### SPORTS LEGENDS OF MICRONESIA: 1966 TO 2012

Throughout the history of sport, the efforts to name the greatest athletes of all time never seem to end, and the topic is often the focus of discussion at various social gatherings. Sports in Micronesia are no different. The same questions have been kicked around and discussed in Micronesia since the middle sixties. Among these questions are: Who’s the greatest athlete in the history of Micronesia? Who’s the greatest athlete in the history of each island? What’s the name of the greatest Micronesian female athlete of all time? Who are the five all-time best athletes to ever compete in various sports in each of the Micronesian states/nations? Is there one baseball or basketball or track athlete that reigns supreme over all of their Micronesian contemporaries? Who’s the coach that most enhanced the athletic venues of Micronesia? Are athletes from the 1960s equal in athletic skill to those of today? Or are athletes of one decade better than those of another? Though these questions may not be directly answered in this book, readers can certainly draw their own conclusions. These and other similar questions are often in the forefront of any discussion of sports in Micronesia.

The primary purpose of *Sports Legends of Micronesia: 1966 to 2012* is to foster an understanding and appreciation of Micronesia’s greatest sports personalities. I also hope the book serves to stimulate memories and discussions of each Micronesian country’s historical athletic culture. This effort is a first in terms of identifying and authenticating legendary athletes, coaches, officials, and pioneers who were, or still are, involved with sports in Micronesia, from 1966 to 2012.

Sports certainly have come a long way since the mid-sixties. Athletic facilities have been upgraded from crude, rudimentary sites to modern, world-class facilities. Playing and coaching rules, strategies, and techniques have evolved from the older, more informal methods to modern systematic ways. Similarly, a reliance on untrained, naturally talented Micronesian athletes in the past has given way to state-of-the-art training and preparation and the development of well-honed, mature, world-class athletes who are now to be found in all parts of Micronesia. This book will chronicle and showcase the people in Micronesia who are responsible for where we are today.

I have attempted to maintain consistency and uniformity with island-nation names throughout this book. Before 1976, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), also referred to as the Trust Territory or TT, was administrated by the United States under a United Nations mandate, and was made up of six districts. Guam was not a part of the TT and Kosrae, formerly known as Kuseai, was a part of Ponape District at that time. Post 1976 found the TT broken up into separate island nations with very different political affiliations. Apart from Guam, most of the original TT island groups have undergone name changes. I will use the following terminology when referring to each island nation in this book. The first name given is the TT designation followed by today’s more acceptable, preferred name: Truk or the State of Chuuk now becomes Chuuk, Ponape or the State of Pohnpei will be known as Pohnpei, Yap or the State of Yap remains Yap, Kuseai or the State of Kosrae will be known as Kosrae, the Marshall Islands now known as the Republic of the Marshall Islands will carry the Marshalls label, Palau presently known as the Republic of Belau is simply Palau, Guam or the Territory of Guam remains Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands will be referred to as the CNMI, which is an acronym for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (C.N.M.I.). Quite often, when Saipan is referred to in the discussion it will mean exclusively Saipan and not the CNMI as a whole.

Reasons for Writing This Book

The main reason for undertaking this project was to produce a book showcasing and discussing the achievements of sports legends from the major island groups in Micronesia from 1966 to 2012. These sport icons are from the CNMI, Guam, the Marshalls, Palau, and the four states of the Federated States of Micronesia (Yap, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Chuuk). My apologies to Nauru and Kiribati; two island nations that also compete in the Micronesian Games. They have not been included in this book. The task of getting names, pictures, stories, and bios of legendary sports figures from the nations that made up the former TT was a momentous undertaking in itself, without adding the two, more remote nations that were a good deal less accessible to me.

Another reason for this book is to inform Micronesian citizens and residents about the individuals who made the region’s sports programs what they are today and who continue to have a positive impact on them. Palau’s National Olympic Committee (PNOC) President, Mr. Frank Kyota, speaking to a gathering of Palauan sports heroes perhaps said it best, “Micronesian sports derive from the past, and we are here only to continue that pace and continue the legacy.”

