

# HAROLD “ODDJOB” SAKATA: ATHLETIC HERO OR HEEL?

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*This strong man who could kill with one blow of the hand has so much friendship in that hand to offer. —Bill Fryer*

Harold (Toshiyuki) Sakata (1920-1982) was an Olympic weightlifter, professional wrestler, and film actor, but he is best known for his hat and the secondary role he played as the infamous “Oddjob” in the 1964 James Bond blockbuster *Goldfinger*. Much uncertainty persists, however, about the image Sakata conveyed as a prominent public figure. The first three decades of his life reveal a rags-to-riches story of a struggling Japanese American from an impoverished immigrant family who gained fame in the highest echelon of athletic competition. However, exigencies of the marketplace transformed him from a hero on the weightlifting platform into an anti-hero in the wrestling ring and a villain on the movie screen. Although fame and financial success was his ultimate reward, it obscures the true identity of Harold Sakata, who was a remarkable strength athlete who sought chiefly to share his talents in the entertainment world to enrich the lives of others. Despite his menacing appearance and violent actions, he was not a destroyer. Contrary to the public image he projected, Sakata did not let his celebrity status deter from the natural humane instincts derived from his weightlifting days. He promoted good will rather than ill will and was more in step than out of step with societal norms.



Harold Sakata sports the steel-rimmed bowler hat from his trademark role as “Oddjob” in the 1964 movie, *Goldfinger*.

## BECOMING AN OLYMPIC HERO

The most complete rendering of Sakata’s life and career are Joseph R. Svinth’s biographical treatments in the *Journal of Alternative Perspectives* and the *Encyclopedia of Japanese American History*.<sup>1</sup> A valuable feature of Svinth’s accounts is the background he provides on the Nuuanu YMCA in Honolulu, which became the early center for weightlifting activities in Hawaii. He notes

that it was preceded by organized baseball and the presence of Asian students from Tokyo and Shanghai who attended the YMCA college in Springfield, Massachusetts. Most critical to its establishment were the efforts in 1912-13 of B. M. Matsuzawa of the Tokyo YMCA, who came to Honolulu to open a YMCA for Asians, and Lloyd Killam, a religious leader from the University of Missouri.<sup>2</sup> According to Svinth, “they began offering English and Japanese-language Bible classes in a room at the Central YMCA. During a sabbatical to the Midwest in 1915, Killam convinced several friends to join him in Hawaii, and in 1916 these missionaries began campaigning for an interracial YMCA in the Islands. The existing (white) leadership of the Hawaiian YMCA opposed this, so in March 1917 the missionaries set about raising money for a dedicated Asian facility.”

According to Svinth, the fundraising campaign worked, and they opened the Nuuanu YMCA’s first meeting rooms in April 1918.<sup>3</sup>

When the new facility was dedicated, 600 Japanese sailors were ushered into a luncheon for Korean members. “When the eight Koreans sat calmly and enjoyed their lunch meeting and did not throw a sugar bowl or a dish at one of the naval men,” said Killam afterwards, “I knew that

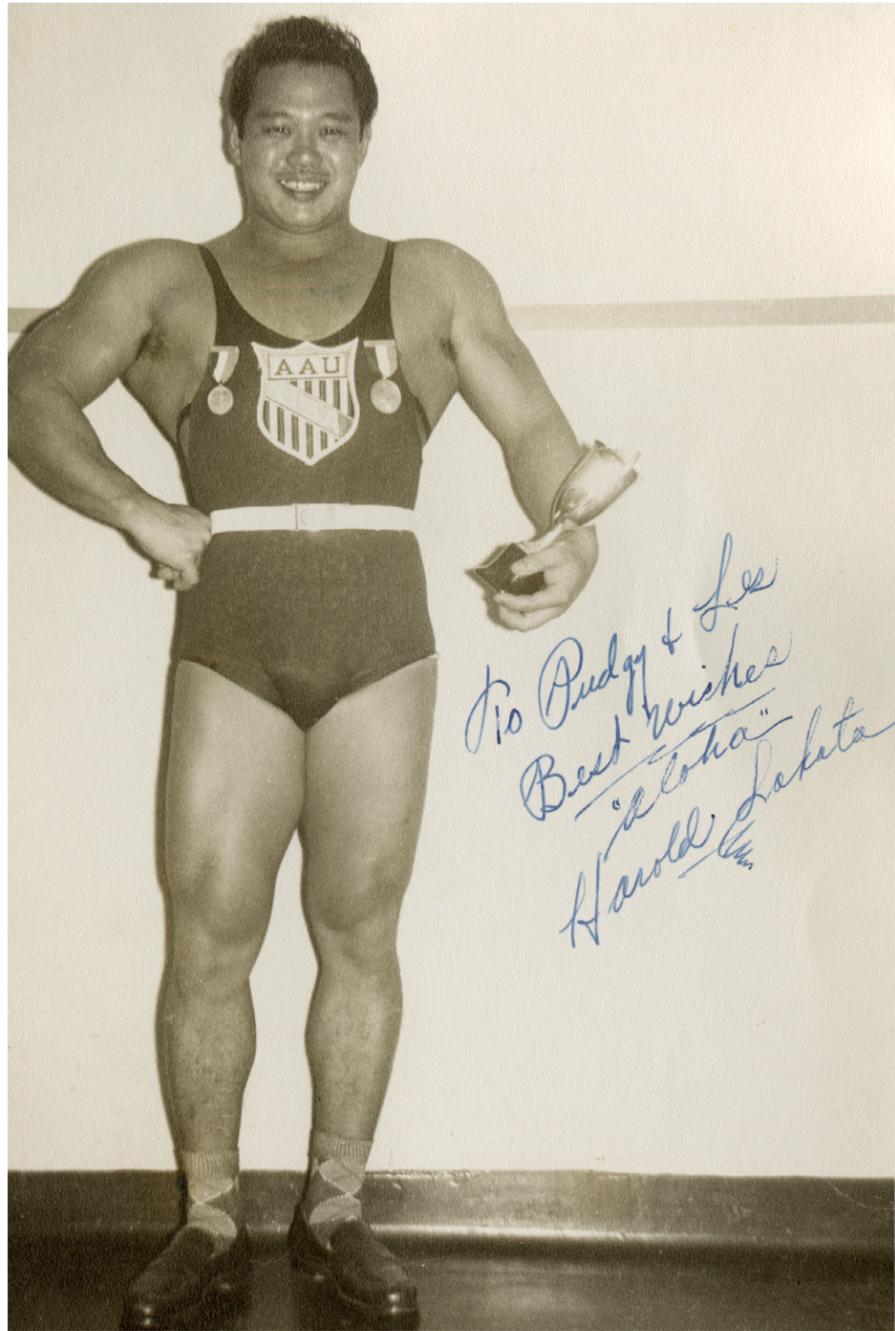
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the inter-racial plan would be a success.” Over the next five years both membership and facilities grew. The large gymnasium was completed in 1922; the swimming pool opened in 1924. By 1937, as Killam proudly noted in articles published in the *Nippu Jiji*, there were 119 boys’ clubs affiliated with the Nuuanu YMCA, and 2,766 young men used the facility on a regular basis.<sup>4</sup> It is unlikely that weightlifting was practiced at this racially segregated facility located at the corner of Fort and Vineyard until the 1930s, but by the time a new Nuuanu YMCA was constructed across the street in 1963 it had gained a reputation as a hotbed for the sport.

Harold Sakata was born on 7 January 1920, on the big island of Hawaii, near Holualoa, the son of Risaburo, an Issei (Japanese immigrant) and Matsue, a Nisei (American born) in a family of six brothers and four sisters. After dropping out of school in 1936, Sakata worked on the family’s coffee farm, then on sugar and pineapple plantations on Maui until he moved to Honolulu in 1938 where he worked variously as a carpenter’s helper, truck driver, stevedore, ditch digger, and finally fireman for the city of Honolulu and Hickam Field. At the outset of World War II, he recalls that “it was rough for the Japanese, even if we were American citizens. Everyone had to wear identification badges, and ours had a black rim that we were restricted. It was ugly.” While working on the waterfront as a stevedore, every time he boarded a ship “a Marine would search me, make me open my lunch bucket. I resented being treated like a spy.”<sup>5</sup> At age eighteen, “Sakata stood 5’8” but weighed only 113 pounds,” notes Svinth, “After seeing some physical culture magazines he decided to start lifting weights ‘so I’d look as good as the other guys.’”<sup>6</sup> When he showed up at the Nuuanu YMCA is unclear, but at an outdoor competition at Kapiolani Park he pressed 190, snatched 210, and clean and jerked 265 for a 665-pound, three-lift total as a middleweight on 28 September 1941.<sup>7</sup>

At a succession of “strength and health” shows in 1942, Sakata increasingly played a major role in the staging of weightlifting competitions while steadily improving his own lifts. At an integrated meet on 5 July 1942 at the



Pudgy and Les Stockton visited Hawaii in 1949, and based on signed photos such as this one by Harold Sakata, they became friends with some of the local Olympic lifters. Sakata signed his picture “To Pudgy & Les, Best Wishes -Aloha- Harold Sakata.”

