

**GUEST: SKIPPA DIAZ**

LSS 214 (LENGTH: 27:36)

MEMORIAL AIR DATE: 9/9/14

**Skippa Diaz is a big guy with a big heart who has had a big influence on the students he taught and the athletes he coached. He's best known as the head football coach at Farrington High School for two decades, starting in the 1980s. Many who avidly followed his career are unaware that Skippa and his wife Mary spent more than four years caring for family members in Wisconsin. We caught up with Coach Skippa Diaz during a visit back to the islands.**

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, produced with Sony technology, is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in HD, high definition. It's in Sony's DNA.

**Aloha no. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Mahalo for joining me for another Long Story Short. Before Skippa Diaz coached football, he played football at Farrington High School in Kalihi, where he was an all-star lineman, and Oregon State University, where he earned all-conference honors, and even played for professionally in the Canadian football league. But as a boy, Skippa Diaz was too big to play football.**

**You were a big guy, even when you were a little kid; right?**

Right. Oh, I was a bambula. Yeah. I mean, I was such a bambula that I loved to play sports, particularly football, but unorganized. When it became organized, they put weight limit on you. [CHUCKLE]

**So how big were you?**

I was bigger than the average bear. [CHUCKLE]

**I heard you were two hundred pounds in third grade.**

Yeah. [INDISTINCT] say about that. But you could be a hundred pounds [CHUCKLE] to play football, and I was a hundred eighty, two hundred. And so, I never got to play football when I was eight through when I was fourteen.

## **What'd you do instead?**

I ended up doing a sport where they didn't weigh me; I went swimming, and I swam at Palama Settlement. Jeff Yamashita, Lincoln, and several of the other guys, Larry Oshiro; they're all from Palama Settlement. And I tell you, the guys that were around ... you know, when we were young, we were looked at and said, No, he ain't gonna make it. You know. But lo and behold, majority of them came out preachers, policemen, firemen. They were hardworking people. And ministers come up from the group that I was around. And it was affected by the people who were at Palama Settlement, or at the various schools that we went to. They helped mold us. And even my parents at home. So, education was always a major aspect for me, and I'm glad I did get into that area. Because it allowed me to do stuff with kids, and affect their lives somehow during their lifetime.

**I would think that a big guy wouldn't be that fast in the water, but I'm told you were fast.**

[CHUCKLE]

**You were a competitive swimmer.**

Well, I did okay.

**Butterfly?**

Fly was my stroke. But I liked the I.M. the individual medley, too. See, there's two kinds of swimmers. There's sinkers, and there's floaters. I was a floater. And it's easy, you know. When you're buoyant, you stay on top of the water. When you're a sinker, three-quarters, you gotta almost swim straight up to stay above the water. And I think I allowed that to make me do what I was doing.

**Bill Smith, the world champion swimmer; he said that if you kept at it, you could have been an Olympic prospect.**

Him and I were of the same mold, but yes, he said that. I don't know. You never know, when you start a new track, you know. When I was fourteen, fifteen, I finished swimming and I went with football and track, because I think it was more popular at the time.

**You know, some of the guys who go back a long time with you said ... you know, I was asking, Why has Skipa been so effective with players and with**

**young people? And they said, That's because he came up the hard way. So, my question to you is, how tough is the hard way?**

Well, low income, you know, and I had seven sisters and brothers, and Mama had hanai'd about another seven of us.

**Living in Mayor Wright Housing?**

Mayor Wright Housing; right.

**How big was your place, with fourteen kids?**

Was three in a bed and two in a bed. [CHUCKLE] Was a lot. And over the years, when one went, then another one came in. Mom took care of a lot of kids, besides us.

**What did your dad do?**

Dad worked at Pearl Harbor. He was working on the boats. And then, when he had his heart attack, he couldn't work anymore, so he spent a lot of time going to the library. And I was the book carrier. The guy was a tremendous reader. He could read almost a book a day. I mean, those fat ones, too. But I was the guy who had to carry all those books from Mayor Wright, down Kukui Street to get to the library. And then, he ordered another one, and I'd pick 'em up and go back. I was the carrier for that.

**Did you mind doing that for him?**

No, no; I didn't. 'Cause I found a lot of good solace in the library. Lot of different stuff; I got to reading a lot of things. I think that's one of the reasons I became a history teacher, because of the amount of reading I did with Dad.

**When your mom kept bringing more kids in the house, did you ever think, Oh, what about me, Mom?**

A few times.