A third reason for publishing this book relates to the rather meager written historical record with respect to Micronesian sports. Until recently, history was usually oral in nature and was passed down through the ages by word of mouth. It is clearly time for sports in the region to move out of the traditional shadows of tales handed down from one generation to the next and into detailed, written form. Naming the sports legends from the 80s, 90s, and 2000s has been a relatively easy endeavor, as most sports-minded individuals know who these superstars are. However, a number of iconic legends from the 60s and 70s are no longer alive today and finding people with knowledge of these two decades has been an arduous undertaking although, at the same time, an extremely rewarding experience. Many expert and well-informed athletes, coaches, officials and other well-versed individuals have passed away or are no longer living in Micronesia. Thus, there is an urgent need to produce a document which accurately brings together events, names, pictures, bios and achievements that might otherwise be lost.

Legends such as Clara Joshua, Elizar Sabalt, Tony Towai, and Felix Kyota of Palau, Fountain Inok of the Marshalls, Susumo Aizawa and Masitoki Steven of Truk, Ponciano Rasa and Felix F. Rabauliman of Saipan, Guam’s Ronnie Tavares, and Dr. Eliuel Pretrick and Henry “Kency” Edwin of Pohnpei are just a few of the celebrated sports stars from the 60s and 70s who are no longer with us. I hope this book will serve as their legacy.

Initial Questions, Problems and Definitions

Among the initial and continuing questions and problems I encountered during the writing of this book were the following: What is a legend? Is a legend on one island necessarily a legend on another island? Should there be a quota of legends for any one island nation? What is the effect of personal conflicts and biases when naming legends? What happens when some nominated sports personalities are just not legendary in quality? Should sport icons with criminal records be considered legends? Should athletes competing in the new millennium be considered legendary? And, what is to be done with contradictory definitions of a legend?

I have dealt with these potential difficulties as follows:

What is a legend? A legend is an athlete who truly dominated their sport/sports on-island as well as off-island. A legend is usually an individual who has competed at a very high level over an extended period of time. Thus, this broad definition would preclude any overnight sensation or phenom from becoming a legend. Unfortunately, this has meant that many Peace Corps volunteers, who were fine athletes but spent only a year or two in Micronesia, have not been considered legendary. At the same time, though, I decided not to adhere to a stringent, limiting definition, so as to build flexibility into the designation of genuinely great athletes of Micronesia as legends.

A legendary player will most likely have had a career of at least ten years with significant accomplishments in the form of individual statistics and awards and individual or team championships. Being inducted into any sports fall-of-fame helps slightly, but does not automatically lead to being called a legend. Performing at an extremely high level over an extended period is usually the ultimate factor in earning the `legendary' tag.

Most sports are included in this book. The sports not included are slow-pitch softball (where everyone is considered a legend), mixed martial arts, boxing, bowling, badminton (still a fledgling sport) and sailing.

Additionally, high school athletes are not included in this book. To be included in this book, an individual, even though a superstar in high school, must also have been an outstanding athlete after high school. A line had to be drawn someplace. Thus, a phenom in high school needed to dominate after high school as well. Consider swimming for example. There were many great swimmers in age-group swimming who might qualify on performance alone to be labeled legendary. However, if they did not continue their swimming careers in college or adult programs, they were not eligible to be in this book.

