

## One for the Team

# The best young surfers in Hawai'i go for gold in the Junior World Championships

A mob of paparazzi was waiting at the airport in El Salvador when the Hawai'i Surf Team got off the plane a week before the start of the International Surfing Association (ISA) Junior World Championships. Flashes flashed, shutters clicked—the sort of reception usually reserved for famous hometown surfers or returning champions, but neither was the case here. Ten of the twelve teenagers had never competed in this contest before, and even though Hawai'i is the birthplace of surfing, no team from the Islands had won since 2014. Still, for El Salvador and for youth surfing globally, the juniors were a big deal, and nothing—not even a barrage of cameras—could distract Team Hawai'i from its mission: to bring gold back to Hawai'i.

The ISA World Junior Championships started in 1980, and since then it has become the premier competition for surfers under age 18 to showcase their talent and see if they're ready for the next level. Historically, the “next level” meant the World Surf League (WSL) championship tour, which is to surfing what the major leagues are to baseball. Only thirty-two surfers compete on the WSL championship tour every year, but now that surfing is an Olympic sport—a direct result of the ISA's lobbying efforts—there are new competitive avenues. A strong performance at the Junior World Championships won't qualify a surfer for the WSL or the Olympics, but almost all of the top surfers in the world are contest alumni: Thirty-three of the forty surfers in the Tokyo Olympics competed in it, including gold medalist and five-time WSL world champion Carissa Moore. Medaling at the juniors signals a promising career ahead.

It had been seven years since Hawai'i had won team gold in the juniors, and this year the team started from behind.





Luke Swanson shares a congratulatory hug with teammate Shion Crawford after a heat during the 2022 International Surfing Association's Junior World Championships in El Salvador last May, where Team Hawai'i competed against forty-five countries for a gold medal. On the opening spread, teammates hoist Ēwelei'ula Wong for a victory carry up the beach after her win in the girls under-18 division.

The 2020 and 2021 competitions were canceled due to the pandemic, and there were doubts about whether it would take place this summer. By the time it was officially announced, Hawai'i was unprepared: no coaches, no team, no time for tryouts. "Hawai'i was in a pinch getting coaches," says Chris Martin, whose son Kai was on the 2019 team, which took silver. "So I volunteered. I didn't want the kids to lose out on the opportunity to represent Hawai'i."

Martin grew up on Hawai'i Island, the only one in his family who surfed. Though he taught his son to surf and coached him for most of his life, Martin's experience as a competitive surfer was limited to local amateur contests—a far cry from the Junior World Championships, in which over four hundred surfers from forty-five countries compete. But coaching a gold-medal-level surf team is a full-time job, and because Martin already has one at a shipping company, he couldn't do it alone.

As it happens, one of Hawai'i's best up-and-coming surfers is Jackson Dorian, son of Shane Dorian, who surfed professionally on the WSL championship tour for eleven years and ranked as high as fourth in the world before becoming renowned as one of the best big-wave surfers on the planet. Dorian was part of a generation of surfers who revitalized the sport in the '90s alongside titans like Kelly Slater and Rob Machado. "I was probably going to go as a parent anyway, so I volunteered to be a coach," Dorian says. "Our team wasn't chosen until six weeks before the event, so it was very last-minute."

**Without proper tryouts**, Dorian and Martin relied on former team coaches and people in the surf industry to pull a team together. There's no shortage of talented surfers in the Islands, but making the team takes more than skill. "Character and results," Martin says. "We looked for surfers

who had good character, who wanted to represent Hawai'i and had the results to back it up."

It was a laborious process for the coaches, but for the twelve kids selected, it was just an email that arrived out of the blue. "It was surprising," says Puamakamae Desoto, who competed in the girls under-18 division. "I didn't know I was in the running. I didn't know the contest was even back on." "We found out we made the team, did a couple of trainings and then left for El Salvador," says Ēwelei'ula Wong, who competed in the same division.

