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Kaua'i's tandem surfers riding high

It's a second world title for Yoshida, Vierra

By Jon Letman
Kauai People

The ink had barely dried from reports of Blanche Yoshida and Kalani Vierra's first place win at the Duke's Ocean Festival 2007 tandem surfing competition in Waikiki when the duo began packing their bags for Spain to compete in the International Tandem Surfing Association (ITSA) World Tour 2007.

Now, just days back from claiming their second world championship title (both the ITSA tour and the Duke offer the title "world champion"), Yoshida and Vierra are happy to be home.

"The Kauai community was awesome," Yoshida said at King Kaunani Elementary where she is a student services coordinator. "We were in Spain by ourselves, but we knew we had so much support back home and that inspired us to bring home the title."

The competition in Spain was the last leg of the five part ITSA tour held in Maui, Australia, California, France and Spain. Yoshida and Vierra competed in four of the five matches.

Started by legendary surfer Duke Kahanamoku at Waikiki in the early 1900s, tandem surfing involves a male/female team riding one board. The man exhibits his surfing skills and strength by twisting his partner in the air in a series of acrobatic maneuvers and lifts. The effect is reminiscent of figure skating except that unlike ice, a wave changes in size, shape and speed.

Surfers are judged on 45 distinct maneuvers divided into three tiers with points awarded according to difficulty, transition and sequencing.

Yoshida began tandem surfing when her family moved to Hawai'i in 1967 and her father suggested she try the sport. As a Trias teen who'd never seen the ocean, Yoshida was keen and after being introduced to Waikiki beach boy Leroy Ah Chey, embraced the sport. Within six months she and Ah Chey had won their first contest at Makaha.

In 1973 Yoshida stopped surfing to start a family. She hadn't tandem surfed in nearly 35 years when her husband told her about Duke's Ocean Fest at Waikiki. After meeting French tandem surfer Rocio Leroy and trying a few old lifts, Yoshida immediately caught the bug again.

When Yoshida began searching for a potential partner the same name kept coming up: Kalani Vierra.

As County of Kauai's lifeguard supervisor and a life long water enthusiast, Vierra had the experience and strength required for tandem and soon he and Yoshida were practicing moves she hadn't done since the 1960s. Two months later, they took 3rd place at their first competition in Makaha.

From there the team's rise was stellar - 3rd place at the Buffalo Big Board Classic on Oahu, 1st place on Maui, 2nd place at Novoa Heads, Australia, 1st place at Huntington Beach, Calif and then the world championships at Waikiki and Spain.

Vierra and Yoshida practice two or three times per week, mostly at PK's in Pe'pe'u but also Pakalae and Hanalei which has a longer wave suitable for tandem. Depending on where they are competing, they try to practice on similar waves.

"PK's is good because its difficult to tandem surf there. If we can do it at PK's, we can do it anywhere," Yoshida said.

Vierra keeps fit weight training, jogging, swimming, paddle boarding and underwater rock training.

"I'm lucky because Kalani is an excellent surfer, a true water warrior."

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