Central YMCA, he set a record total of 705 pounds with lifts of 205, 220, and 280 at 160 pounds bodyweight, easily surpassing the three other lifters in his class.<sup>8</sup> Over the next year, encouraged by bantamweight champion Richard Tom, his training partner at the Nuuanu gym, Sakata gained strength and became a light-heavyweight. At the annual Hawaiian AAU Weightlifting Championships on 27 June 1943, he clean and jerked 300 pounds to total 780 pounds, just 20 pounds shy of the 800 total registered by John Terpak in winning the Senior National Championships in Los Angeles the previous day.<sup>9</sup> His picture, along

with Tom, who set a world record total at that meet, appeared in the January 1944 issue of *Strength & Health*.<sup>10</sup> Some of Sakata’s progress may be attributed to the nature of his military service in the 1399<sup>th</sup> Engineer Construction Battalion (nicknamed the Chowhounds because of their large appetites), which completed 54 defense-related construction projects, including water tanks, warehouses, airfields, and roads on Oahu. Assigned to the Special Services division at Schofield Barracks, Sakata was able to spend time in the Army at the post gym lifting weights and getting stronger.<sup>11</sup> By the end World War II, he was heralded by the local press as “an up and coming world champion” and “our local pride and joy.”<sup>12</sup> His growing celebrity status was recognized at a benefit dance where he was dubbed the “Strongest Man in Hawaii” and performed, along with other strength athletes doing posing, muscle control, and hand balancing routines. In July 1946, before 500 spectators in the Nuuanu auditorium, Sakata became the fourth Mr. Hawaii amidst a field of 21 contestants.<sup>13</sup> More significantly, on a national level, he totaled 775 pounds at the 1946 Senior Oahu Weightlifting Championships, which was five pounds more than the 770 registered by H. Vinkin of the United States Navy in the 1945 national championships. Then at the territorial championships on 28 June he registered an 825-pound total via lifts of 265, 250, and 310, which was just short of Frank Kay’s 836-pound aggregate at the nationals in early June in Detroit.<sup>14</sup>

Owing to the generosity of the Hawaiian AAU, Sakata was able to compete in the 1947 Junior National Championships in Dallas on 21 June where he posted a total of 800 pounds with a 240 press and snatch and 320 clean and jerk to win the light-heavyweight title. “He showed good form and power in all the lifts,” commented Bob Hoffman, “and will do much better when he has a little more training time in this country.”<sup>15</sup> A week later at the Sr. Nationals in Chicago, as runner up to John Terpak of the York Barbell Club with an 805-pound total via lifts of 240, 250, and 315, Sakata qualified for the upcoming world championships in Philadelphia.<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, he, along with Richard Tom, was invited to train, at Hoffman’s expense, with America’s best weightlifters in York.<sup>17</sup> One of them was Pete George of Akron, Ohio, who would cop the world lightweight title. Pete has “fond memories” of Sakata, who “told me fascinating stories about the Hawaiian Islands.” He never dreamed that he would “spend most of my life there.”

Coming from Ohio, I couldn’t imagine a land in which winter never came. We were in York in late September, and he was complaining how cold it was. One day as we were walking from the Y to the York Barbell Club to train, he lit up a cigarette, but he shortly threw it away so that he could place both hands in his pockets to keep them warm. He then asked me why so many trees in the area were dying. I asked why did he think they were dying.

He said because their leaves were drying up and falling. I told him about deciduous trees, and he said, ‘Oh, yeah, I remember a teacher in grade school telling us about them.’ In contrast to his image as ‘Odd-job’ he was friendly, generous and usually smiling.<sup>18</sup>

At the championships, Sakata finished fourth with an 810½-pound total, behind Terpak (854½), Keeval Day (British Guiana, 815½), and Juhani Vallamo (Finland, 810½), who garnered third by virtue of two pounds less bodyweight. Sakata, however, made a valiant attempt to place second, according to Hoffman, on his final clean and jerk. Wrote Hoffman, “A lot of nice things can be said about Harold Sakata, and one of them is that he has a lot of courage. He has proven himself to be the strongest man in Hawaii and he is not so big either. His weight of 178¾ at this championships does not prove a thing either for he has a lot of surplus weight.” Continuing on this theme, Hoffman wrote, “He had been eating three and four heaping platters at each meal at Dorcas Lehman’s restaurant where the training table for the world’s championship team had been established.” Hoffman also claimed that Sakata had grown fat. “His cheeks puffed out like a squirrel’s with nuts in its mouth, and he had considerable [fat] over all his body. He looked more like a long distance swimmer, which he is, than a weight lifter.” However, Hoffman complimented Sakata, “he showed that there was great power under that smooth, suntanned exterior by a successful second attempt with 325. . . . Sakata tried manfully to make a success with 336, more than he had ever lifted in his life, and narrowly missed success.”<sup>19</sup>

No doubt disappointed that he was the only American not to figure in the team championship scoring, Sakata lapsed into obscurity until the Senior Nationals in June 1948 at the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium, which also served as tryouts for the London Olympics. Hoffman, as American Olympic Coach, was clearly impressed with his performance against formidable competition as he showed improvement on all three lifts and displayed a captivating manner. “We like to see Sakata in action,” wrote Hoffman. “He’s a man of rare courage and confidence, a fighter, he approaches [the bar] as if he owned the Shrine gymnasium, a serious look on his face, he calmly places his feet, and lowers into a perfect starting position with buttocks low, back flat and puts all he has into the lift. . . . Harold showed that he is improved and any man who keeps him off the world champion team this year must be good.”<sup>20</sup>

Although his 830 was 50 pounds less than that of reigning world champion Stan Stanczyk, it was good enough to earn a berth on the Olympic team. In a lead-up to the competition, Hoffman renewed his faith in Sakata as “a good fighter. I like that man Sakata, a nice, smiling fellow normally, possessing a fine likeable personality, when the going is easy he appears cocky and a bit chesty as he walks out to the bar, but when all depends on a lift or two, he approaches the bar with a look of grim determination and he usually makes the lift.”<sup>21</sup> In London, Sakata

fulfilled Hoffman's confidence by posting an 837¼ total, overtaking his nearest rival, Klas "Porky" Magnusson of Sweden, by 11 pounds and surpassing Juhani Vallamo, who had edged him out in 1947 by 55 pounds. It hardly mattered that Stanzyck's winning total of 920¼ was 83 pounds greater. What impressed Hoffman was that Hawaii's strongest man had "come through so gloriously" to win a silver medal and valuable team points for America.<sup>22</sup> The response in Hawaii was even more effusive towards the heroic achievements of Sakata and other native sons, bronze medalist Richard Tom, Emerick Ishakawa, and Richard Tomita upon their return from the Olympics. Speaking for the group, Sakata said they were all capable of lifting more but played it safe because of the strict enforcement of the rules. Given the fact that "more than 600 strong men from 30 nations vied for honors in the lifting competition," observed the *Honolulu Advertiser*, "the Hawaiian lifters made a brilliant showing."<sup>23</sup> The athletes were no less buoyant about their performance. A *Star-Bulletin* article picturing Sakata hoisting his three lightweight teammates makes much of their eagerness to compete again in the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki. Calling it the "biggest thrill" of his life, Sakata "has changed his mind about turning a pro rasser. He wants to try out for the Olympics again in '52 and hopes to do even better than he did in London this year." Coach Henry Koizumi revealed that weightlifting was taking on "aspects of a major sport at the Nuuanu Y" where its weightlifting club had been "flooded with applicants . . . ever since the news of

what the Hawaii boys did in the Olympics."<sup>24</sup>

### GOIN' PRO

How he would turn his silver medal performance into one meriting gold, however, remained unclear. On 18 December 1948, Sakata reportedly "pulled a superman stunt" at the annual Nuuanu YMCA Senior Invitational meet by shattering four Hawaiian heavyweight records. "All during the night Hal had the capacity house cheering him on to new records."<sup>25</sup> Although his 870 total bettered the previous mark by 115 pounds, it fell far short of the winning heavyweight total of 995.5 pounds registered by John Davis at the recent Olympics.<sup>26</sup> Sakata then took a turn at bodybuilding. On 18 March 1949 in front of an estimated audience of 5,000 at the civic auditorium, he won the title of Mr. Waikiki. To Walter Christie, Jr., his victory was more the result of his Olympic fame than the quality of his physique. "While many body building specialists were quick to point out that the massive Sakata lacks muscular definition, the judges' selection was popular with the crowd as a deserved recognition for his Olympic performance." Far more memorable was the performance of guest poser, Clarence Ross, 1945 Mr. America.<sup>27</sup> Sakata's hope of reaching a higher weightlifting echelon persisted through the spring of 1949 but culminated on 22 May in a disappointing third place finish in the heavyweight class at the national championships in Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, Sakata had begun professional wrestling training under the tutelage of Ben Sherman, Hawaii's foremost mat

celebrity. Despite his love for Olympic weightlifting, several compelling factors were driving Sakata to a more remunerative way of life. With three years until the next Olympics, scant improvement in his lifts, and virtually no financial rewards in amateur weightlifting, he rightly reasoned professional wrestling would be a viable alternative. Sakata was led to this way of thinking, according to a 1949 article in the *Pacific Citizen*, when "a very wise man asked me if I were happy. Sure, I said. 'And you're proud of those silver trophies?' Sure I'm proud. 'Now let's see if you can eat them,' he said."<sup>29</sup> The choice was clear. He decided to retire from amateur weightlifting on 14 June and devote his energies fulltime to professional wrestling under the

auspices of promoter Al Karasick who staged wrestling bouts every Sunday night at the civic auditorium.<sup>30</sup>

