

Weighty ambitions

As he trains to break weightlifting records, a Pearl City grandfather hopes to inspire seniors

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With barely a drop of sweat sliding across his tanned and weathered face, weightlifter Gary Kawa-mura lifted the barbell — laden with steel plates that weighed more than he did — and raised it in a smooth motion high above his head.

He held it there for a few seconds, concentrating, then dropped it to the floor of the Nuu-anu YMCA gym. It landed with a thud and Kawa-mura smiled. Even at 65, Kawa-mura can do this with apparent ease, the result of more than 40 years of repetitions such as this one.

And while he's surrounded by younger, stronger athletes — a constant reminder that his athletic peak is behind him — Kawa-mura knows he's lucky to still engage in the sport he loves: competitive Olympic weightlifting.

Five years ago a stroke left him temporarily paralyzed on the left side of his body, and for the last 15 months he's dealt with sciatica so painful that he was forced to sleep on the floor for relief.

"Every time I come down to the gym, I'm thankful," said the Pearl City grandfather, who stands 5-foot-4 and weighs 125 pounds. "I work in insurance, so I see a lot of guys in care homes and people my age who can't walk or are paralyzed. Even if I didn't break any records, I'm just happy and thankful I can do this."

He battled his health problems with the same determination that made him a two-time masters division world champion and record holder. Most people his age are slowing down, but not Kawa-mura. He's charging forward with lofty goals.



Kawamura wants to break world records at the 2017 World Masters Games, a quadrennial event. But his more ambitious goal is to become the oldest athlete to qualify for the U.S. championships. He thinks he can accomplish this in two years, when he'll be 67.

Olympic weightlifting consists of two events. In the snatch, the competitor lifts the bar overhead while dropping to a squat and then rises to a standing position. In the clean and jerk, lifters first rest the bar on their chest before pressing it overhead.

On this day in the Nuu-anu YMCA, Kawa-mura looked as strong as ever, matching the snatch world record for his age and weight by lifting the metric equivalent of 132.3 pounds. He followed that with a clean-and-jerk lift that would have set a world record in competition — 165.3 pounds.

While those marks are impressive, he'll need to surpass them in competition in order to qualify for the national championship. The weight from both lifts is added, and the total must match or exceed a certain standard, which this year was 346 pounds.

Kawamura hopes to do better than that — at least 176 pounds in the snatch and 227 pounds in the clean and jerk for a total of 403 pounds.

"I'm not going to win," he said, "but I think I can get in, competing with young guys, teenagers."

Kawamura started lifting when he was 17, shortly after graduating from Farrington High School. He weighed 114 pounds.

Lifting weights has been a constant in a life full of change. He first worked as an art teacher at Lei-le-hua High School and then sold life insurance for more than 30 years, all while raising a family of four in the Kapa-hulu-Palolo area.

Although he worked out more in his younger days, Kawamura still hits the gym three times a week. And, as he's done with every workout since 1970, he brings a black composition notebook and meticulously records how much he lifted and how many reps he did.

The books show everything, including Kawamura's prime, when he could rest a barbell on his back and squat 415 pounds. He can't do that anymore, but his current goal is 342 pounds.

Until that happens he'll draw inspiration from his younger training partners, most of whom are also national competitors.

"When I train with them I always feel that the weight I am lifting is so small compared to what they are lifting," he said. "Since they are stronger than me, it gives me inspiration to train harder, knowing that I can only do what my body will allow me to do each time I step into the weight room."

Just as they inspire him, Kawamura hopes his story can inspire other senior citizens to live a healthy lifestyle. His advice?

"First of all, exercise," he said. "You got to do some physical activity. And then just get into it slowly. And you got to have a goal to motivate you."

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