The same goes for phenoms. In my travels and research, I came across an individual who scored 8 goals in a high school soccer game. Not legendary in my opinion. Phenomenal, of course, though one could bring up the issues of unskilled defenders or totally incompetent coaching or both. Another situation involved a high school athlete who set the Micronesian and CNMI men’s high-jump record and minutes later, threw the javelin 55m/180ft. Not legendary. Again, phenomenal, but not a legend. If one looks back at this book’s definition of a true legend, one sees that a legend is one who sustains a high level of skill level over an extended period of time and competes post-high school. In other words, quality and quantity combined. A slow-pitch softball pitcher on Saipan was nominated to be a legend because he pitched a no-hitter. Incredible, but still not legendary. Not only was this pitcher lacking in quantity, but the author decided not to showcase slow-pitch softball. Yes, perhaps the phenoms of Micronesia should have their day too, but someone else will have to write that book.

Is a legend on one island a legend on another island? The answer is simply no. Since some island nations/states are further advanced than others in terms of adequate athletic facilities, technically-trained officials, and experienced coaches. To compare an athlete who may have developed, say on Guam, with an athlete from an outer island of Yap, where facilities, coaches, and officials may be almost non-existent is not practical or fair. Another way to approach this issue is to consider whether or not a 2hr. 37min. marathon run on Guam is more impressive than a marathon run in Germany in September of 2hr. 33min. My experience says the marathon run on Guam, even though a bit slower is a better performance, simply from the standpoint that the Guam runner must compete in extreme conditions of heat and humidty.

Should there be a quota of legends for a sport for each island nation? Absolutely not! Yes, I agree that two things can taint and corrupt the contents of this book, undeserving individuals being called legends and too many legends in a specific sport for a specific island group. I can honestly say that I carried a big stick and maintained the legend standards and principles to the greatest extent possible. Even to the point of losing friends in some instances.

Since this book covers more than 40 years or parts of 5 decades, 20 legends for each island per sport comes down to an average of 4 legends per decade which seems like a valid and realistic number.

However, listing all sports figures who deserve to be called legendary is of prime importance. I certainly did not want to omit any justifiable individual. How would one explain to a bonified legend that he/she was excluded from this book simply due to a restriction on the number of legends? Sorry, not on my watch! This book’s primary purpose is to recognize and honor all individuals who deserve to be called legends.

 Removing biases and personality conflicts from the selection process became a real challenge for the committees. These negative factors are a part of real life and occur on a daily basis in the everyday world. Naturally, they also occur in sports, whether we like it or not. Intense and long-term rivalries, heated competitions, village battles, and family feuds can inflame and keep alive these negative emotions. Some are so intense they fester for a lifetime. Many never go away. Fortunately, in the long run, positive attitudes most often prevail. Ideally, respect, admiration, and true sportsmanship form the foundation of sports and should be the guiding principles in the sporting world.

 The committees and I agreed that no retaliation or personal biases were to creep into the selection process. We all agreed that statistics, performance and accomplishment would be the deciding factors when selecting legends. Dislike for a nominee was not to play a part in the selection process. On the field performance would be the prevailing consideration.

 Another kind of bias can also creep into a selection process. This can be the result of wearing “rose colored” glasses which sometimes happens when one plays with teammates for so long that it becomes impossible to properly evaluate their true skill level. Opposing players’ weaknesses or lack of skills are easily recognized. At the same time, those same weaknesses in your own teammates can often be completely overlooked. Another situation involves the “superstar” effect, in which the skills of average or above-average teammates are amplified due to a team’s success. The best players and coaches on a team tend to make their teammates play better than they normally would if they were on other less-successful teams. The committees were aware of these two dangers and responded accordingly.

 I have seen the “super star” affect many, many times during my coaching tenure. The Oleai (Saipan) women’s softball team was a classic example of this “super star” influence. This team had 4 legitimate super stars: the most dominating player in over two decades at first base, a pitcher who was unhittable, a shortstop who was as smooth as silk in fielding her position, and a catcher who not only was always the league’s best hitter, but could also maintain her squat behind home plate and still throw out runners trying to steal a base. Average players on this historic team deemed themselves “super” due to the success of the team as a whole. One infielder, a self-described legend, made across-the-diamond throws that needed two or three bounces to reach first base. You be the judge.