**Or, how small is the dinner gonna be tonight? Did you ever have those thoughts?**

Oh, yeah; indubitably. But somewhere, somehow, she managed to spread it all around, and everybody had something to eat. And I did a lot of different kinds of things. I shined shoes, and I helped wash cars, and stuff like that.

**Did you keep the money, or did you give it to your family?**

All went to Mom; all went to Mom. Everything went to Mom. I felt like I was contributing to the family that way.

**Well, when you have a lot of kids, she has less time to divide up; right?**

Oh, yeah; yeah, yeah, yeah.

**So, you probably could get into some big trouble on your own.**

Yes; yes. A person could do that real easily. And I got on the outskirts of that area, but I didn't think I was getting into that kind of trouble. Mom and Dad were always very educationally inclined. They felt that we needed to go to school, and my aunts and uncles steered me in the right direction. I had coaches, and I had teachers that straightened me out. I had a principal at Central Intermediate, Mr. Manual Kwon. Oh, jeez; he let me know which way to go in the door and go out the door. And he got it across to me in no uncertain terms. I sort of liked that. I liked when somebody put a line down and said, Hey, you do this or you do that. And it's nice; life is good when you have things that you know you gotta do, and then you do it.

**It's structure.**

Structured; yes.

**And that's how you coach too; right?**

I coach that way, too. You know, with the upbringing from my family, my sisters, as well as Mom and Dad, I made education the top of the rung. You do that first. If you come play here for us, you get your grades squared away, you make sure that you kiss Mama and Daddy every morning. You know, I required that. Sing the alma before and after practice, every practice. Before you know it, they get out on the field, and they're doing stuff, besides themselves, for somebody else. And you get good results when you get a kid to take in those terms to go ahead and do it because of Mom, do it because of my friends. You got somebody pushing you to do something right, like Tom Kiyosaki, or Mr. Shigemi at Likelike Elementary, and demand that, and you know, you end up doing it. Mrs. Chun, sixth grade, Likelike Elementary; she was beautiful lady, but she put the law down, and I followed the law. If I did something wrong at school, when I went home, my mom and dad just chastised me for not being a good guy. So, I got my upcomings because of my family and the people in the

community, and you know, that's what made me do what I did. Go to college, play some sports, get an education, come back home. And my dream job was Farrington High School.

### **You went to OSU?**

I went to Oregon State University.

**And you know, my daughter went there, and so, I've traveled there in the last ten years. And today, it still is a very white bread university. How did you do over there? Did you feel at home?**

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, there was a large community of local kids.

### **There's a Hawaii Club, in fact; right?**

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. All up and down the coast. Oregon competes with Oregon State for the luaus, who'll do a better luau. But we had a lot of kids that you could fall back on when you get lonesome for home. And Rockne Freitas and I were going to school together at the time. And then, we had all the other kids that we knew from Maui, from Molokai, that was going school over there. Made it easier for us to make that transition.

**Throughout his life, Skippa Diaz has navigated some pretty big transitions. After earning bachelors and masters degrees in education from Oregon State University, Skippa returned to Hawaii. He taught and coached at Washington Intermediate, and at Kalani, Waialua, Mililani, and Farrington High Schools. Skippa's wife Mary, also a lifelong educator, was vice principal at Waialua High and Intermediate, and at Roosevelt High School. In 1995, a major health crisis gave the two of them a wake-up call, so to speak.**

**You're a big guy, but you used to be a bigger guy.**

Yeah.

**In physical stature.**

Yeah; yes.

### **What happened?**

Well, I just ate too much, and I had a condition called sleep apnea. And I didn't realize I had that. I just thought I was ... I thought I was sleeping at night, but I

get up in the morning, and I was tired. And this went over about a six, seven-year period. And ended up, I had not a heart attack, but congestive heart failure.

**Because of lack of oxygen?**

Because of lack of oxygen. And the way I got that one was, when you get sleep apnea, your air passage closes up. And when it does, you ain't got no air coming in. And I took a sleep study after I got into the hospital. They took me to Kuakini Hospital to give me a sleep study, and what I found out was, when I'm sleeping—they have this thing called episode. It's a period of time when you don't take in oxygen at all. And usually, the episodes range from twenty to maybe sixty times at night that you stop breathing. And I think when I was there, I had thirty-seven times when I stopped breathing for almost two minutes per episode.

**It's a life-threatening problem.**

Oh, all the way; all the way. See, oxygen gotta go all through your body so you can function well. And the darn thing was breaking down in my liver and my lungs, and all of that.