Those training sessions were essential, and not just because there wasn't much time to prepare. Most of the surfers had never been on a team before, in surfing or otherwise. Kids surfing at this level aren't playing AYSO soccer or flag football in their spare time. By third grade they've dedicated their lives to training for surf competitions, most hoping to go pro. By high school they almost always pursue alternative

SKY  
WAIKIKI  
RAW & BAR

**Mimosa  
Brunch**

10am - 2pm  
Saturdays & Sundays

ROOFTOP OYSTER BAR  
2270 KALAKAUA AVE. 19TH FLOOR // (808) 979-7590 // SKYWAIKIKI.COM

Model: @janna\_maria  
Photo: @michaelkwell

# Rediscover you

DELIVERED WORLDWIDE WITH ALOHA

808.320.0656  
@hiflyingdress  
hiflyingdress.com



**Wong wraps herself in the flag of Hawai'i at the awards ceremony. While Hawai'i competes as part of the United States in Olympic surfing, it has the distinction of its own category in junior and pro competition—a meaningful distinction for Native Hawaiians in particular. Being Native Hawaiian "gives me a sense of kuleana," or responsibility, Wong says. "I'm part of something bigger than myself: I'm part of the community that created surfing."** PHOTO BY MIKE RODRIGUEZ

forms of education—homeschooling or online classes—so they can learn around their surf schedules. But it's a solitary sport for the most part: Surfers usually train and compete as individuals. Aside from the Olympics, the juniors is a rare chance for surfers to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Surfers can win individual medals, but the ultimate achievement is the overall team medal, determined by the total combined points earned by everyone on the team.

"We'd all meet at the beach early in the morning," says "Kai-boy" Martin, a team captain and one of only two members of the 2022 team who had competed in the juniors before. "We'd all warm up together and then just run heats. There wasn't much surfing advice. It was more heat management, understanding what you were doing to earn your scores. They wanted us to really understand how to score."

In competition there are four surfers in each twenty-five-minute heat, with

the top two moving on to the next round. Each surfer can catch as many waves as they can, but only their best two waves count. Each wave is judged on a ten-point scale, meaning the best possible score in a heat is twenty. Points are awarded for performing maneuvers with "speed, power and flow," states the rulebook. Longer rides means surfers can attempt more maneuvers; the more difficult they are and the more gracefully they're executed, the higher the score. Usually, a combined score of twelve or thirteen is enough to win. During Team Hawai'i's training sessions, the coaches gave the kids fifteen minutes to catch exactly two waves, with the goal of scoring no less than twelve points. "That makes you make good decisions and pick good waves," says Kai-boy. They also ran heats of three surfers each, with the rest of the team giving feedback. "That's the part I really loved," Desoto says. "Now nine people, not just the girls you might compete against but the guys,

too, are critiquing you. We're not used to having our competitors telling us how to better ourselves."

Yet even with the handful of training sessions, some things you can learn only in competition, practical things like hydration, rest and not overtraining, as well as more abstract things like mental preparation and positive thinking. For Shane Dorian it was an opportunity to pass his knowledge and experience to the next generation. "It was important to them to perform at a high level and not let the team down," he says. "I really wanted to give them the knowledge and mindset and confidence." Dorian competed in the juniors three times in the 1980s and knows how important it is to do well. "It was a formative experience in my life. It really was the catalyst for me to get serious about surfing."

**Young surfers can usually get by on energy and pure enthusiasm.** But this was a grueling, nine-day contest against the best surfers in the



Swanson takes his victory lap after winning gold in the boys under-18 division; Crawford took silver.

world, with heat after heat including a second-chance repêchage bracket where athletes who lose can still fight for a spot in the finals. When the air feels like a sauna and the ocean like a roiling bowl of warm soup, it takes focus and determination to perform at your best—and that’s when things are going well. But Team Hawai’i faced adversity before the competition even started.

Luke Tema, who competed in the boys under-16 division, and Vaihiti Inso, who competed in the girls under-16, both tested positive for COVID soon after arriving in El Salvador. They quarantined in separate hotel rooms, and it seemed they wouldn’t be able to compete, which would have essentially killed Team Hawai’i’s hopes of bringing home an overall team medal. Meanwhile, the rest of the team struggled with heat exhaustion. Things felt like they were starting to unravel.

