

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Dave Shoji

LSS 1311 (26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 3/31/2020

I don't know where my life would've gone, had I not had volleyball. And I, I'm so grateful that I've been blessed with, with all of this. This is unbelievable, and so, again, I gotta give credit to the man upstairs, and, uh...I'm, I'm just really grateful for the life I've had.

He was the second women's volleyball coach in the history of the National Collegiate Athletic Association to reach the 1,200-win milestone. Many believe the truly remarkable statistic is that his teams won more than 85% of the matches they played during his 42-year coaching career. But during most of his own years playing several different sports, volleyball was not one of them. Former University of Hawai'i Wahine volleyball coach, Dave Shoji, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one, engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people. Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Hanging high above the live action on the floor of the Stan Sheriff Center on the Mānoa campus of the University of Hawai'i, four banners are on display, proudly representing national championships. Linked to those team titles is another banner paying tribute to an individual and the stellar record amassed through four decades by the man who would build a women's collegiate volleyball unlike any other.

Aloha māi kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Despite his coaching success and national recognition, Dave Shoji says he did not receive many offers to coach at other schools, and he simply was not interested in coaching anywhere else. Shoji spent time in the islands as a young boy, but he was really a west coast kid whose parents were from the farmlands of California. Kobe and Shizuko Shoji wouldn't meet until 1942, when the families were forced by the U.S. government to relocate out of state.

One thing that I, I don't know if people know about you is where your parents met. Where was that? Can you tell me their story?

My parents met...they actually lived about fifteen miles from each other. One lived in upland-my dad lived Upland, California. My mom's family lives in Chino. They had

heard about each other but never met. Once the war broke out and both families were sent to Arizona...

Internment Camp.

Internment Camp Poston Arizona. I guess they met there. And, um...actually got married before my dad volunteered for the 442, and he was sent off to war, so...

Did he ever talk about what it was like to have been in an internment camp, only to then enlist for the very people who imprisoned you?

You know, my dad, like a lot of the 442 people, never really wanted to talk about it. So, he didn't talk about it with his family, with our, our siblings, and...so we knew very little about it. All we knew is that they met, and they got married, and he went off to war, and-

Did your mom talk about it?

My mom didn't talk about it much either. Um, it's funny. I don't know if it was more private or something, but, uh, they didn't really share a lot of that stuff with the kids. We would ask, but we'd get kind of one word answers all the time, like, "Yes." "How was it?" "Oh, it wasn't great." "Uh, what did you eat?" "We had little to eat." Stuff like that. It's just, uh...not, not too much information.

But not resentment? Just-

No, I don't think there was a lot of resentment. My mom was such a sweet person, she couldn't resent anybody. Uh, and...my, my dad, you know, volunteering was, uh, his way of showing, you know, that he was an American.

Uh, and he was quite athletic, I'm told.

He was. Uh, he ended up going to Pomona College, but he was a tailback on a single-win, wing football team. He long jumped 24 feet-

24 feet?

24 feet. Plus, um...so, that kind of tells you what kind of athlete he was. A football player and a, a track star. So, um...and he could do anything. He was very, very coordinated, and that's where, kind of, I was like, "Wow. I, I need to start doing some of this."

In 1949, Kobe and Shizu Shoji moved to Hawai'i with their two sons, Dave and Tom. Dad Kobe Shoji would spend a decade teaching plant physiology at the University of

Hawai'i. Dave's younger brother, Kelvin, was born in the islands. The family would later move to Hilo, when Kobe accepted a position with Steve Breuer. Eventually the demands of extensive work-related travel forced the family to move. Dave and Tom Shoji would return to California to live with an aunt. Their parents and the youngest son lived in Iran and Puerto Rico for several years during the 1960's.

Even your brothers were sports guys. And were they athletes as well?

My brothers were athletes. Um...at an earlier age...my, my-actually one of my brothers, Tom, played college football at UC Santa Barbara. So, he was quite an athlete as well.

And you were a, what, triple letter college athlete?

No, just two letters in college. Like, three in high school. I played football, basketball, and baseball in high school. Baseball was my best sport. Uh I played at a high level in high school, and the American legion ball, and then I got actually a scholarship to go to Santa Barbara to play baseball. But I realize that, at that time, that I wasn't going to go anywhere in baseball, so...

Because?

Uh, I was too small. I...my arm wasn't good enough. Um, I didn't have any power. Um...it's just a different game in college, and I, I was a good high school player, but I knew I wasn't going anywhere in the sport.

And volleyball, how did that come to your attention?