 My “rose colored” glasses were lost in the beautiful Saipan lagoon when I made the decision to write this book. The other committee members always recognized accomplishment, performance, statistics, and other experts’ recommendations when choosing the legends recognized in this book.

 Should sport icons with criminal records be considered legends? This is a tough question. It has to be answered in two ways. It is my opinion that in most cases, sports icons who commit crimes of any nature generally pay for it through customary societal means. This is to say, one who is convicted of a crime is obliged to pay their debt to society. To exclude these individuals from being showcased in a book like this would create a situation of double jeopardy. This I cannot do. So, if an individual is a true legend, has a criminal record, and paid the punishment as imposed by social mandate, they will be included in this book. The only exceptions to this would be individuals convicted of child abuse, dealing or distributing illegal drugs, or those currently serving time in jail. Some of those identified as legends in this book have committed various felonies and misdemeanors. To omit them would serve no purpose at all and would constitute a double penalty. This, I will not be a part of. In most cases, readers of this book will not even be aware of legends with a delinquent past. Yes, it is unfortunate that crimes are committed. But not all sports personalities are perfect people.

 I also know of situations where crimes were committed and the law enforcement agencies and judicial system played the ostrich card. A crime occurred but does not appear on any police record. It is perhaps best to let bygones be bygones and allow the accomplishments of our legends to be their legacy.

 Perhaps some people will have a problem understanding and accepting this concept. I had to make a decision and it is made in the best interests of naming those who truly deserve to be called legends for all to read and talk about. In many cases, a debt paid to society can produce an individual with a more stable character.

 Can athletes competing in the new millennium be considered legendary? This is another very tricky question. This book does recognize a few athletes who began their athletic proficiency in the 2000s and are still competing. There are many others who, likewise, began their careers in the new century but are not considered legends. An athlete competing in an individual sport probably has a better chance of attaining legendary status than a team-sport athlete. Three athletes come to mind immediately; Manuel Minginfel, Yvonne Bennett, and Lori Cruz Hayden (Marino). These three athletes cannot be left out of this book. Lori won a world body-building championship in 2003. Yvonne is perhaps the greatest Micronesian female track and field athlete of all time. Her 56-second 400-meter run in Oceania 2011 in Samoa will be the standard for that event in Micronesia for years, maybe decades, to come. And Manuel won a silver medal in the 2006 World Weightlifting Championships. To leave them out would be an injustice and would serve no true purpose. They genuinely dominated their respective sports like no others had before them.

 At the same time, a team-sport athlete must be a pure super star to be included in this book. There certainly are very deserving 21st century athletes who rate the highest recognition possible, but it will have to be later on, and not in this book. Sorry, but that is my feeling and many, many sports personalities agree with this philosophy.

Committee

When I decided to write this book, my first task was to form a committee that would oversee the selection of the legends. I assembled a number of individuals, who are legends in their own right, to be part of this group and who, I believe, represented a cross section of the athletic community. The most difficult dilemma in the formation of the committee was to have representation from each of the 8 island groups. This became an impossible task. So I created committees in each of the island states/nations. The committee members did quite well with the responsibility of coming up with nominations from their respective locales. I also found that sports personalities who were active in the 60s and 70s or who had more than 25 years of sports-related experience were the most knowledgeable and reliable when discussing historical information and results. Furthermore, I discovered that no single person knew or knows the identity of all the great Micronesian sports legends. I did find, however, that certain individuals were quite familiar with several decades of sports history relative to a specific island nation. Nonetheless, to find an individual who was a walking almanac of sports information for the whole region from 1966 to 2012 was impossible. Some came close, but none possessed knowledge relating to all of Micronesia. Nevertheless, there were a few individuals who are experts when it comes to their home-island over the past 40 or so years.