Sakata's instructor was "Blazing Ben" Sherman, reputed to be one of the world's top grapplers who at one time operated a gymnasium with the legendary George Hackenschmidt in London. Sports reporter Dan McGuire waxed effusive in praising Sherman, "A master of every hold—Greco-Roman or catch-as-catch-can—Sherman has a lot to offer any aspirant to the crown once held by such as Hackenschmidt, Frank Gotch and Strangler Lewis. The Blazer, however, is at his best as far as the crowd is concerned when he shifts to the unorthodox and turns on the showmanship as only he can."<sup>31</sup>

At his debut on 13 August at the Hilo Armory, Sakata, described as "powerful" and "beautifully built," pinned veteran Bucky O'Neill in twelve minutes after a missed drop-kick.<sup>32</sup> On 28 August he "gave the crowd a big thrill" at the Honolulu civic auditorium where he displayed tremendous strength and "a good knowledge of holds" to pin Earl Rasmussen in 7 minutes and 20 seconds with a Boston crab. "His feats of strength brought the house down," reported the *Honolulu Advertiser*.<sup>33</sup> Much to the delight of local fans, Sakata employed the crab and pile driver as well as weightlifting and leverage tactics in subsequent months to defeat a succession of opponents.<sup>34</sup> He also displayed his public spirit and continued commitment to weightlifting in a variety of ways. In the fall of 1949 he conducted weightlifting and bodybuilding classes for high school boys on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons at the Nuuanu YMCA. He also performed feats of strength and assisted with judging at local meets.<sup>35</sup> Svinth explains that as a war veteran and Olympic medalist, "Sakata didn't have to play a heel. Instead, he was billed as 'Mr. Sakata, the Human Tank' and given scripts that allowed him to win using honorable methods."<sup>36</sup> It was a cozy fit whereby he was able to thrive in a less than respected profession in a respectable way.

His way of life changed suddenly, however, when his organization, seeking to capitalize on Sakata's success in the larger wrestling venues of North America, dispatched him for an indefinite stay in the Pacific Northwest. "I'll be there as long as there's money to be made," was his response.<sup>37</sup> His mainland debut took place on 3 April in Seattle where, in scoring a win over Pacific Coast Ju-

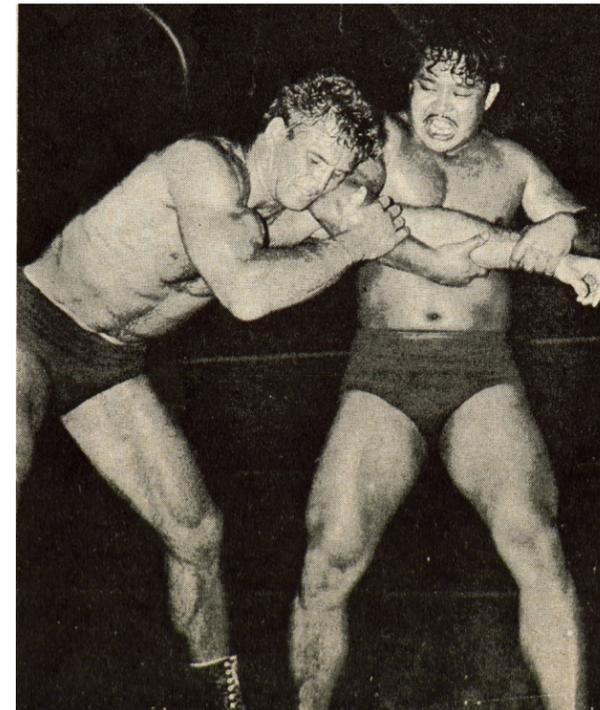
nior Heavyweight Champion Bob Cummins, he created a crowd sensation by wearing a flamboyant Japanese robe, replete with getas (wooden clogs). By July, he told his former weightlifting coach Henry Koizumi, he was averaging five matches a week, mostly in Washington.<sup>38</sup> But, it was a rough-and-tumble existence, as columnist Larry Tajiri of the *Pacific Citizen* observed in January 1951. Sakata was not only performing four or five times weekly, but "appearing on wrestling bills hundreds of miles apart on successive nights. One night, for instance, he headlined a show in Klamath Falls, Ore., and the next night was in Vancouver, British Columbia, more than 400 miles to the north. He has appeared in fishing towns like Nanaimo on British Columbia's Vancouver Island and in cities like Seattle, Portland, Spokane and Tacoma."<sup>39</sup>

He also wrestled throughout Utah, Oregon, and Idaho in the Intermountain West, traveling by train, bus, and plane until he could afford a new sedan, which enabled him to extend his tours to the United States Midwest and Canada.<sup>40</sup> It is not surprising that he eventually sought to return to the more stable and familiar environs of his homeland. He did so by competing in a tag-team match in a tournament staged by his old promoter Al Karasick. He and partner Dave Levin won two out of three falls over Andre Adoree and Wally Dusek. Sakata clinched the match with judo hip throws, followed by a press and pin on Dusek.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile Karasick was making arrangements with Tokyo businessman Moe Lipton and San Francisco promoter Joe Malcewicz to send leading American professional wrestlers to Japan for the benefit of Shriners Crippled Children's Hospitals. Under sponsorship by the Torii Oasis Shrine Club of Tokyo, they would conduct matches in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Yokohama, and Kobe, and perform at American military bases in Japan and Korea. Included in the entourage were Dr. Leonard Hall (Seattle), Bobby Bruns (Chicago), Andre Asselyn (Montreal), Casey Berger (Dallas), Andre Adoree (Los Angeles), and Sakata.<sup>42</sup> According to Svinth, their first show took place at the Tokyo police gym on 25 September for Japanese officers, followed two days later by one for United Nations soldiers recuperating at the Tokyo Army Hospital. "The first public show took place at Tokyo's Memorial Hall on 30 September 1951. According to the *Nippon Times*, Sakata seemed to use a jujitsu



The 1947 United States World Weightlifting Team included several Hawaiian lifters: (back row, L-R) John Davis, Norbert Schemansky, Stan Stanzyck, Harold Sakata; (middle row, L-R) Tony Terlazzo, Frank Spellman, Peter T. George, John Terpak; (front row, L-R) Emerick Ishikawa, Bobby Higgins, Joe DePietro, and Richard Tom.



The link between weightlifting and wrestling has always been strong and at mid-century, with no real way to earn money as a lifter, Sakata's decision to turn to pro wrestling made great economic sense. He's shown here in the January 1953 issue of *Muscle Power* putting an arm lock on bodybuilder Eric Pederson.

trick in his flying hip move to throw the giant Casey Berger.” In succeeding weeks, while the wrestlers entertained numerous audiences in Southern Japan, they were joined by former world heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis (1937-1949). Svinth makes much of Louis’s impact at these shows. On 2 December when the troupe reached Yokahama, he took on six opponents in a match. On another occasion, one of Louis’s adversaries, a Navy heavyweight champion named Lee Giles, was intimidated by his size, noting that “when I walked out to face the guy, I couldn’t see around him. Luckily it was an exhibition. He moved in a kind of halting way. You know that shuffle that he had? I was fast enough to keep away. So I did everything but run. I was Ali without the sting. I remember hitting him once, right in the forehead. It was like hitting a wall.”<sup>43</sup>

It appears from Svinth’s account, that the wrestlers were often upstaged by Louis in match promotions. Most significant of the details that can be gleaned about Sakata is that he was adept at speaking conversational Japanese and that he took this opportunity to marry a Japanese woman named Lita Ohki while in Tokyo.<sup>44</sup>

A less than rosy picture of Louis’s involvement with the tour is provided in Red McQueen’s report in the *Honolulu Advertiser* which states that his appearances were “such colossal flops” that the Brown Bomber and his handlers decided to leave “considerably in advance of their schedule.” Most programs consisted of two or three wrestling matches followed by Louis’ exhibition, but McQueen’s informants told him that “Japan fans for the most part have been giving the shows a wide berth. . . . According to Harold Sakata, local weightlifting champ who is in the grappling group, they were doing a lot better with their own shows before Louis was brought in as the big come-on. The wrestlers are happy that he is leaving.” Nor was there any more discussion by Karasick about the possibility that Louis might referee a wrestling match or give an armed forces exhibition in Honolulu on his return journey.<sup>45</sup>