Well almost by mistake. I was taking a volleyball class at Santa Barbara, and the instructor was the coach of the volleyball team. His name is Dennis Berg, still a really good friend of mine. He has an Olympian daughter, Lindsey Berg. But, uh...I was taking the class, and I was doing pretty good, and my buddy and I just loved it, and we'd go play wreck volleyball on, uh, on the weekends. And so, the coach, Dennis, said, "Hey, you guys need to come out for the team." So, I said, "Ok, we'll, we'll go out." So as juniors we, we went out for the team and made the team. I don't know, I guess the team wasn't very good or something.

You did become an All-American in volleyball.

Well back then it was...it wasn't the same sport as it is today. It was pretty low-level, but, uh, we enjoyed it and we had a good time, and we actually won a national-

And you picked it right up. Oh, you won the national...

We won one national championship in 1969. That's kind of my claim to fame as a player.

And, uh, were you thinking about, uh, coaching it as you were playing? Or, had uh, any thought since you're, you know...the, the coach had plucked you out and showed you the sport?

Yeah, I had no idea about coaching. I knew I wanted to be involved in athletics somehow. I was trying to be maybe a high school basketball coach, or, not even volleyball...basketball, maybe, but, um...it wasn't really in my vision yet.

Dave Shoji enrolled in ROTC while in college in Santa Barbara, and graduated with a two-year commitment for active duty in the army as an infantry officer. Once again, a volleyball opportunity presented itself. He was recruited to tour and play for the Army's volleyball team, and then the All-Armed Forces Squad, which very possibly turned out to be a life-altering experience because this infantry officer most likely would've been deployed during the height of the Vietnam War. With his college degree and honorable discharge from the army, Dave Shoji returned to Hawai'i, where his parents were living again. It was the early 70's, and after a brief stint as a dishwasher in a local restaurant, Shoji returned to school for a post-graduate study at UH. He found himself helping to set up a new volleyball program. It was the early years of Title 9, and the university had a new Senior Athletic Director for women, Dr. Donnis Thompson

She started the UH Athletic Department for Women, and she had two sports. And she chose...she was a track athlete, so she started track...track and field, and then she chose volleyball 'cause she thought volleyball, uh, had kind of a natural interest in, in Hawai'i, and we had some really good athletes. So-

And yet volleyball was, uh...it, it wasn't a...the kind of sport you think of first, first off if you're looking for sports, right? At that time, it was something you wouldn't think of right off the top.

Well, at that time it was a very regional sport. It was basically on west coast. The Midwest, the south, and east had no volleyball, basically no volleyball. They had teams, but they, they weren't very good. So, the sport was based in west coast. And so she saw that, and she, she knew we would bring people over and we could go there more inex-you know, inexpensively, so that's kind of where we focused and she focused. She was...she was quite a woman, and quite a pioneer the sport and women's athletics in general.

Did you ever coach men's volleyball?

Oh, I coached four or five years at UH. They asked me to take the program back. Uh...they dropped the program for a while, and then they wanted to start up again. So, I, I was coaching both men and women at the same time.

What's the difference? What, what is it like coaching men and women?

Oh, it's night and day. Yeah, it's, uh...I always felt like the women were more receptive to my teaching. They, they were willing to learn about techniques and they would actually listen. You know, and do things. The guys just wanted to play. They wanted to play. They were more athletic, and so they didn't want to do drills. They just wanted to play, which is ok...um, it, it just wasn't my way of coaching. So, it wasn't real enjoyable for me. We had great games. We had great teams, uh, even early on, but, um...I decided, like, I, I'd rather stay on the women's side and let somebody else do the men. And, and the men have done fantastic over the years, too.

That must've been hard, doing both at the same time?

Well, it was. It was, uh, because the men's season was in the spring, and the women's in the fall. So, the, the recruiting part of, uh, the women's game was in the spring, and I had a hard time juggling both-coaching the men and then trying to recruit for the women, and running the women's spring season. So, it, it was difficult.

And were the men and women, at that time, playing at Klum gym?

Yeah.

Uh, and people don't remember it. Many people don't, or weren't, weren't alive then, but it was a...it was small, wooden gym.

It's still there. Klum Gym is still there.

I didn't even know it was still standing.

If you had seen games there and wanted to walk in there and, like, reminisce, you can still do that 'cause it's still up. My dad took me to basketball games at Klum, and, in, I think, I remember 1956 or something, it was built. And I thought, "Man, this is awesome place."

For the audience it's fabulous 'cause you're right near the athletes.

Yeah, it, it was...

It's really hot in there, though.

It was really hot, but we had a big homecourt advantage. I mean, teams would come in there and it was just stifling hot, but our, our kids were used to it, so we usually won.

That, um...and so, you developed a fanbase that, I don't know, may be second to none. Tell me about that, the relationship with fans.

