

Thirst for knowledge

Bennett's improvement took Hilo to the top

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photo

Hannah Bennett's love of swimming played a large role in her landing and making an impact on the Hilo High School water polo team, after moving from Fiji as a freshman.

With limited swimming opportunities in Fiji, she moved in with her sister and found the Big Island and water polo to her liking, picking up key components, such as leadership and experience, to help the Vikings win the Big Island Interscholastic Federation championship.

Bennett was named the BIIF Player of the Year in a vote by the league's coaches, improving each season while adding other sports to make herself better.

"It means a lot to me because in the beginning of the season one of my goals was not only to do better than the previous year, but I wanted player of the year," she said. "Making that goal means a lot."

"I moved back to Fiji beginning my junior year and stayed for a couple of months, but came back for water polo season. Part of the reason is I want to play in college."

Bennett plans to play water polo at Golden West College in Huntington Beach, Calif., and major in marine science. She aspires to become a marine biologist.



She received a small academic scholarship after writing an essay on the person who inspired her. Bennett's subject was her older sister, Kimberly, who played water polo at the University of Hawaii and works in the emergency room at Hilo Hospital.

Eldest sister Leilani works at a hotel on Oahu. Her parents, John and Henrieta Bennett, own a cosmetics business called Dilo oil in Fiji. She speaks Fijian to her mom and English to her dad.

"I wrote about Kimberly," Bennett said. "She's the first one who introduced water polo to me. She's been a mother figure to me, more strict than my parents.

"She's been a great role model for me. She sacrificed a lot of things so I could go play. My parents are very supportive. They come and watch me play every season."

Bennett played 2-meter defense, often guarding the other team's top player, scored occasionally on offense, but more importantly became the team's glue — not only for her solid play, but also her direction of others.

"She worked really hard to improve her game from the previous year," Hilo coach Ron Koehler said. "She was our go-to player and a quarterback of the team all year. She was a leader in the field, like a coach in the water.

"She was pretty consistent in scoring. She threw the ball more accurately with greater power and more importantly greater confidence. It doesn't matter how hard you throw if you're throwing it right at the goalie.

"We didn't have a big superstar on the team. We needed someone to distribute the ball and get everyone involved. She set the tone for the whole team. We needed someone to control the action."

Then there's her size. Bennett is 5-foot-3 and faced opponents much bigger on defense.

"Two-meter defense is the most difficult position because you're trying to stop the other team's most powerful player close to the goal," Koehler said.

Stamina and the ability to swim fast and pester an offensive player like a pilot fish are good qualities to have. Bennett

All-BIIF Water Polo

First Team

(Listed in alphabetical order)

Name	Year	School
Hannah Bennett	Sr.	Hilo
Summer Borowski	Sr.	HPA
Nani Davis	Sr.	Kam
Cohco Harbour	Sr.	Waiakea
Mandy Kaapuni-Santos	Jr.	Hilo
Ohi Parker	Sr.	Kame
Bridget Walker	Jr.	HPA
Goalie: Eva Avery	Sr.	Hilo

Honorable Mention

Brittany Kumove, HPA; Akela Kuwahara, Hilo; Emma Kimata, Hilo; Ninamaria Jeffrey, Hilo; Jessica Leialoha, Kamehameha; Kiana Krzyska, Kamehameha; Radhika Dockstader Ka'u; Chandi Dockstader, Ka'u; Shasta Montgomery, Kealakehe; Charley Samsanguansit, Kealakehe; Jade Morton, Kealakehe; Rachel Shimizu, Waiakea; Leigh Williams, Waiakea; Lauren Hill, Waiakea

Goalies: Tori Campbell, Hawaii Prep; Gabby Dyer, Kamehameha; Rachele Krahner, Waiakea

Player of the Year

Hannah Bennett Hilo

Coach of the Year

Ron Koehler Hilo

got better at all three, and also added toughness.

"It's about being strong," she said. "I'm pretty small, but I think I'm pretty strong and it's about being able to swim fast. I did track and field, and swam. It helped a lot.

"Being in the water, it's all about swimming faster with technique. It definitely made me faster and got me into shape.

"I learned a lot about the game, but mostly we had a great team and it was about working together. We had a lot of seniors and worked hard. We really wanted to win the BIIF championship."

The Vikings did. They beat Kamehameha-Hawaii 5-4 for the title. Then Bennett swam away with satisfaction.

"It was the most memorable season of my water polo career," she said. "We exceeded all my expectations and goals."