Many were old and some had already passed away. There are stories within stories to be told. I want to share so many with you but then there would be no need for you to read this yourself. Checkoway focuses on a few key boys and one girl, but also weaves in the story of many others. There are the swimmers, their parents, Sakamoto, his wife and daughters, the benefactors, those who believed and those who didn't that it was possible for these kids to win, not only in small meets, but Olympic Gold. There is the quest to somehow bring these under-weight, under-nourished, ramshackle kids in hand-me-down swimsuits, to the 1940 Summer Games, only to have that hope crushed by the outbreak of World War II. The interruption of the war, the internment of many Japanese-Americans, the financial and subtle political barriers tried but could not dampen the spirit of Sakamoto and his kids. I was absorbed by the unique style of training Sakamoto used, one that was grueling and required a firm three year commitment by the kids. I was amazed that some of his boys trained sailors to swim during the war when it was realized that *"fifty percent of the Navy couldn't swim."*

I can picture these children, their bony, shivering bodies leaving the water, without even a towel to dry off with or to keep them warm. I can see the wonder on their faces as they journeyed from their home to far away places in the world, by ship, rail, buses and even air. I can feel their pride in their accomplishments. I am impressed by their sheer will and determination to stick with the program. I can feel their sorrow when Pearl Harbor is bombed and they are no longer seen as the Americans they are. I can cheer them on as some finally make it to the 1948 Olympics to represent America.

Checkoway humbly credits her book, not to her passion to write it,

"but because so many people have been so largehearted in helping me find my way in doing so."

We are the lucky recipients of her quest to not let this story be forgotten. Don't miss this. Julie Checkoway has written a winner in every sense of the word.

Caroline says

Spectacular! To coin a cliché, a real page-turner about the unlikely grooming of Olympic and near-Olympic swimmers from the 1930s to the 1948 Olympics with children from mostly poverty-stricken, uneducated Maui families where the parents picked sugar cane for a barely survivable living. The dream of their coach, Soichi Sakamoto, a regular schoolteacher who did not even normally teach swimming, was to train these kids to become professional swimmers - learning to swim in dirty, muddy sugar cane plantation ditches. To do this, he required all the kid to sign a three-year contract in which they pledged just about all their available hours to rigorous swim practice for three years. The contract was filled with high-standard rules - one rule broken and the kid would be out of the club. The high standards governed all aspects of the kids' lives, including respect for and obedience to their parents. Many of the kids achieved high standards in international swim meets, for which their participation was paid for and sponsored. One particularly poignant scene described several of the then-teenaged kids' experience aboard a luxury cruise ship taking them to a swim meet abroad. A Maui fundraising drive paid for necessary essentials, such as clothing and luggage, and tutors trained them in etiquette they would be required to use. However, at dinner once aboard the ship, they realized that no one had realized that they did not know how to use regular table silverware such as knives and forks, because they were used to eating with their hands! Despite their embarrassment, they imitated the other esteemed guests at their table, and the lofty guests fortunately were so impressed by the teenagers' swimming accomplishments and an after-dinner ukulele serenade that their elementary manners did not become an issue.

In the last book chapter, Julie Checkoway, the author describes her amazing research into the coach and the swimmers' lives. It is thorough and detailed. I obtained an advance copy in June 2015 from my cousins, independent booksellers, who acquired it then at the New York City book convention. Amazon has likened it on their website to *Unbroken* and *Boys on the Boat*. I would add *Seabiscuit* to that and consider the three books analogous. I also think it could make a great movie.

Laura Harrison says

Incredible! I read this book in one evening. Shocking, riveting and truly inspirational. I liked it much better than *Unbroken*-a must read!