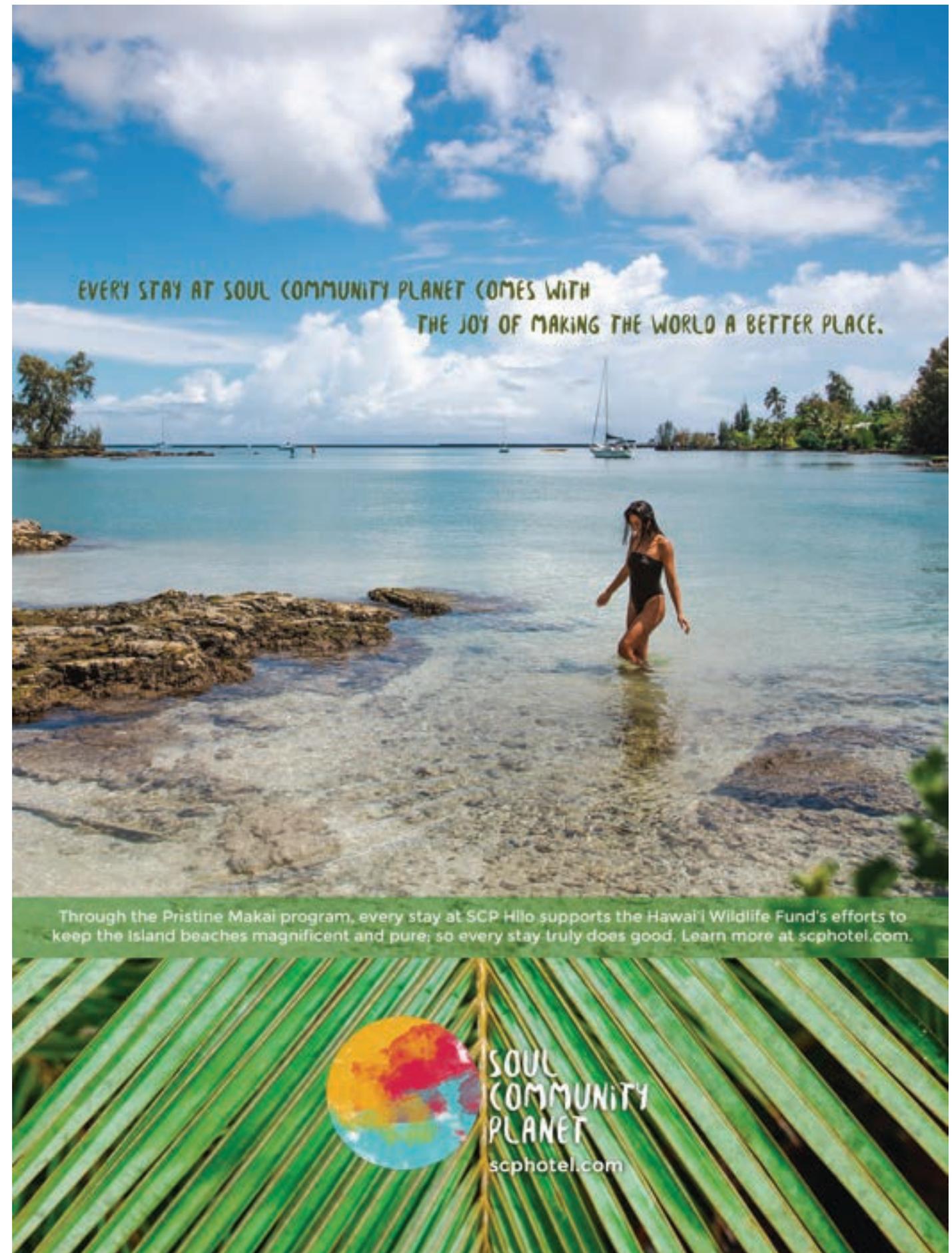
On the first day of the competition, both Inso and Tema tested negative and were cleared to compete. The team’s

morale soared, and Tema hit the water like he had something to prove. “Luke was super inspirational as far as not giving up and surfing his heart out,” says Kai-boy. “He had three or four heats where he found a wave at the last minute to advance.” The kids rallied around Tema’s buzzer-beating heroics, and those who had been knocked out of competition encouraged their teammates from shore, shouting praise and critique just as they had during training. “Our team spirit and support for one another was off the hook,” says Inso. “I full-blown lost my voice because I was screaming, cheering everyone on.”

The screaming reached a fever pitch when Ēwelei’ula Wong, another team captain, got to the finals. After suffering heat exhaustion and losing early in the third heat of the contest, Wong powered through an additional seven repêchage rounds to reach the final. She was exhausted but buoyed by her teammates’ success: Luke Swanson and Shion Crawford took gold and

silver in the boys under-18 division. “I’m stoked!” Crawford told a reporter after winning the silver, with no sour grapes over Swanson’s gold. “If it was anybody else [who beat me], I would’ve been bummed,” he said. Wong was already in the water by then, and she knew that even if she didn’t win her final, she could still earn enough points to push Team Hawai’i to the overall team gold.

