

WALLY YONAMINE – A HAWAII SPORTS PIONEER

By Wes Nakama
HHSAA Assistant Director of Information

Wally Yonamine, a legendary former Hawai'i high school athlete whose charitable foundation is the long-term title sponsor for the HHSAA baseball state tournament, died Feb. 28 at age 85 after a long battle with cancer.

Yonamine grew up in the tiny plantation town of Olowalu, Maui and was a standout running back and all-around athlete at Lahainaluna High School. He later starred on Farrington's football team and was believed to be the first Asian American in pro football after earning a roster spot with the San Francisco 49ers.

Yonamine also played professional baseball for the San Francisco Seals and Salt Lake City Bees before becoming a pioneer in Japan's major league while playing for the Yomiuri Giants in the 1950s. He won three batting championships, finished his career with a lifetime .311 average and is credited with revolutionizing the game there by introducing an American style of strategy.

Yonamine later became a coach and manager in Japan and was inducted into that country's Baseball Hall of Fame.

Since 1997, the Wally Yonamine Foundation has sponsored the baseball state tournament and in 2006 it created a \$200,000 endowment that ensured the tournament's financial solvency for the foreseeable future.

"Coming from a small hick town on Maui, I really feel Hawai'i did a lot for me, so I'm glad I can be one of those guys who can give back to Hawai'i," Yonamine told The Honolulu Advertiser after making the donation. "Financially, my family is doing well, so we thought it was a good idea to give (the HHSAA) something they can work with, not just a one- or two-year thing."

Keith Amemiya, who was HHSAA executive director at the time of the donation, said Yonamine's generosity was comparable to his Hall of Fame athletic ability.

"Not only was he an extraordinary athlete whose accomplishments are unmatched in our state's storied athletic history, he was such a kind and generous person who cared so much about Hawai'i and its people, especially those from his home island of Maui," Amemiya said. "Up until the end, he continued to follow baseball and was especially proud of Maui's current major leaguers, Shane Victorino, Kurt Suzuki, and Kanekoa Teixeira."

Photos courtesy Gregory Yamamoto/ScoringLive.com