Well, you know, back in the early days, we had people...I don't know who they were. They would show up, and, and then...I don't know. We had a lot of local kids on the team, so I think that was part of the attraction, and then I'm from Hawai'i, and so I think there was some kind of bond there. But they, they would come and then we'd start winning, and I think people jump on the bandwagon and they come, but then they're hooked. They, they see the game. They see the girls and, and, uh, they just fall in love with not only the, the game, but the players and, and the coaches. So, we had a little, I call it a cult following, you know? It was like-

What, what about the aunties? What kind of cult is that?

Well it's just...uh, at that time, they weren't old. But they, they...but, um...you know, no one really knew about us outside, uh, you know, this tiny little circle. So, we had...first it was like 1200, and then 1500, and then 1800 packed, you know, the Klum gym, and then...and so we had a really loyal following, even back then. It was, as far as I knew, it was only 1800 people. Um...we weren't on television yet.

The coaches of the other teams would sometimes say there was a real high level of volleyball knowledge and appreciation in Hawai'i.

Oh, absolutely. Uh, our fans, especially the ones that followed us from early on, they knew volleyball. And they knew good volleyball, and they appreciate good volleyball. And if it came from the other team, so be it. They would appreciate volleyball that was played, uh, at a high level by the other team. They wouldn't ever be nasty to the other team. Uh, they'd cheer their plays as well as ours.

You know what really used to move me so much was, um, the aunties would give lei to your players, but they'd also give lei to the, many times to the other players as well.

It was interesting, the other night, at the Cal Poly game. So, we win. Our girls go and get the lei from the aunties. Um, the other team storms off...'cause they're upset. They lost. But their coach made them come out of the locker room and go get their lei from the aunties, 'cause she knew that they had brought lei for the other team, too. So, that's an interesting phenomenon. I don't think you'd see that anywhere else.

Although the Wahine volleyball program has been undeniably one of the most successful in the country, recruiting has always been a challenge. Shoji had to import height, as well as compete for many of those top-tier players as possible. Diane Sebastian was the first, followed by so many others, including Lily Kahumoku, Angelica Ljungqvist, T. Williams, and Kim Willoughby. These were the players who were often highly recruited by bigger, wealthier schools. Shoji cites Emily Hartong and Suzanne Eagye as examples of players who were not heavily recruited, but while playing at UH they worked hard and elevated their game. They were considered among the best players in the country. But Coach Shoji gives a great deal of credit to the local girls, Hawai'i's own home-grown talent, as they key to the program's success. These women will always share a special bond among themselves, with this community, and most definitely with their coach.

What were your experiences?

My experience with Dave, ok, first started...can I? Can I?

Ok, yeah.

You know I'm not a talker. Dave knows I'm not a talker, but...back in '82, he got in touch with me. I had eligibility left. It was still AIAW. So, he asked me if, "Joyce, do you want to come play? You got two years eligibility, and they turned NC2A." So, that was the best memories of Dave. Getting in touch with me...sorry, guys.

But, I, I met remarkable women. We won back to back. Yeah, Dave? And, um...I just want to thank him for bringing me back to school, sharing with my fellow, my fellow, my fellow...yep, 2, 2, 2. Um, so, Dave, thank you, mahalo, and love you. 'Kay, that's all.

It's over! What a comeback! What a comeback! What a comeback! Down two games to none, they win three in a row! They do the impossible! They are the national champions.

We were always supplemented by a great local player. They had great volleyball IQ, they call it. "Tita" Ahuna was one of 'em. Mahina Eleneki. Um, Kanani Danielson was another that just could play volleyball. I mean, they, they didn't need to be big, tall, whatever. They could...so, you combine those, kind of...a great athlete, working hard, undersize with the, the good local player, and we were pretty successful. I don't know if it's, uh, a natural thing with Hawaiian players, but, uh, every center we had from here had wonderful hands, touch. And Robyn is one of 'em, and go back to Nahaku Brown. But Hawaiian girls just seem to have some kind of amazing touch on the ball, where the mainland girls, they were just all...most of 'em were so trained, you know. And they could, you know...they were so mechanical, where...I guess it's from the park or something.

That's so interesting. I...why-

Yeah, I, I don't know. I couldn't explain it, but if you...I mean, Robyn grew up down in the natatorium, and her dad would play. And Nahaku Brown, her, her, her dad ran Pahoa at the gym, and so she was always in the gym, and...but it was something...I didn't reach then that touch. It's just amazing that we've had probably six, eight local setters and they all just...I'm like, "That's, that's what we need. We need that touch. They're just so natural and-

Dave Shoji met Mary Tennifer, an accomplished athlete in her own right, on the UH Campus. They married in 1986. Although she played basketball in college, Shoji says she became very knowledgeable about volleyball.

Mary, what can I say? I, you know, I think someone said it really well...yeah, if there's, uh, a great person, or a great coach, there's always a great woman pushing that coach along the way. So, thank you for 31 years, Mary.

How was that raising a family and, um, and conducting a life outside that consuming career?