Upon returning to Hawaii in January 1952 Sakata resumed his local wrestling performances where he encountered former Mr. USA and strongman Armand Tanny of Santa Monica, California. On 16 March he handed Sakata a rare defeat when he countered an airplane spin with a backdrop, followed by a press and pin in a match that lasted 13 minutes and 22 seconds.<sup>46</sup> On 14 and 15

March Sakata had an opportunity to renew old friendships with Hawaii’s Olympic weightlifters by serving as “featured performer” at a Japan vs. Hawaii International Goodwill Weightlifting Tournament at the civic auditorium where he displayed feats of strength. Organized by Dr. Richard You, AAU Committee Chairman, the two-day muscle show featured four Hawaiian weightlifters against an equivalent group of Japan’s best and included a Mr. and Miss Nisei physique contest. All proceeds went to the general Olympic fund that enabled Hawaiian weightlifters to compete in the national championships at New York City in June 1952, which also served as tryouts for the Helsinki Games a month later.<sup>47</sup> It was the occasion when a Hawaiian contingent of Ed Bailey, Emerick Ishikawa, John Odo, Richard Tom, Richard Tomita, and George Yoshioka, under You’s guidance, upset the York Barbell Club after a reign of twenty years. Sakata, of course, contributed to the weightlifting culture that led to this victory by his exemplary performances over the previous decade. Likewise, Tommy Kono, who would become Hawaii’s greatest weightlifter, contributed indirectly in a no less critical way. Representing the U.S. Army, Kono denied York Barbell valuable team points by outscoring its champions, Frank Spellman and Joe Pitman, in the lightweight class.<sup>48</sup>



Harold Sakata’s wrestling persona was “Tosh Togo,” named after his middle name—Toshiyuki—and a famous Japanese admiral.

In May, Sakata returned to the Pacific Northwest and for the next two years wrestled throughout North America. During this time, Sakata shed his “good guy” image to become a heel with the pseudonym of Tosh Togo. Becoming a villain enabled him to become “one of wrestling’s most colorful performers,” according to a 1964 account: “In the ring, Togo’s great strength, his knowledge of karate and judo and the coldly expressionless countenance which he can assume at will combine to make him one of the ring’s great villains. He is often booed and hissed as he enters the ring in his ceremonial robes. But like Liberace he does his smiling on the way to the bank.” Sakata is quoted in that article as saying, “Cheerful-looking wrestlers die broke. In my own case, I didn’t make much money when I first started out as a clean-cut college boy type. Then one day the audience started booing me and I knew I had found the secret of success in the ring.”<sup>49</sup>

Sakata adopted the name Tosh Togo, “because Toshiyuki is my middle name and Togo was a great man in Japan. Not Tojo—Togo, the admiral who outmaneuvered

the Russians in 1906” in the Battle of Tsushima Straits, Svinth noted.<sup>50</sup> While touring on the mainland wrestling circuit, Sakata entertained American audiences by breaking bricks with his bare hands, a skill he learned from Korean karate master Mas Oyama.<sup>51</sup> In 1954, as Tosh Togo, he returned to his Big Island home where his wife gave birth to a son, Jon Tatsumi Sakata, on 15 September and he wrestled several matches. The Hilo newspaper referred to him as a fan favorite, a “former Kona boy who made the big time in pro wrestling” and “one of the strongest men in the world.”<sup>52</sup> In Honolulu, however, Sakata showed evidence of his new villainous persona. In January 1955, the *Advertiser* referred to him as “naturally strong” and a wrestler who has “learned his ropes well during a trip to the mainland and uses his great strength and knowledge of judo effectively. Like most of today’s wrestlers, Sakata plays it rough and for keeps. He says it doesn’t make a hit with fans, but it wins the matches and creates greater demand for his services.”<sup>53</sup>

From 1955 to 1958 Sakata spent most of his time wrestling in Japan, during which time he and his wife had a daughter named Glenna. He also did tours of India, Pakistan, and other Asian countries. In 1959 he was a “hot card” in Texas and became a favorite of television audiences.<sup>54</sup> On returning to Hawaii in 1962 after an extensive tour of Europe, Tosh was described as “a ‘compact’ wrestler, small as heavyweights go, but with tremendous strength and stamina and the experience and skill necessary to remain among the top-ranked wrestlers for the past decade.”<sup>55</sup> On 7 July an estimated 3,000 fans watched him pin Lou (Shoulders) Newman of British Columbia in two out of three falls at the Kona Lions 16<sup>th</sup> District Fair in Kealahou. As a preliminary, Sakata also gave a karate exhibition where he broke three one-inch boards held by referees with the ball of his foot, broke a brick in half with his hand, bent a 50-penny railroad spike, and twisted a beer can into an S-shape.<sup>56</sup> Seemingly contrary to his villainous ring role, he took the opportunity during visits to the Islands to engage in public service activities for his homeland. Though not otherwise displaying an interest in politics, he assisted Duke Kawasaki, with whom he had served in the 1399<sup>th</sup> Engineer Construction Battalion during World War II, in a heated 5<sup>th</sup> District (Maui) Senate race. He also continued offering physical education classes at the Nuuanu YMCA.<sup>57</sup>

#### A HIGHER FORM OF VILLAINY

In early 1963 Sakata toured Australia, where he wrestled under the name of Tosh Tojo, reminiscent of Japan’s World War II Prime Minister, Hideki Tojo, in an attempt to incite fans against him.<sup>58</sup> He then went to Great Britain where he was “discovered” by producers Harry Saltzman and Albert R. Broccoli who were casting actors for their upcoming film *Goldfinger* starring Sean Connery as James Bond. They saw him on TV in a televised main event being held in Birmingham, England.<sup>59</sup> The film was based on Ian Fleming’s 1959 novel in which Bond uncovers a gold-smuggling operation by the nefarious Auric Goldfinger that would contaminate the United States Bul-

lion Depository at Fort Knox. Much of Goldfinger’s dirty work was carried out by a Korean henchman named Oddjob, whose physical talents bordered on the miraculous. Goldfinger proudly referred to him as “my handy man. . . . I call him Oddjob because that describes his functions on my staff.” Exactly what those functions entailed was clarified for James Bond, with Goldfinger’s statement, “We will have a demonstration.”

He pointed at the thick oak bannisters that ran up the stairs. The rail was a massive six inches by four thick. The Korean obediently walked over to the stairs and climbed a few steps. He stood with his hands at his sides, gazing across at Goldfinger like a good retriever. Goldfinger gave a quick nod. Impressively the Korean lifted his right hand high and straight above his head and brought the side of it down like an axe across the heavy polished rail. There was a splintering crash and the rail sagged, broken through the centre. Again the hand went up and flashed down. This time it swept right through the rail leaving a jagged gap. Splinters clattered down on to the floor of the hall. The Korean straightened himself and stood to attention, waiting for further orders. There was no flush of effort in his face and no hint of pride in his achievement.<sup>60</sup>

Duly impressed by Oddjob’s great strength, Bond asked casually, “Why does the man always wear that bowler hat?” While Oddjob held the household cat he was savoring for dinner, Goldfinger pointed to a wooden panel near the fireplace: “Still holding the cat under his left arm, Oddjob turned and walked stolidly back towards them. When he was half way across the floor, and without pausing or taking aim, he reached up to his hat, took it by the rim and flung it sideways with all his force. There was a loud clang. For an instant the rim of the bowler hat stuck an inch deep in the panel Goldfinger had indicated, then it fell and clattered on the floor.”<sup>61</sup> The implication of these violent stunts was that Oddjob could easily dispose of Bond at a moment’s whim from Goldfinger. “You see my power, Mr. Bond. I could easily have killed you or maimed you.”<sup>62</sup>

Whether Sakata could fulfill this murderous role convincingly on film was the object of an impromptu screen test at the producer’s London office. “He won the role of Oddjob easily,” according to a subsequent report, “demonstrating his strength by kicking off the mantel of Saltzman’s fireplace with his bare foot.”<sup>63</sup> According to Sakata’s version of his hiring, he showed up with a couple bricks and a board to show he was no weakling. “The director said ‘Harold, we know you’re strong. You don’t have to prove it’ but the kids in the crew looked disappointed so I gave the bricks a bare chop and snapped the

board with my hand and that made everybody happy—even the director, since the next thing I knew I was standing in line to sign a contract.”<sup>64</sup>

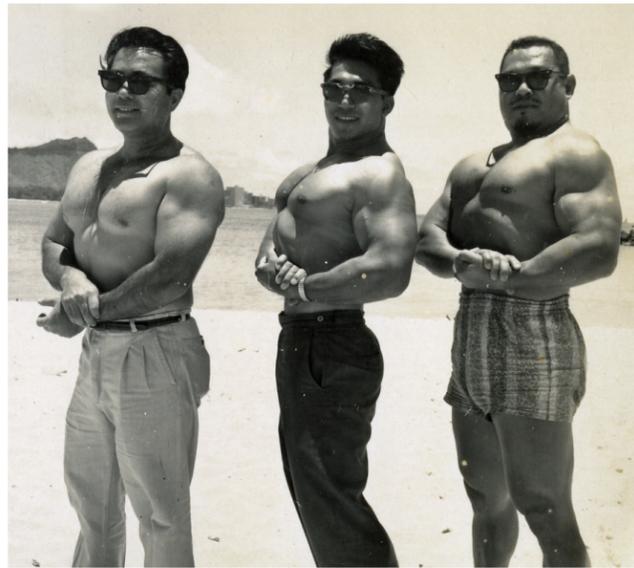
When asked whether snapping off a head with the brim of his hat was easy, Sakata responded, “Sure. After five and a half months of practice. It’s not the throwing; it’s the whip, the spin, the slicing blade. Like a boomerang that doesn’t come back. I worked with a plaster statue of a girl and aimed for the neck. It got so I could topple the head off every time. It made me very conscious of necks. Every time I’d meet a pretty girl, I’d say ‘My, you have an attractive neck.’ I really felt terrible about that lovely girl in the film. ‘Can’t I kill an old ugly one?’ I asked the producer. ‘No Oddjob,’ he said.”<sup>65</sup>