I first shared my tentative plan to write this book with various individuals on Saipan, Guam, Palau, the Marshalls, and Pohnpei in 2009. These initial discussions led to individuals who stood out when it came time to identify and validate potential legends. Some of these individuals were invited to be committee members. The initial members consisted of me, Ricardo R. Duenas, Tony Rogolifoi, and Ted (Pastor) Ngewakl, all of Saipan. Dennis Zermeno, Patrick Lujan, and Baklai Temingel were to be consulted later as the book began to materialize.

Experts, sports personalities, and sports federation and national Olympic organizations were also employed to help the committees locate all the deserving legends. Terry Sasser of the Marshalls Islands National Olympic Committee and Baklai Temengil, general secretary of the Palau National Olympic Committee, are just two of the many nominators of potential legends. Local sports federations also provided valuable input. Torgun Smith, a Guam tennis administrator, Bill Keldermans of Palau Basketball Federation, Dennis Zermeno, a former director of the Guam’s recreation department, Sterling Skilling of the Kosrae Sports Federation, Ted Rutun of Yap, and Roque Alcantara of Guam were leaders of local organizations who made nominations. All nominations were carefully considered and this book could not have been completed without the support of each of the island nations.

Selection of Legends

Legends were selected by several means. The first and best method that the committee used was a nomination system. An individual had to be nominated in order to be considered a legend. A nomination could be made either verbally or in writing to any or all of the committee members. Anyone could make a nomination. Sports federations, National Olympic Committees, athletes, sports reporters, fans, coaches, officials, sports administrators, and all citizens of Micronesia were encouraged to submit names of potential legends to the committee. The more nominations each committee received, the more accurate the final product would be. Each nomination was “cross-checked” by each committee member. Cross checking involved getting feedback from as many people as possible in order to make an appropriate choice. Usually, the committees were unanimous in their decision for either accepting or rejecting a nomination. A nominee’s statistics and career numbers were closely scrutinized in making the final decision.

The cross-check system proved to be very advantageous for the simple reason that it precluded one person’s being the judge, jury, and executioner in deciding the fate of a nominee. Biases, personality conflicts, and prejudices were also held to a minimum with the cross-check system. However, there were a few times that I, as the main author of the book, had to make a final decision. I accepted this role as the integrity of the book depended upon 100% accuracy in identifying Micronesia’s sports icons.

The cross-check system was also useful in another way. Patrick Lujan, a respected, long-time Guam TV sports reporter was probably the first individual in Micronesia to establish a list of the greatest athletes for a specific sport. Patrick devised a plan much like cross-checking, though it could also be called a point system, to establish the greatest Guam football players of all time. He invited 30 seasoned Guam sports personalities, each having at least 30 years of experience with Guam sports, to submit a list of those they believed to be the 10 greatest Guam football players of all time. He then combined the results from all the lists by using a point system. All 10 names on each list received one point. The points for each nominee were totaled and a list was put together ranking the nominees from the highest to lowest point total. Thus, a list of the top Guam football players of all time was created. Patrick confided to me that all but one of submitted lists were valid and used in his tabulation. Only one ballot was rejected as being unsuitable. Patrick’s system had a success rate of an incredible 97%, i.e., 29 out of 30 ballots turned in were useful. He was able to use a form of cross checking to come up with his Greatest Guam Football Players list.

When you read the football section in this book, I am sure you will be impressed and agree with me that it represents the best of those who have ever played football on Guam.

Ultimately, my committees used a system similar to Patrick’s in finalizing our lists of Micronesia’s legends. We talked to as many people as possible in order to get their input as to who should be labeled legends. The committees found that the most effective means of establishing who the true sports legends are was through oral communication.

My committees and I also looked at all the existing historical documents we could find. We consulted the CNMI Archives located at the Northern Marianas College library, the Internet, former residents of Micronesia, and other available resources. Names of potential athletes from the 1960s to the 2000s were then forwarded to the committee as nominations. Records of accomplishments, statistics, and awards received were obtained. Interviews were conducted to screen potential legends as well.