**And you were toughing it out, thinking, I don't feel so good.**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**But I'm going to work.**

I going, I going. I going do 'em, I going do 'em. But I was at a meeting one day, and George Kamau was our trainer. And he looked at me and he says, Hey, something wrong with you. He took me in his truck and took me down to the hospital, and they diagnosed me and said, Hey, this is what you got, man.

**And they told your wife.**

Told my wife; yeah.

**Almost make-die-dead.**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. He almost passed. But somehow, you know, they helped me; it's possible for me to stay alive. And that was in 1995.

**Did you feel like you were ...**

Oh, I ...

**I mean, you must have been getting so little oxygen and feeling so exhausted.**

Oh, yeah.

**And then carrying this weight around.**

Oh, yeah. That was big-time scary. [CHUCKLE]

**In fact, I don't know if they gave you that great a chance.**

No, no. They thought it would be, you know, this guy; better bring the priest in.

**Yeah.**

But somehow, it didn't occur. I don't if the Lord said, Hey, wait. [CHUCKLE]  
Thank you, thank you.

**What has changed, then? You've lost weight. That's been the plan, right, to lose weight?**

Yeah, yeah, yeah; yeah, yeah. And maintain one good healthy lifestyle. And for me and the wife, we've retained, at least for the last four years that I've been away from home, we made it a point to swim a minimum of three times a week. And that really helped.

**How are you getting the oxygen you need?**

With sleep apnea, what they do, they give you a—certain ways that they can do it. Mine was, I have a machine called a CPAP machine. CPAP; acronym for continuous positive air pressure. And it's like a machine that's operation reverse of a vacuum cleaner. Instead of sucking the air in, it blows the air out, and it's a box about this big. And it has a flexible hose, and then some Velcro to wrap around your forehead. And then, you have what I call the opihi. Now, I promote that to anybody I know who has sleep apnea, or they snore a lot. That's a big sign. I tell them, Hey, go get one sleep study, and if the stuff is at the level it is, go use the CPAP machine.

**Some people who die, quote, in their sleep; that's sleep apnea.**

Yeah; it's sleep apnea. It's doing that. And it's really something that can be avoided.

**By 2004, Skippa Diaz was helping to lead the City's Parks Department, when another health concern led to another major transition for him and Mary. Not his own health, but that of Mary's parents and Mary's disabled brother Butchie. Coincidentally, Skippa had a brother-in-law and a brother named Butchie. This transition took the couple to Wisconsin for more than four years.**

My wife found out while we here that Mom, Dad, and Butchie were going to be put in a home, because Mom and Dad couldn't take care of Butchie.

**They were in their nineties.**

They were in their nineties; yes. Mom was ninety-four, and Dad was ninety-five. And my wife told me, You stay here, because I had a pretty decent job with the City and County.

**Deputy Director of Parks.**

Right, right, right. And she said, she's gonna go up there and take care all three of them. And it took me a month, and I said, Timeout, I cannot do this, I gotta be with my woman. And I said, I'm going up, too. So, I retired, and then I went up. And jeez, I had a good job. But then, I found out that I don't care what job you got, if the person you love with all your life is not with you, it's a miserable life. So, I went up there.

**Had she already gone when you figured that out?**

Well, you know, she was always with me, so I figured, I can handle. Mm-mm. I couldn't handle. [CHUCKLE] So, I went up there. And then, that's when I just had a tremendous revelation that, you know, when you take care the people you care for, when they need the help, there is gonna be reward. Not financial, but you know, your brain going stay right, you're gonna be able to go to sleep real easy, you know, when that's finished. But the journey took four years, four and a half years, but it's just something you do. And I feel real good that I went and did that.

**And it wasn't a hobby. It was a fulltime, twenty-four/seven commitment.**

Twenty-four/seven; yeah. That's what it is. And it was my wife, too. At first, she was taking care of three. You know, just to take care of one, twenty-four/seven, is a mean chore. You put two, or three. Oh. So, you know, I had Butchie

twenty-four/seven. Mary was taking care of Mom, and then we both could take care of Dad because he was just using the two canes. He went from the two canes to the walker, from the walker to the wheelchair. And same thing with Mom. You could see, you know, in the tail end of their lives, they have certain things they're gonna do, and that digression is gonna end up with them leaving you. But, whoo; couldn't beat it.

**Yeah.**

All the money in the world ain't gonna make me want to do something other than what I did these past four years.

**There's this great picture of you and Butchie.**

Oh. Yeah, yeah. This one has always ... [CHUCKLE] this guy, he used to smile, and he used to tap me on my shoulder when I was going too fast. You know, I'd be swimming in there with him. Yeah; this guy was ... he was just the apple of my eye.

**Downs Syndrome, autism.**

Yes.