Andy Miller says

The Three Year Swim Club tells of Soichi Sakamoto's decision in the 1930s to form a swim club in Maui consisting of kids of workers on the sugar plantations. The team started swimming in the irrigation ditches but Sakamoto adapted such as having his swimmers swim hard upstream and then turning around to rest

while swimming downstream, one of the first examples of interval training. As the swim club progressed Sakamoto gained access to the pools and success. The story continues with the team's success as some of the swimmers qualify for the elite meets and win

It was not an even path, as the Maui swimmers went to the mainland they encountered racial discrimination not experienced in their native Hawaii., though there were exceptions such as the friendliness and advocacy of swimmers from Stockton California during the national championship in Louisville. There is also resistance from both the Hawaii and national swimming establishments, including criticism of the strenuous and long swim workouts. An especially telling comparison was when some of the Maui swimmers joined college swim teams they found the workouts much easier and shorter. And of course there was the cruel end to the goal of every swimmer; the Olympics, when the games were cancelled in 1940. The story comes to an end shortly after success for one of Sakamoto's swimmers in the 1948 Olympics

This well written true story balances the sport, the inspiration with the complexities of real people, the author does not shy away from the hard feelings between Sakamoto and one of his star swimmers nor the small town politics of those jealous of his success. This is a great read

George says

INTERESTING. INFORMATIVE, AND INSPIRING.

“Soichi Sakamoto had no good reason to do it, no right to, no knowledge of how to, but he called out to the children, nonetheless, “How ’bout I teach you something about swimming, eh?” (p. 54)

The title's awkward, the writing/editing often rough, and it's packed with enough stats to make a statistician blanch. That said, Julie Chaekoway's 'talk-story,' non-fiction, *The Three-Year Swim Club: The Untold Story of Maui's Sugar Ditch Kids and Their Quest for Olympic Glory*, really is *“the inspirational, untold story of impoverished children who transformed themselves into world-class swimmers.”* (–from the goodreads synopsis).

It also offers up many interesting asides and insights of some pretty amazing people, places, times and events.

Recommendation: For those interested in human interest stories, nostalgia, history, and ethnic cultures. For competitive-swimming aficionados, too, of course.

“...he’d had his coach’s dreams and his teammates’ unfinished quest in his fingertips that day. And because he did, those last ten yards, the excruciating distance between wishing and wanting, between hoping and achieving, were the greatest responsibility he had ever borne, and the roughest water he had ever had to cross.” (p. 342)

Grand Central Publishing. Kindle Edition. 451 pages

Beth says

Note: I read an advance reader copy Interesting bit of little-known "shadow history" from Hawaii in the first half or so of the 20th century. Writing was a bit sloppy (several hackneyed phrases and awkwardness) but that might have been cleared up in the final edition that went to press. I got about one-third of the way through and my interest lagged so I decided not to finish

Of interest to those who want to read about people succeeding against the odds, competitive swimming, or finding out more about the history of Japanese-Americans in Hawaii.

Sarah at Sarah's Book Shelves says

[3.5 stars]

When I heard about this book at BEA, I immediately jumped on it...as I was a swimmer growing up (and was not familiar with this story) and love all things Olympics. Coming from that perspective, I enjoyed this book for the most part. I loved getting to nerd out with swimming and the Olympics – the political machinations behind the Olympic bidding process, 1930's training techniques, and the differences in the 1930's version of the sport (i.e. butterfly seemed to be missing and distances were 110, 220 rather than today's 100, 200). If this stuff sounds like boring minutia, you should probably skip this one.

I was completely invested in the fates of Sakamoto and his underdog swimmers during the first half of the book. Can they become national players? Will the females be allowed to attend Nationals? Will his stars make the Olympic team? Then, World War II hit, changing the story's direction. It hit the pause button on the swimming suspense and shuffled the people I'd been rooting for. This is obviously how real life played out, but it made for an odd story arc and dulled my emotions.

The Three-Year Swim Club lacked the intense emotional impact that made The Boys in the Boat such a widespread success, but would be a great choice for people interested in swimming and/or the Olympics.

Visit www.sarahsbookshelves.com for more reviews.