I was able to travel to the eight Micronesian island groups in order to interview knowledgeable individuals who had firsthand information regarding sports icons on their islands. Oral interviews and detailed journals were used to keep a record for finalizing all data and information. While in each island group, historical information was evaluated in order to come up with the best possible list and background information about the greatest athletes, coaches and officials.

Once all the legends were identified, the third and final step was to obtain bios, photos, data, statistics, and other information needed for each legend in order to complete the book.

Birth and Rebirth of Sports

As I mentioned, the book covers a period from 1966 to 2012. I consider 1966 to be the real beginning date for sports in Micronesia. The birth of sports and participation in international competition are linked to each other. One could not exist without the other. This author is well aware of Guam’s sports programs that began right after World War II with the huge influx of United States military personnel on Guam. To be sure, some of the sports programs on Guam did begin in the late 40s and continue throughout the 50s, as local athletes and teams began to be allowed to compete in military-sponsored sports activities. These sports were most likely to have been baseball, basketball and fast-pitch softball. Significantly, other than one or two sports programs, the other island nations did not begin to develop full-fledged sports programs until the end of the 1960s, or more precisely, just before the 1969 Micronesian Olympics (1st Micronesian Games) held on Saipan. Yes, some islands had baseball programs that can be traced as far back as the Japanese times in the 1920s. Dr. Don Shuster, of the University of Guam’s Micronesian Area Research Center (MARC) researched and authored a book that tracks the history of baseball in Palau. He states that Palau baseball began in the middle 1920s. Other Micronesian islands such as Chuuk and Saipan also had baseball games/leagues as early as the mid 1920’s. Susumu Aizawa of Chuuk and John Blanco of the Northern Marianas are just two of the many gifted Micronesian athletes that were allowed to play in the Japanese professional baseball leagues during the 1950s.

Nonetheless, for the sake of discussion, it is generally agreed that a broad and comprehensive Micronesian-wide sports program did not begin in earnest until the late 1960s or, more precisely, in preparation for participation in the 1969 Micronesian Games, and in Guam’s case, entrance into the 2nd South Pacific Games, held in New Caledonia in 1966.

An important aspect associated with the beginning of sports development was the 1966 arrival of Peace Corps volunteers in Micronesia. Highly qualified PCVs served as athletes, coaches, and advisors in most of the island nations and helped build and sustain sports programs. These PCVs brought a higher level of athletic skills, coaching techniques and administrative experiences that were useful in enhancing existing facilities and developing first-rate sports programs.

A striking example of the arrival of advanced playing skills occurred at a basketball game in 1968 in Gualo Rai, Saipan. Felix Rabauliman, Rick Duenas, and I were watching a game being played between Black-Micro Pilipino construction workers and a Saipan all-star team. During that game, a Peace Corps volunteer broke free and dunked the ball. Felix, who had never before seen a basketball slammed through the hoop, turned to me at once and asked “Does that count?” Rick vividly remembers the Pilipino team was not only in awe of the slam but even questioned its legitimacy.

In the 1970s, after the ‘69 Micronesian Games, some nations continued to further develop and maintain viable, comprehensive sports programs while other nations slipped back into the pre-1966 doldrums of waiting until the last minute to build national teams for off-island competitions. I know this for a fact for two reasons. First, I had the fantastic opportunity to live and work in Palau from 1970 to 1974 as the athletic director for the Micronesian Occupational Center in Koror. MOC was the regional-wide vocational college for all of Micronesia. My four years in Palau were some of the best years of my life. The sports program at MOC flourished under the direction of Tony Towai, Teddy Iyekar, and me. MOC won almost every athletic contest or event they participated in. You name the sport and MOC dominated, except for baseball, in which MOC held their own but did not dominate.