Director Guy Hamilton found Sakata to be an “absolutely charming man,” according to Bond biographer Laurent Bouzerau. “He had a very unique way of moving, [so] in creating Oddjob I used all of Harold’s own characteristics.”<sup>66</sup> However, during the filming of *Goldfinger* in the summer of 1964 Hamilton did not think Sakata’s behind the neck judo chop of Sean Connery looked realistic enough in one of the scenes, noted columnist Eddie Sherman. “When Togo tried it again, he really applied the muscle. Connery didn’t report for work till three days later.”<sup>67</sup> Given his professional wrestling background as a heel, Sherman claimed that the role of a cold-blooded Korean killer fit Sakata to a T. “For sheer brutality, his performance as Oddjob tops anything he ever attempted in the ring. For a starter, he kills one attractive girl by painting her body with heavy gold paint. Another beauty he calmly dispatches by breaking her neck with his heavy metal-brimmed hat. And in a violent judo encounter with James Bond, he gives Fleming’s indestructible hero the fright of his life.” The most electrifying scene in the movie, however, comes at the end when the seemingly indestructible muscle man is electrocuted while trying to retrieve his steel-rimmed derby from a grill into which Bond has hurled a live wire.<sup>68</sup>

Initially Sakata was worried about whether he was good enough to play the role until Ian Fleming made a rare appearance on the set one day. “He looked at me and told me that I was a better Oddjob than he could have ever imagined. I cannot be more pleased.” Sakata also had great affection for Fleming who died of a heart attack soon thereafter without ever seeing the completed film. “When I was working on *Goldfinger*,” he recalls, “the producer wanted

me clean shaven, but Fleming insisted I keep my mustache because it made me more sinister.”<sup>69</sup> It was “Oddjob, who makes the strongest impression in *Goldfinger*,” is the view of Bond biographer Steven Jay Rubin. “Sakata’s only dialogue in the entire film is a series of grunts and groans, but one look at his immense, sumo wrestler-like bulk made audiences shudder. In person, he was a kind, gentle man, who was always careful to avoid hurting his acting partners. In the film as a massive, indestructible ‘wicked oriental’, stuffed into ridiculous formal wear and equipped with the razor sharp bowler, Oddjob became the prototypical Bond villain. After *Goldfinger*, the writers were always dreaming up Oddjob types to fight Bond.”<sup>70</sup>

By November 1964, *Goldfinger* was breaking all box-office records in Britain, according to Hamilton. “You are a real knock-out in the film,” he told Sakata, “and a big name in this country.”<sup>71</sup> Soon he and his bowler hat were scheduled for guest appearances at movie premieres in the United States and Asia and tapped for a mean role in a Kraft Suspense Theater production in Hollywood.<sup>72</sup> In Germany, Sakata became a national hero, according to one press report. “Everywhere I go people ask for my autograph and shake my hand,” he asserted, and he had many movie offers. A sure sign of his newfound celebrity status was the creation of a cocktail called the “OJ-7” in London.<sup>73</sup> His likeness stands at the entrance to the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum in London, and his spectacular screen death received coverage in



Harold Sakata loved to hang out with the Olympic lifters of the Nuuanu YMCA when he got a chance to return to Hawaii. Emerick Ishikawa, Tommy Kono, and Sakata participate in a friendly “Best Chest” competition during one of their reunions at the beach. They remained friends to the end.

*Life* magazine, which called it “Shocking, shocking!”<sup>74</sup> To what extent Sakata’s portrayal of Oddjob contributed to the film’s popularity cannot be determined, but worldwide box office receipts for *Goldfinger* eventually reached \$124,900,000, far in excess of the \$3,000,000 production cost.<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile Sakata, unsure of his stardom from a movie in which he spoke not a word, continued his wrestling career, albeit with uneven success. He would occasionally lose a bout, but his worldwide fame greatly enhanced crowd appeal and tripled his salary.<sup>76</sup> It was based on his image of Toshi Togo as being one of the meanest villains in motion pictures and in the wrestling arena. Ironically, it contrasts with the Harold Sakata in real life. Aside from the rigors of movie-making and wrestling tours, he led an easy-going and non-violent lifestyle in lavish homes he owned in Honolulu and Tokyo and sought every oppor-

tunity to reinforce ties with his family on the Big Island.<sup>77</sup> When home, he continued to conduct his weekly weightlifting lessons at the Nuuanu YMCA and was always available to perform for charity events. In December 1964, he was on the program of the annual Honolulu Christmas Fund Show to wrestle karate expert Fuji Fujiwara at the Honolulu civic center to assist needy families.<sup>78</sup> When the new Shriners Hospital was constructed in May 1966, he was named director of the physical training program.<sup>79</sup> In a 1965 interview for *Playboy*, Sean Connery confirms the kindhearted nature of Sakata’s off-screen personality. When asked whether he was as strong as he looked, Connery responded, “tremendously so. He knows karate and judo and wrestling and weight lifting. With it all, though, he is a very sweet man, very gentle.”<sup>80</sup> Indeed, Sakata described himself as “a gentle man, not a criminal at large. I have a daughter 8 and a son 11 who live here [Honolulu] with my former wife. Kids and women are fascinated by my hat.”<sup>81</sup> He told Gene Hunter that “he’d like to change the image of evil he projects on the screen. ‘I’m marked now as a killer,’ he said. ... But when Sakata assumes the grim, heartless expression of Oddjob and menacingly fingers the steel-brimmed black hat he used to break the neck of that beautiful girl in *Goldfinger*, he doesn’t look like a man destined to be cast as a kindly parish priest.” The hat with which he killed and in turn was killed in the movie “remains his trademark. ‘Wherever I go, I wear that,’ Sakata said. ‘You should see the commotion it causes. It frightens the women, but they still want to touch it.’”<sup>82</sup> As John Hagner, founder of the Hollywood Stuntmen’s Hall of Fame assures us: “In almost every film there’s that one moment of extraordinary action which is the focal point of the entire movie, a moment seldom forgotten by the public.”<sup>83</sup>

How difficult it was for Sakata to escape his villainous image was revealed in an interview conducted by Honolulu celebrity columnist Cobey Black. About his latest film, *The Poppy Is Also a Flower*, Sakata complained to Black: “I am a trafficker in opium, and in the picture before that, *Death Travels in a Box*, I am in the box—doing all the nasty killing again. If the public likes the image, I’m not going to fight it, but not long ago I said to my agent, I’m tired of the dirty work. Must I always be a killer? ‘What would you rather do?’ he asked. ‘I’d like to hold beautiful girls in my strong arms very gently,’ I said.”<sup>84</sup>

The harshness of Sakata’s screen personality was ameliorated somewhat by the charitable nature of his film’s release to the public. Sakata was one of 20 stars and featured performers, including Angie Dickinson, Rita Haworth, Yul Brenner, Trevor Howard, Anthony Quinn, and Omar Sharif, who donated their talents to a televised version for the United Nations International Children’s Emergency (UNICEF). It also featured a prologue by Princess Grace of Monaco, and tickets for the Vienna premier attended by European royalty in March 1966 cost \$100. “I’m only a former Kona boy who’s not had too much schooling,” was Sakata’s stunned reaction.<sup>85</sup> “I met kings, queens, princes, ambassadors—all kinds of dignitaries—during my three weeks in Europe. And Europe’s top mov-

ie stars.”<sup>86</sup> It was an unforgettable experience. These benefits enabled Sakata to hobnob with the rich and famous on yachts and private homes in the Mediterranean.<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps the most poignant example of Sakata’s considerate nature occurred during the dissolution of his marriage in the early 1960s. According to Gary Sumida, son-in-law of the great weightlifter Tommy Kono:

My Father in Law said that one day Harold had picked him up to go somewhere, though he didn’t say exactly where they were going. After he got into the car, Harold told my father-in-law that he needed to stop at the Papeete Bar at the old Waki-kian Hotel. Harold’s wife was a waitress there, so Tommy didn’t think anything odd about that. However, at some point during the car ride, Harold asked my father if he knew a particular bartender, who worked there. Tommy said ‘Yes, I know the guy.’ At which point Harold told Tommy that before Hal had gone on his last wrestling tour on the mainland, he had asked that bartender to look after his wife while he was gone. Well, turns out that the bartender made the obvious mistake in charming Hal’s wife while he was gone. And now Hal was gonna go talk to that guy. Tommy was now afraid for that bartender’s life. He told me that if Hal went after the guy, he did not think he could stop Hal from hurting the guy...real bad. So, he braced for the worst. When they got there, he said the bartender took a look at Hal’s face and knew that Hal knew what was going on. Hal told the guy he wanted to sit down and talk to him, and the guy knowing that he could not out run Hal obliged. All 3 of them sat at a table. Hal looked the guy in the eye and told him that he was divorcing his wife. He also told him that he had better take care of her well and make her happy, or else. Then he stood up and walked out.<sup>88</sup>

Whether Sakata was ever less than loyal to his wife, though he had ample opportunities, cannot be determined, but his prolonged international trips either for wrestling or movie-making undoubtedly took a toll on the marriage.

