**Okita nurtured so many in softball coaching career**

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There are any number of ways to measure Howard Okita’s superb softball coaching career.

There are the years, 51 of them, now in the books as he calls it a career.

There are the triumphs, two national championships in college, six state high school titles and, all told, more than 800 victories spread across Kailua Little League, Kailua High, Hawaii Loa College and Hawaii Pacific University.

There are the trees, the Norfolk pines that came in the gallon cans and measured, maybe, 18 inches that he and helpers planted and nurtured at the appropriately named Okita Field. Trees that now majestically top 40 feet.

But, mostly, there are the people, including a major leaguer (Sid Fernandez) and growing numbers of teachers and coaches, whose lives have been touched.

“Every year you’d get a new crop of kids and that was exciting,” said the 76-year-old Okita, who credits them with keeping him young.

So many that Okita has given up on a precise count of how many took advantage of tuition waivers and achieved degrees during his tenure. “I know I’ve been to a lot of graduations,” he says proudly.

None of it was foreseen in 1963 when Okita agreed to help coach the Kailua T-ball team of a neighbor’s son after work. Thus started a “hobby” that turned into a life’s work. And every season for a half century, “Coach O” has found his way out to a diamond stressing good defense and an education.

Much of it came after his work hours for the Hawaii Air National Guard at Hickam, where he retired after 40 years as a chief master sergeant. “I’d work from 6:45 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. and be back in Kailua by 4 p.m.,” Okita said.

“I can’t believe the patience he had,” said Stacy Araki, who was on his 1988 team at Hawaii Loa and now coaches at Leilehua High. “Now that I’m a coach myself, I’m more amazed.”

When Okita’s wife, Nina, would be asked about her husband’s devotion to coaching, he said her reply was inevitably, “Well, at least I know where he is all the time.”

Mostly he was out winning games. He took Kailua High to six state titles in nine years and then was persuaded by Hawaii Loa athletic director Al Minn to start a softball program. The Mongoose went 125-65, including the 1991 NAIA national title.

When HPU and Hawaii Loa merged, Okita eventually took over the Sea Warriors, going 508-214-3 in 15 seasons with nine postseason appearances. Then he stayed on for another five as an assistant coach to Bryan Nakasone, including the 2010 NCAA Division II national championship season.

Though he has flirted with retirement for years, Okita says, “It feels like time. Time to go.” We know it is serious because HPU is scheduled to end the regular season at Hawaii Hilo on Saturday and Okita gave up his seat to another assistant who had been unable to make the mainland trips.

“Time has flown by,” Okita said. “You don’t realize how much until you look at the numbers.”

And, by any measure, his are remarkable.

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