Secondly, Micronesia entered the 5th South Pacific Games, held on Guam in 1975. I, as the athletic director of the Micronesian team, along with the volleyball, basketball, and fast-pitch softball coaches, toured the Trust Territory island district centers to evaluate and choose athletes to represent Micronesia in these Games. It was obvious that most island nations had shut down their athletic programs right after the ‘69 Micronesian Olympics on Saipan. A plan to select athletes to compete in men’s athletics, fast-pitch softball, basketball, volleyball, tennis, table tennis, swimming, golf, weight-lifting, and spear fishing and women’s athletics and swimming was prepared to make the process as fair as possible. In few district/nation centers, did I see any evidence of year-around practice, and the selection trip had been announced more than 6 months in advance. However, some great athletes did perform well during the 5th SPG. These were superior athletes in their own right and always stayed in shape. Tony and Takoa Towai, Tony Satur, Adriana Jack, Cecilia Lisua, Katsushi Skang, Huber Santos, Fountain Inok and Gus Aguon (all legends) are just a few of the great athletes who competed and did well on Guam in 1975.

The 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s saw a rebirth of sports in most nations. Probably the most significant reason for the resurgence was the development of sports associations that not only assisted their respective nations in becoming affiliated with various international and regional sports governing bodies, such as IOC (International Olympic Committee) and the IAAF (International Amateur Athletics Federation), but also assisted in promoting on-island events and competitions for specific sports. Membership in international federations opened the doors for participation in world-wide, regional, and area competitions, such as the World Olympics, World Championships in various sports, the South Pacific Games/Pacific Games, and the Micronesian Games. Participation in such off-island events required that athletes be ready to compete on a much higher level than in on-island competitions.

Member nations of the International Olympic Committee also received solidarity funding which provides for necessary and indispensable grassroots programs that develop younger athletes for future off-island competitions. Membership in regional organizations such as the Oceania Athletics Association (OAA) also provided money and programs for maintaining and developing programs in which athletes, coaches, and officials benefitted from world-class training.

To a certain degree, the number of legends that represents each island nation is a function of the extent to which their respective athletic programs have developed and improved over the past five decades that this book is showcasing. Guam, with the post-World War II military contributions provided to its sports programs and its larger general population compared to other Micronesian island nations, will obviously have produced more legends. Of course, this author has no control over what transpired in the island nations from 1966 to 2012 and is only reporting what he, his committees and all other contributors have been able to discover.

An unforeseen but satisfying benefit of writing this book has been the degree to which it has stimulated discussion among citizens of Micronesia regarding who are the genuine, legitimate sports icons, either locally or from all across Micronesia. This is a subject that has rarely been officially discussed before and has now been brought to the forefront in many conversations within the Micronesian sporting community as well as society as a whole. Patrick Lujan, by naming the top Guam football players of all time, is the only individual this author could locate who had previously undertaken a quest to name sports legends of Micronesia. Even though this book is a preliminary effort, I hope it will be valued as the instrument that began the discussion and exchange of ideas.

However, I did come across another list of great athletes, this one also from Guam. An organization on Guam created a list of the 125 all-time great 20th century athletes. This list was then pared down to the top 25 athletes who were called “The Elite Sports Masters of the Millennium”. Ironically, without ever seeing this impressive and extraordinary list, I included 22 of these “Elite Masters” in this book. The three not included is a baseball player from the 1940s and two boxers. Of the remaining 100 nominated athletes not making the “Elite” list, I included 75 of them.

Though this book is not in competition with any existing all-time lists or projects, I feel that the individuals included in the Guam section of this book have more than met my rigorous and strict criteria. One example of athletes in my book who were not considered to be a 20th century “Elite Master” are three great and record-setting athletics stars of the 90s, TJ Quan, David Wilson, and Florenz Qutilong. Again, you be the judge.