#### THE FRUITS OF FAME

By the mid-1960s Sakata had enjoyed fame in three disparate areas which required him to display his muscular might. Almost every local newspaper reference to him makes mention of his weightlifting heroics of yesteryear. Upon returning home for a rest in January 1966, he headed straight for the Nuuanu YMCA where he was doing lots of weightlifting “to get back in shape,” and said, “I sure miss the sweat and smell of the game.” At the an-



Harold Sakata's wrestling and acting careers put a strain on his family life in the early 1960s. Here he is in happier times with his wife, Lita Ohki, and their children in 1958.

nual state AAU weightlifting championships in July 1966, he offered a trophy to any competitor who could better his 17-year-old total record.<sup>89</sup> Though much in demand for personal appearances as well as for movie and television acting roles, Sakata continued his wrestling engagements in Hawaii and overseas. "Tosh is big stuff in Europe," noted the *Star-Bulletin*, "with autographers hounding him."<sup>90</sup> When he purchased a new Mercedes-Benz in 1967, Sakata got red-carpet treatment from the dealer with a custom-made gold-hat on the front of the vehicle.<sup>91</sup> Toy and gimmick manufacturers created replicas of the man with the lethal hat in dolls, puppets, miniatures, and puzzles.<sup>92</sup> Another signifier of his celebrity status came from him being easily recognizable in public. Once when strolling down a street in Cologne, Germany, he was approached by a young woman who asked if he was the actor who was in *Goldfinger*. Sakata politely doffed his bowler, bowed, and answered affirmatively. Soon he and the young woman, Hilda Deatrech, were engaged and she was working as a hostess at the Pagoda Restaurant in Honolulu and studying hotel management. On another occasion, while he was visiting a Barcelona nightclub, a customer recognized Sakata and insisted on talking to him. It happened to be world-renowned, surrealist artist Salvador Dali, but Sakata had never heard of him.<sup>93</sup>

While televised appearances of his wrestling matches and guest appearances, such as the one on the premier of the new *Jerry Lewis Show* in September 1967, kept Sakata and his hat before the public eye, there emerged in early 1968 an opportunity to display his strength and villainous behavior.<sup>94</sup> Al Ricketts' column in the *Star-Bulletin* sheds light on how Sakata embarked on this new phase of fame with Vicks Formula 44 cough medicine. Ricketts

describes how the physical culture values instilled in him as a youth trying to get strong and healthy caused Sakata initially to turn down this lucrative commercial offer. "I refused because it's a cough medicine and I felt that it wasn't for me," explained Sakata. "I'm a healthy man" and "I stay in shape because it's part of my job." However, after thinking it over, he decided to do it. "You've seen the commercials, I'm sure," writes Ricketts.

Old Oddjob comes home from a hard day at the office and breaks up the house with his coughing spells. Tables, chairs, lamps and windows are smashed before his wife finally reaches him with a spoonful of cough medicine.

'You should see the new one coming out this fall,' grins Sakata. 'This time I'm breaking up a whole city block! Impossible but it happens. I don't know where it's going to end. This time I'm coming home on the bus. I step out into a beautiful residential district. I'm smiling.

I'm smiling because the day has been so beautiful. All of a sudden a sneaky cough comes up to me . . . and a fence goes down! Before I know it I slam again and a tree goes down. And when the tree goes down the birds start singing.

All the way to my home the cough is building up. All of a sudden a stone wall goes down. Then my hat falls off and my uncontrollable hand slams down on a fire hydrant. The fire trucks come. By this time I'm home and I'm supposed to knock, but instead of the knock I cough and my hand goes right through the door!<sup>95</sup>

In a sudden appearance on *The Tonight Show*, Sakata walked on the stage as Johnny Carson was introducing the show's lineup and utterly demolished the set with his hands, feet, and hat, leaving the host stunned and able only to utter, "That's a damn nasty cough."<sup>96</sup> In these televised performances, as in his movie and wrestling roles, Sakata spoke not a word, but used his muscles to convey a more powerful message.

So pleased was the Vicks organization with Sakata's coughing fits that it offered him a three-year contract for eight more episodes, all with a destructive theme.<sup>97</sup> Although he continued his wrestling engagements in Hawaii and abroad, his agent, Lew Sherrill, was always putting together more picture deals for Sakata. Such was Sakata's popularity that he was invited to a weeklong, all-expense paid, guest appearance at the Warner Brothers studio in Hollywood, along with the likes of Frank Sinatra and other celebrities. "Oddjob is moving up," quipped the *Honolulu*



When Arnold Schwarzenegger visited Hawaii in 1969, he and Paul Graham, a bodybuilding friend from Australia, met with Hawaii's lifting royalty. Seated next to Arnold is Sakata, Paul Graham (leaning forward), Tommy Kono, and Emerick Ishikawa (kneeling). Seated on the floor are Richard Tomita, holding a photo album, and Richard Tom.

*Star-Bulletin*, "but his black homburg still fits."<sup>98</sup>

Indeed, Sakata was never distracted by the glitter and gold of movie culture or lost sight of his humble origins. Although he traveled the four corners of the world to act and wrestle before audiences of tens of thousands, he sought every opportunity to visit his family on Kona and to renew his weightlifting friendships on Oahu. In May 1968, the latter gained new meaning when Sakata, Emerick Ishikawa, Richard Tom, and Richard Tomita sought to promote a revival of the sport to the golden days of 1948. "Once upon a time," observed columnist Jim Easterwood in the *Star-Bulletin*, "when Tommy Kono was in his prime—weightlifting was a big thing in Honolulu. But now it's slowly withering on the athletic vine," owing in part to Tommy's leaving to coach Olympians in Mexico. University of Hawaii student Pat Omori, ranked sixth nationally as a bantamweight, was the only lifter left with championship potential. What Sakata and Ishikawa planned, with support from Dr. You, was a "get-together" at the Kanraku Tea House for old-time weightlifters and new ones to stimulate interest.<sup>99</sup> Further, to encourage the kind of camaraderie needed to generate enthusiasm, Sakata hosted a feast at his "palatial pad," featuring

whale meat, squid, and octopus, with abundant beverages for former weightlifting greats along with muscle boosters from other sports. "There's talk of forming a weightlifting association with 'Oddjob' as head," reported the *Star-Bulletin* "with the idea to promote an Olympic weightlifting champ in 1972. 'Munich should be the greatest Olympics yet,' said Sakata, 'and Hawaii will be represented. . . . I'm sure of that.'" Any athletes with championship ambitions were encouraged to call him personally at 949-3682.<sup>100</sup> No Hawaiian weightlifters qualified for the Munich Olympics, and only Omori (1977 and 1979) and John Yamauchi (1972, 1975 and 1976) became national champions over the next decade. However, other future Hawaiian champions, including Brian Miyamoto, Brian Okada, Mike Harada, and Russ Ogata, benefited from the upswing in activity generated during this period by former greats of the game.

For Sakata, this involvement went beyond occasional reunions, social events, and his own regular coaching at the Nuuanu YMCA. It included a strongman performance on Thursday evenings at the international ballroom of the Pagoda Restaurant and Hotel where his fiancé worked.<sup>101</sup> According to *Advertiser* columnist Wayne Harada, it took place within a "Tokyo-type revue—col-

orfully costumed, pleasantly paced and musically varied” 2½-hour program that offered “a tasty sampling” of Japan and Okinawa.

But Oddjob steals the show. His appearance is not widely publicized; that’s because he is not firmly committed to the show. If a movie role or a wrestling match takes him away from Honolulu, the teahouse show goes on minus his might.

He quips about his Vicks 44 commercials—‘I dare not cough,’ he muses with tongue firmly in cheeks—as he slips out of his getas (wooden slippers) and kimono to reveal his karate outfit. With his hand, with his foot he splits pieces of wood with remarkable ease. (Yes; he brings his hat, too).