Wong faced off against surfers from Spain, France and the United States. *The United States?* one might rightly wonder. In the Olympics, Hawai’i is part of Team USA, but in the ISA and the WSL, Hawai’i has the distinction of being its own entity and competes separately. This adds an additional element of pride for these surfers, especially because the United States and France won four of the past five team gold medals, and particularly for Wong because she’s Kanaka Maoli, or Native Hawaiian. “That gives me a sense of kuleana [responsibility],” Wong says, “because I know my kūpuna, my

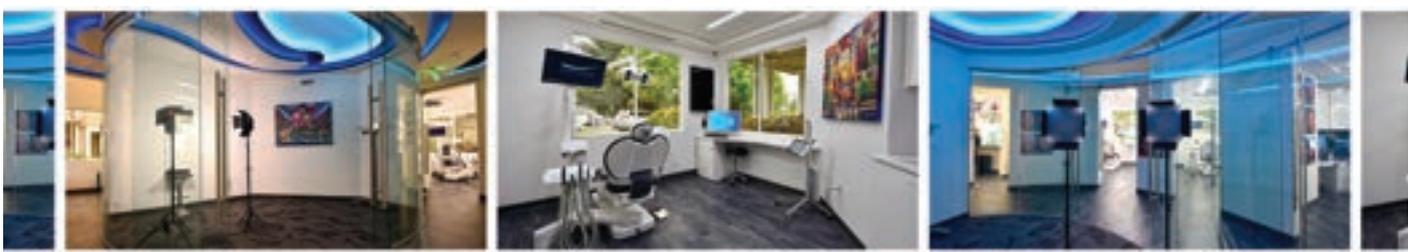




Shawn Keller, DDS

# Same Day New Smile™

Schedule your complimentary consultation!



We offer in-person and virtual options, perfect for out-of-state patients.



See more photos and video testimonials online!  
425-558-1515 | SHAWNKELLERDDS.COM



Above, Team Hawai'i poses for a photo-op during a cultural exchange with their hosts, Team El Salvador. COURTESY ISA HAWAII

ancestors, created surfing. It gives me a greater sense of identity. It gives me a lot of confidence in the water. I'm part of something bigger than myself: I'm part of the community that created surfing."

The waves were moderate and messy, with six- to seven-foot faces and steady offshore winds peeling spray off the lip like a comet's tail. Within a minute Wong dropped in and went left, carving a bottom turn and slashing off the lip. Her 6.83 gave her the early lead. Her competitors started scratching to catch up, putting points on the board, but Wong held her lead and her composure, waiting for the right wave, just as she had practiced. Her patience paid off.

This time she went right, executing a perfect bottom turn, then smoothly maneuvering to the lip before whipping her board back down again to continue riding—not once, not twice but three times, faster each time and with a fluidity that left even the most poetic of her teammates too awestruck to say

anything except "Braaah." With her score of 8.17, it was pau (finished).

**Hawai'i took home four of the twelve individual medals:** two gold, one silver and one bronze. More important, they won the overall team gold medal. "We *all* got a gold medal," says Crawford. "It wasn't like, 'You got one and I didn't.' We all got it together." For the coaches, too, the team gold was the mark of true success, the first in seven years and the fourth in the eighteen years that the ISA has held the Junior World Championships. "We were noticed not just for surfing well but for being humble and respectful," Martin says. "We wore our flag around and repped Hawai'i well. Our team was more focused on winning overall gold than individual gold. That's very unique in surfing."

The kids on the under-16 teams will have a chance to return next year, but for the rest the win is a gold-plated bon voyage as they embark on the next stage of their surf journeys. Even though an Olympic

gold medal would be a nice companion to an ISA gold, all the surfers are pursuing a greater prize: the WSL world title, the holy grail of surfing. These competitors-turned-teammates will almost certainly become competitors again.

But even as they turn pro, with all the seriousness and determination it demands, these kids maintain both a sense of adventurousness as well as greater purpose. "I want to surf all the breaks I can," says Crawford, prioritizing process over results. True, too, for Kai-boy Martin: "I just want to travel and get better at surfing," he says. Desoto sees herself doing more with surfing than simply winning: "I want to inspire girls all over the world. I want to share Hawai'i and the culture and the story of surfing."

As for Wong, her love for surfing is unwavering, but her love for competition waxes and wanes. "I really just want to be a good representation of my people," she says, "on a global scale and in my everyday life." **hh**