Yeah, it was difficult with the family, 'cause, um...and my wife reminds me all the time that we had our second boy, Erik, and I went from the hospital, uh, took her home, the baby home, and went to practice. So, she, she didn't appreciate that. But the, the family kind of became intertwined in the, in the job, and to this day I think because the boys were always in the gym. From two years old, they would come to the gym and play with the ball...that's how they became good at volleyball. They, they had a knack for it. They understood the game. They were around it. They went to all the games.

All that practice at the gym, waiting for dad, paid off. Kawika and Erik Shoji have been successful at the highest levels of men's volleyball competition. Both were first team All-Americans while at Stanford. Kawika is a setter who was named 2010 player of the year, as he led Stanford to a national championship. They both played for the U.S. national team and won bronze medals at the 2016 Olympics.

We both want to say thanks, dad, for just really being an unbelievable dad. Um, making time for us outside of volleyball, too, and making all of our games, and supporting us, and, um...just really dedicating all of your time to not only the state and the program and the university, but also to our family. And so, thanks, Dad. We love you, and this is a well-deserved celebration.

Athletics continue to dominate the Shoji 'ohana. Daughter Cobey Shoji Hutzler was a defensive specialist setter at University of Las Vegas, and the University of Michigan. She

was Director of Volleyball Operations at Stanford, and has coached at various places, including a championship high school team in Florida. She's married to Coleman Hutzler, a coach for University of South Carolina football. They have two children.

What do you look forward to most these days?

Got three grandchildren. Hopefully we'll have four or five, um, but those three grandchildren are just kind of our light. Uh...you know, now we, we just look forward to seeing them. Two of 'em are in South Carolina, and one's in Poland, so we don't...yeah, so, they're far away. But, um...yeah, I mean, it's, it's, uh...watching-we watch a lot of volleyball still.

Hey Robyn, where are you? Come. Angelica, come, come up here. No, I'm not going to yell at you. I'm not gonna yell at you.

We can roast you some more.

No. I want to say this in front of everybody. But, uh, when I retired, and it was kind of a simultaneous hiring of Robyn Amo, I was so happy for her, and I was so happy for the program. And then she told me that she wanted to bring Angelica back. Um...I, I am just ecstatic that these two women are gonna head the program. And Kaleo's here, too, somewhere, but, uh, the third coach in our program now.

Dave and Mary Shoji have been regulars at the Wahine matches since he retired as head coach. We sat down with Coach Shoji for this conversation late in 2019. He told us he's grateful for the medical care and support he received while being treated for prostate cancer, and he wants people to know he's feeling great. Dave Shoji is reluctant to talk about his individual accomplishments as a volleyball coach. So, before we finish up, here are just some of the highlights of Coach Shoji's amazing record, for the record.

Coach Shoji never had a losing season. He led the Rainbow Wahine to four national championships, and 9 NCAA final Four appearances. His teams amassed 20+ win seasons 38 times, and 30 plus wins 19 times. He coached 86 All-Americans, 25 conference players of the year, and 175 All-Conference picks. Academically, he has also coached 107 conference All-Academic players.

You'll find more of our conversation with Dave Shoji posted online at PBSHawaii.org. These extra clips also include the top ten Shoji wins from former Hawai'i sportscaster and ESPN anchor Neil Everett. And Coach Shoji talks about women's college volleyball has expanded geographically, why there's more parody among schools today, and the critical role club coaches play in recruiting young high school players years before they're ready for college. Mahalo to Coach Shoji of Mānoa, Oahu, for sharing your

stories with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

I've been reminded of this for a lot of years now, and the last few, you know. We got to the thousand wins and then 1100, and now, whatever the record is. So, I've had time to reflect on this over the course of the last few years. I never really thought about it back when we had 800 wins or 900. It just wasn't important to me, and...but lately everyone seems to be on this theme of breaking record, and...well, I think the key word is we've achieved, not what I achieved. I haven't really done anything myself. It's, it's all about the people around me and people that've helped me, and the players. That, that's what, uh, how I'd like to be remembered. Not me, or how many games I won. I never served a ball, Jim, and never dug a ball. I never had a kill. So, you've gotta give credit where...really, the credit goes to the players and the, all the other people involved in the program.

Oh, wow, what a rally. Match point. Aloha ball. It's over. Dave Shoji is the winningest coach in the history of Division 1 NCAA volleyball.

It's really a humbling night for me because we would've never had anything like this, uh. The crowd in Hawai'i, the fans in Hawai'i are #1. Still love them. I still enjoy it. I love you guys. I love my team. I love the students over there, coming up to support us.

Again, I...I really don't know what to say. I just want to reflect on, yeah...reflect everything on the team and everybody that's been part of the program, as well as everybody in this building tonight. So, you know, I appreciate all of the accolades, but let's think about this as yours and ours together, alright? Thank you very much.

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