And he also hurls a barbell in mid-air positions. Entertaining? You bet.<sup>102</sup>

Contrary to sports fans who underestimate weightlifting as lacking drama and action, it meant virtually everything in life for Sakata. “Weightlifting has been good to me,” he mused in 1970. It enabled him to gain fame and affluence and to lead varied careers in wrestling, movies, television, and commercials. “It’s been a good life. The struggle and hard work early in life built up my body and

discipline and weightlifting gave me the chance I needed to make something out of life.”<sup>103</sup>

During the 1970s Sakata, as Tosh Togo, became a household name as much for his television appearances and commercials, where he increasingly assumed talking roles, as for his films. Often in these engagements, the killer hat excited as much interest and villainous identity as the man. Sakata’s movie roles post-*Goldfinger* followed a familiar pattern established in his wrestling career of a heavy on the wrong side of morality and justice. In what was billed “the most amazing spy thriller of all time,” Sakata played the role of Big Buddha in *Dimension 5*, where he headed an Asian crime ring that intended to destroy the city of Los Angeles with a hydrogen bomb. The plot is foiled, of course, and Big Buddha dies in the process. But according to reviewer Dave Sindelar,

it comes across as if someone had been told about James Bond style thrillers, and decided to make one of his own without the benefit of having seen any of the originals. Yes, there are pretty girls and suave spies who specialize in witty repartee. However, the story would easily fit into thirty minutes of a real James Bond thriller, the pacing is non-existent, the repartee painful, the music anonymous and without any of the brassy charm of a real James Bond soundtrack. About the only thing that really comes across as Bondian



In this movie still, Harold Sakata, playing Oddjob, prepares to throw his hat and decapitate a statue on Goldfinger’s estate. Sean Connery, who played James Bond, and Gert Frobe, who played Auric Goldfinger, look on.

is the presence of Harold ‘Oddjob’ Sakata as the main villain, and even he’s been dubbed by [voice actor] Paul Frees.<sup>104</sup>

A few years later he had another Buddhist role in a Universal Studios pilot for a television series called *Sarge*. At last, Sakata had an opportunity to be a good guy who carried out the muscle work for Academy Award-winning star George Kennedy, who plays a San Diego police detective sergeant who becomes a priest in his former precinct to avenge the hoodlums who murdered his wife. As a friendly cook without his Oddjob attire or attitude of a cold-blooded killer, there is nothing distinctive about Sakata’s role. Although he gets to speak, much of Sakata’s talent is wasted in this softer version of himself.<sup>105</sup> In one episode, however, he has a stronger role. “I smash four guys. When I was going home they try to jump on me.” But it was trivial for Sakata who had been jumped on many times in his wrestling career. “My talent is for action. Since I’m a good guy in this one I don’t hit people first. But when they start hitting me, that’s another story.”<sup>106</sup> Despite favorable public reaction, the series, pitted against CBS’s *Hawaii Five-O* and *The ABC Tuesday Movie of the Week*, was broadcast for just one season from September 1971 to January 1972.<sup>107</sup>

A more consequential experience for Sakata was his role as Karate Pete in *Impulse*, a horror film starring William Shatner who plays a serial killer of wealthy widows. But much of the horror stems from Sakata who brought to the screen a character, according to a contemporary account, “so sinister, moviegoers will be talking about him for years to come.” His performance evoked “a sense of terror not felt since Boris Karloff first stalked across the graveyards of England.” Even more intense was the physical abuse Sakata had to endure during the screening. “In *Impulse*, Harold was beaten by the whirling brushes of a car wash, scalded by steaming water, hot-waxed, hung by his neck, battered his hands through tables (not break-away but real tables) and car windows, then run over by an automobile! Not one word of protest nor complaint, instead, Harold was the recipient of many admiring glances at the end of that grueling night as he calmly lit his pipe and walked away, stopping once to look back with a sullen glare . . . which immediately broke into a wide grin.”<sup>108</sup>

Quite the most serious and disconcerting aspect of this ordeal was a fight scene with Shatner that simulated a hanging. Only quick action by Shatner, who slipped the rope off his neck, and Sakata’s strong neck muscles gained from years of wrestling saved him from death. Despite these brutal experiences on and off screen, Sakata was regarded by fellow actors and crew as “the most gentle of men. Polite in the tradition of his ancestors, he is a joy to be with. A ready smile under any circumstances, Harold brushed off his close call with death.”<sup>109</sup> For him the making of *Impulse* provided an opportunity to enjoy fishing in the waters off the Florida coast and to savor fresh sashimi daily in Tampa.<sup>110</sup>

Although Sakata never ceased appealing to audi-

ences, his subsequent movie roles were less impactful. In *The Wrestler*, his characterization of Oddjob is minimized in a swirl of dozens of other stars and or promoters. Gene Siskel gave it two out of four stars in the *Chicago Tribune*, noting that it was as “predictable” as a wrestling match. “All of the material outside the ring seems phony compared to the real phoniness inside the ropes.”<sup>111</sup> *Mako: The Jaws of Death* (1976) and *The Happy Hooker Goes to Washington* (1977) were two other low-budget films in which Sakata had minor roles. The former, he observed while basking in the sunshine of Puerto Rico during its filming, was strikingly similar to the 1975 blockbuster *Jaws*. “We all get eaten,” he chuckled. “The shark is a superstar—he refuses to die in this movie.”<sup>112</sup> In *Goin’ Coconuts* (1978), a frivolous confection designed to showcase the fun-loving personalities of Donnie and Marie Osmond, Sakata appears incongruously as a heavy-handed henchman of a petty crime lord. It was the last of a series of movie roles in which he struggled to reinforce and redefine his identity as an actor. It was only his role as Oddjob that continued to resonate with television audiences in rebroadcasts of *Goldfinger* throughout the 1970s.<sup>113</sup> As the *Star-Bulletin* observed in September 1978, “Togo can’t shake his image as ‘Odd Job,’ the character he played in the Bond movie ‘Goldfinger.’ He just got a call to zip to Haolewood [sic] to play a heavy in an ‘Adventure’ TV movie. ‘Oh, and bring your black suit and the steel-brimmed bowler hat,’ they said.”<sup>114</sup>

Sakata simply could not escape the kind of fame he had unintentionally brought on himself as he transitioned into the movie culture. He continued to attract much favorable attention, not only by his repeated television appearances, but on those occasions, even in ill-health, when he mingled with the public. Ben Wood reported in May 1981 that Sakata had

recently returned from London where he was photographed for a Range Rover magazine ad in his formal Oddjob attire—morning coat, striped trousers, and deadly, steel-brimmed hat. The ad was shot on the same spot where Oddjob crushed a golf ball with his hand and decapitated a statue with his hat in the film. . . . Sakata stayed at the ritzy Dorchester Hotel and said that when he wore his Oddjob outfit he created “mild excitement” among the hotel’s guests and employees, even though *Goldfinger* was filmed way back in 1964. . . . Sakata took a letter from Mayor Eileen Anderson to the Lord Mayor of London and spent two hours with the lord mayor and other officials in Mansion House. While in the building, Sakata said Queen Elizabeth’s husband Prince Philip, was there on business and he chatted with the prince briefly . . . London has been good to Sakata. Besides the *Goldfinger* film, he placed second in the light-heavyweight



Sakata gave this movie still to Tommy Kono on 24 July 1966. He wrote, "To Tommy Kono, my good friend and the greatest weightlifter. Aloha-Honolulu-Oddjob, 'Tosh Togo.'" Several other lifters signed it as well.

weightlifting class in the 1948 London Olympics and wrestled professionally there in 1960.<sup>115</sup>

Obviously, Sakata enjoyed the adulation, but he never sought it. It sought him. By the same token, he never regretted his less than stellar roles in B-grade movies. He enjoyed the activity for its own sake, much in the same

way that he appreciated the muscular brutality of professional wrestling and the physical demands of competitive weightlifting.

During the 1970s Sakata's wrestling career was consuming less of his attention and time. By the fall of 1971, at age 51, he had wrestled an estimated 3,000 matches, and an increasing number of his matches were tag-team and the carnival-like battle royal bouts that were

less taxing on the body.<sup>116</sup> There were also random acts of fan violence that professional wrestlers had to endure. On one occasion in 1968 at a match in Germany, an irate fan hurled an apple with an embedded nail at Tosh which penetrated his skull. "One inch either way and the doctor said I could have been a goner," he later related to a gathering of weightlifters at the Kanraku Tea House. At this point he started wrestling less and doing more movie and commercial work.<sup>117</sup> Tommy Kono witnessed another occasion, according to his son-in-law, while Tosh was wrestling on the mainland.

Hal and another Asian wrestler had a tag team match with a couple of white wrestlers, which Hal and his partner won (by cheating, of course). While waiting for Hal and his partner to return to the dressing room, he [Tommy] stood watching them walk into the tunnel that led to the dressing room. As Hal and his partner reached the tunnel, someone in the crowd (which was booing really loudly at this point) reached over the railing and slashed Hal's partner on the arm with a knife. He decided at that point that wrestling was not for him. Being an Asian Wrestler back in those days meant you were going to be a 'Heel,' and the crowds were never going to cheer for you. In fact, you'd be lucky to get home safe.<sup>118</sup>

Such random acts of violence were rare for Sakata who never engaged in any fights outside the arena. However, he recalls that he once received a semi-challenge. "This man saw *Goldfinger* and asked if I was really that strong. I asked if he would like to try me. He said NO. Then I said, 'Would you be kind enough to have a drink with me.' He accepted."<sup>119</sup> Characteristically, despite his fierce aspect and formidable reputation for strength, Sakata never imposed his will on any potential challengers outside the ring or movie screen.