**He was in a wheelchair.**

He broke his hip, and he was just confined to a wheelchair.

I notice you never say brother-in-law. He's your brother.

He's my brother. From the day I saw him, I said, I get two brother Butchies. Was really a great feeling to have both of them. But this one here, he was something else. Dad was something else, too. The guy was ninety-nine years old, and he could remember stuff. I mean, I'm sixty-three, sixty-four; I'm forgetting stuff. And the guy was ninety-nine, and we're talking about a certain person. I don't know the guy's name; boom, he remembers the name. We're playing cards, and he tells me what my score is. And I said, I got this much. We're playing cribbage. He says, No, you got two more points. I go, Ah.

**[CHUCKLE]**

And he's correct. And he's ninety-nine years old; he was just superb. When he got sick, you know, hard to slow down the movement of that. But he was a darling. He was one father.

**You know, sounds like you live your life so that you don't have regrets.**

Oh, yeah. Yeah. You going get small stuff in the way, but you gotta put your heart in one position, and find out where that bugga aiming, and you go that way. And it comes out pretty good.

**And your heart's always right?**

So far; so far. With my wife, with these guys, yeah. With my family, yeah.

**Do you think after being married for decades already, you got to know her better then?**

Oh; yeah, yeah. That's the part that came full circle. I says, Hey, this is the right one, I got. You know? I don't know if she's saying that about me, but [CHUCKLE] as far as that is concerned, it's really something. Boy, if I had to pick a thing I did that was pretty good, it was that. To be with my wife from now until whenever. I'm totally involved in what she does, and know she is in mine. From day one.

**It seems that Skippa Diaz takes pride in everything he does. Whether it's caring for family, or molding young people, or competing in athletics, he puts his whole heart into it. His warmth and energy can light up a room and deeply touch people. Evidence of that? Half a dozen teachers at Farrington now were his students, practically the entire coaching staff for his football team played for him. And his secret? He's got heart.**

I developed an acronym; and the acronym was spelled HEART, H-E-A-R-T. H refers to humility, the ability to listen to another person and bite your tongue if he's saying something that's different than what you want. But being humble is a quality that is really, really sought after for a lot of people, but never acquired. But humility is a good one. E, education. That one was very, very significant in my family's upbringing. A, attitude. A positive attitude, making sure that whatever the goal, or whatever the project, you set yourself out to be positive and get the darn thing done. R, responsibility. You gotta be responsible for all the things that you do, and sometimes for the things that your friends and your loved ones are doing. But being responsible in that manner has some beautiful connotations that grow from it. And the, T, of course, stands for team, team sports. So, I always tried to slip those five things in on the kids in conversations and developments, and it helped; it helped. And I always wanted to try to emulate Lorin Gill King. I don't know if that many guys know him now, but he was one of my favorites. And like Tom Kiyosaki, all these guys, they gave me the

juice to go ahead and try to do something good. And if you can do it for a person, that's pretty neat. And the kids, you know, when I walk down anywhere in the community, and I hear that word Coach, I think that's better than Skippa. And it's really like one parent would feel, the goodness, because of what the kid is doing. I just pop my buttons all the time. Right at Farrington High School right now, I got about six kids that played for me, that are teachers over there. Now, what better thing that you can see than a kid make the circle and follow you down the road? And it's nice to see that stuff happening by people that I worked with and coached. That's good stuff.

**And all of his athletes remember his crushing handshake at their first meeting, letting them know in a friendly way from the get-go, he's nobody to trifle with. Skippa Diaz came up the hard way, and came out on top, using strength of heart and strength of mind to inspire others all along the way. The latest move for Skippa and Mary; transitioning back to Hawaii after caring for their ohana on the mainland. I'm so glad Coach Skippa Diaz stopped by PBS Hawaii to join us for this Long Story Short. Mahalo piha, Coach. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.**

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is produced in HD by PBS Hawaii with Sony technology. High definition; it's in Sony's DNA.

**So, the people in Wisconsin call you Skipper.**

Yes.

**And do you forget sometimes and say, Oh, are you pau?**

Yeah; oh, yeah. When I start talking fast, my friend up there, all the guys up there, they say, What language are you speaking? But they know pau, or we go. We go; you know. Ainokea. [CHUCKLE] They pick up on that. But good people in Wisconsin. At least the area I came from, you know, they're always watching you, but they know you. Oh, boy; they're just like Hawaiians, but speaking English. They're real good people.

**What do they call the aloha spirit in Wisconsin?**

The Wisconsin spirit. They call it that. That's what they do.

**They really do?**

Oh, yeah, yeah.