#### A HUMANE HEEL

Indeed, much of his extracurricular time was spent in using his celebrity status to promote public welfare and goodwill. It was especially notable when he showed up on 18 July 1972 for the fourth annual Junior Olympics along with 15,000 fans in the stands, Hawaiian Olympic celebrities such as Ford Konno, Bill Smith, and Evelyn Kawamoto Konno, and Mayor Frank Fasi who carried the Olympic torch down the home stretch and opened the festivities. Sakata "got a bigger hand than the Mayor," according to a press report.<sup>120</sup> He also showed up for the statewide Special Olympics held at Kaiser High School in Oahu in May 1981 where he proudly led the "olympians" from Naalehu School, located on his native island of Hawaii, in the opening night parade.<sup>121</sup> Sakata also visited patients and mentally disabled children at the Leahi Hospital, and inmates at the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility, and the Oahu Com-

munity Correctional Facility.<sup>122</sup> Perhaps the best example of Sakata's unpremeditated willingness to do good was an incident related by journalist Don Chapman that occurred at a hotel swimming pool in Kaanapoli, Maui. "Until then I had only known him as a fearsome heavy with the lethal black derby in the James Bond movies. But there he was, gently and patiently teaching a couple of young children to swim, holding them up as they flailed away at the water. I shall remember him more for that moment than for all of his films or his silver Olympic medal."<sup>123</sup> Indeed, much of Sakata's charitable work centered in Hawaii and his Kona homeland, often during his annual New Year's visit to his mother and other family members in Holualoa. "I never fail to go home, to reminisce, go through my youth again, and I realize I shouldn't become proud," Sakata told one reporter. "I visit my grandmother's and grandfather's and father's graves. I see the old homestead where I was born and the house my mama and father built. I never dreamed from the hills of Kona, I'd be where I am today. ... Now I lift such beautiful barbells, but I tell myself not to forget the broomsticks and mama. It's so easy to forget. I don't want to forget where I'm from."<sup>124</sup>

Nor did Sakata forget how much weightlifting meant to his subsequent success in life. It enabled him to scale the heights of fame as an athletic hero and to transition into a world-renowned villain in the ring and on the screen. Winning the silver medal at the 1948 Olympics was probably the most defining moment of his life. "My proudest moment," he recalled two decades later, "was standing with the winners, receiving my medal."<sup>125</sup>

What made Sakata so appealing was his ability to reconcile the image of one of the meanest villains in the entertainment industry with the reality of a friendly person with a heart of gold. Even his mother seemed incapable of coping with the contrast. When she saw *Goldfinger*, Sakata said, "she was terrified. She didn't talk to me for two months." Tommy Kono had a better understanding of him as "a robust person who had a good philosophy of life. . . . Although he always played villains or bullies in movies, he was very soft-hearted." Nor did Sakata have difficulty separating himself from the characters he played or even rationalizing their behavior. "Oddjob was such a sinister, terrifying character," he believed, "but he was beautiful to me. He was loyal, sincere, would never betray his boss and would give his life if necessary. He was a classical villain."<sup>126</sup> Much of Sakata's appeal stemmed from his nonchalance to fame and that he never took himself too seriously. The image he projected as a heel generated widespread fan excitement, but it was offset by his humane nature and many acts of kindness and consideration.

Sakata's last major public appearances occurred on 29 March 1982 when he attended the Academy Awards ceremony at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles in full Oddjob regalia where Albert "Cubby" Broccoli, co-producer of *Goldfinger*, was honored with the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award. He even appeared in a musical rendition of "For Your Eyes Only" with fellow Bond actors Sheena Easton and Richard Kiel on the biggest motion picture stage in show business before a live

and televised audience of millions.<sup>127</sup> It was arguably the most courageous performance of his career, however, as he stood speechless and still before the camera. By this time, he was greatly weakened by the ravages of what was diagnosed a month earlier as liver cancer.<sup>128</sup> Despite a desperate struggle to beat the disease, his body weakened over the next several months until he was barely able to communicate. Yet he retained his fame to the end. Shortly before his death at 2 A.M. on 29 July at St. Francis Hospital, he was offered \$25,000 to make a television ad for Toyota. He died in the arms of his daughter Glenna who recalled his final moments. “He took one last look at me, took one last breath and died—and with a smile on his face. And there weren’t even any wrinkles on his face, no lines at all. . . . I think it was a reflection on what a beautiful person he was. It was like God blessed him.”<sup>129</sup> In recognition of how he gained the great strength to excel in four careers, it was appropriate that the pallbearers for his funeral at the Hosoi Garden Mortuary on 3 August 1982 were all weightlifters identified with the Nuuanu YMCA, fellow Olympians Tommy Kono, Pete George, Emerick Ishikawa, Richard Tom, and Richard Tomita.<sup>130</sup>

## NOTES

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- “Weightlifter Here Better World Record by 5 Pounds,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 29 June 1943; and Vic Tanny, “1943 Senior National Championships,” *Strength & Health* 10 (August 1943), 10-11.
- “Weightlifting News,” *Strength & Health* 11 (January 1944), 10-11.
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- “Four Records Set in Weight Lift Tourney,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 30 April 1946, and “Harold Sakata Named Standout AAU Weightlifter,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 2 July 1946. During the next nine months, Sakata went on to exceed Kay’s marks with totals of 845 and 855 pounds. Henry Koisumi, “Hal Sakata Sets New Marks in Weightlifting,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 25 March 1947, and “Sakata Wins Awards for Weight Lifts,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 30 March 1947.
- “Sakata Cops Jr. Weight Lifting Title,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 23 June 1947, and “The 1947 Junior National Weightlifting Championships,” *Strength & Health* 15 (September 1947): 47.
- Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 9 July 1947. Bob Hoffman’s report of the

- competition, inaccurately credits Terpak with an 840 total and includes the 835 of Frank Spellman who was disqualified for violation of amateur rules. Bob Hoffman, “The National Championships,” *Strength & Health* 15 (August 1947): 21 and 43-47.
- Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 17 July 1947.
  - Pete George to the author, 24 December 2019.
  - Bob Hoffman, “U.S. Makes Clean Sweep . . . Wins Every Class!” *Strength & Health* 15 (November 1947): 30.
  - Bob Hoffman, “1948 Senior National Championships,” *Strength & Health* 16 (June/July 1948): 27.
  - Bob Hoffman, “The United States Olympic Team,” *Strength & Health* 16 (August 1948): 28.
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  - “Simunovich, Masked Grappler Meet Sunday,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 18 March 1952.
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  - Svinth notes that the Battle of Tsushima Straits actually occurred in 1905. Svinth, “Harold Sakata.”
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- “Sakata Has Role in Movie,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 21 May 1966, Sakata also met Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands at the Amsterdam premier of “Poppy.” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 16 August 1966.
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- letin*, 29 January 1966, and “Weightlifting at ‘Y’ Saturday,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 7 July 1966.
- See “Four-Show Mat Series Starts Saturday Night,” *Hawaii Tribune-Herald*, 1 July 1966, and *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 31 July 1966.
  - “‘Oddjob’ Throws His Hat in the Ring for Mercedes-Benz,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 7 May 1967. Similarly, strongman Paul Anderson mounted a weightlifter figurine on the hood of the Cadillac he used to travel across the country giving exhibitions.
  - “Dolls with Derbies,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 26 May 1967.
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  - Honolulu Advertiser*, 3 September 1967.
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  - See “Harold Oddjob Sakata on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson,” at: <https://youtu.be/kslCu2YOthk>.
  - Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 2 April 1970.
  - “Short Takes,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 13 February 1969.
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  - Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 1 July 1973.
  - Gene Siskel, “Pinning the Wrestler,” *Chicago Tribune*, 7 August 1974.
  - Jim Easterwood, “YBA for Hawaii, Too,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 15 January 1976.
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  - Ben Wood, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 4 November 1972.
  - “900 Vie in Jr. Olympics,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 19 July 1972.
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  - “Harold—Oddjob—Dies at 62,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 30 July 1982.
  - “Don Chapman,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 2 August 1982.
  - “Oddjob Continues To Get a Lift Out of Life,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, 27 February 1979.
  - Ben Wood, “There’s Hope for Other 98-Pound Weaklings,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 27 November 1969.
  - “Harold—Oddjob—Dies at 62,” and “Oddjob Continues To Get a Lift Out of Life.”
  - Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 28 March 1982; “54th Academy Awards,” viewed at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/54th\\_Academy\\_Awards](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/54th_Academy_Awards) and, “For Your Eyes Only,” <https://youtu.be/8hHjRi12uZk>.
  - Although there was no speculation in the press about possible cirrhosis of the liver from alcohol consumption, one of Sakata’s favorite pastimes, in addition to fishing and cooking, was drinking, sometimes excessively, with his friends.
  - Honolulu Advertiser*, 13 August 1982.
  - Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 6 August 1982.