I have done my best to make this book as accurate as possible. Some readers may not think so, but its contents have been rigorously researched and documented. I can’t, nor will I try, to make everyone happy. I think it is wonderful if individuals think they are legends. It is beneficial for emotional and psychological health to possess a positive self-image. However, I have found that the true sports legends know they are extraordinary athletes, but don’t find it necessary to blow their own horns, so to speak.

It should be stated that the most useful information regarding the determining of the true legends came from the legends themselves. This is most likely due to the fact that they were not apprehensive about their inclusion as legends. Their whole focus was fixed on who should be included and not on themselves.

Why Did I Write The Book?

A few words about the author may be in order. I probably have as good an understanding of sports from 1966 to 1978 as anyone in Micronesia. My knowledge comes as a result of my involvement with sports on Saipan as a Peace Corps volunteer in the late 1960s, with the 1969 Micronesian Olympics on Saipan, and with sports in Palau from 1970 to 1974 and on Saipan from 1974 to 1978. In addition I was the athletic director for Micronesia in the 5th South Pacific Games, held on Guam in 1975. My resume includes coaching, competing, developing, officiating, and pioneering an uncountable number of sports events and grass-roots programs over the years. I always remind myself that I was fortunate to have been in the right place at the right time but, at the same time, I was able to see what needed to be done and knew how to get it done.

I was also privileged to have been connected with some of the greatest athletes to have made Micronesia their home. I was associated with the Breakers in volleyball and basketball on Saipan in the 1960s and 70s, and with the perennial champion Oleai, Saipan women’s team in fast-pitch softball. I served as coach of the gold-medal-winning Northern Marianas women’s volleyball team in the ‘69 Micronesian Olympics (the only Gold medal won by the CNMI), and as the athletic director and director of recreation and sports at the Micronesian Occupational Center in Koror, Palau (1970-1974). Among the legendary athletes whom I was lucky enough to coach or be associated with during the ‘60s and ‘70s are Ricardo Duenas, Tino Olopai, Cecilia Lisua, Maria and Irmina Pua, Margarita Olopai, Asunta “Margo” Celis, Vicente and Emeterio Saures, Al Snyder, Felix F. Rabauliman, David M. Sablan and Joyce Taro, all of Saipan, and Wilhelm Rengiil, Takeo and Tony Towai, Don Shuster, and Bill Keldermans of Palau, each and every one of them legendary in distinctive and exceptional ways.

 I also envision that in the future this book will be considered the first step toward the establishment of a sports-recognition system in each nation/state and an area-wide sports hall of fame. In my travels throughout Micronesia, I have been disappointed by the lack of reward programs for the great sports personalities in the island nations/states. A simple sports hall of fame in each nation/state would go a long way toward recognizing individuals who have displayed outstanding athletic, coaching, officiating and leadership skills and would become a beacon to guide more individuals toward becoming involved in sports in some capacity. Yes, I completely understand the politics that can undermine such programs and outweigh the positive aspects of a recognition system. I have heard accounts in every nation/state of the feuds and animosities between individuals, teams, and sports associations. I know it exists. However, on Saipan, we have the thriving and meaningful CNMI sports hall of fame. It’s not perfect but it works. It also could provide the blueprint for other nations to follow. This book is certainly not the place to discuss the procedures governing the induction of worthy individuals into the CNMI SHOF but its value is certainly worth noting.

Along the lines of a SHOF, many years ago, Guam took the initial steps to create a baseball hall of fame. Four individuals, John Farnum, Ronnie Tavares, Ignacio Salas (1930’s and 40’s) and Joe Guerrero (umpire), were duly inducted into it. Plaques for each of them were hung on the fence in leftfield and that was it. No more inductees, no more fame, no more recognition for the other individuals who were genuinely instrumental in developing Guam’s highly successful and respected baseball program.

Where could hall of fame members be showcased? Going through the San Francisco or Honolulu airports may provide a suitable answer. You get to see some of the greatest athletes to represent these two fine cities on display throughout the long open spaces at these airports. Guam’s International Airport has many blank walls throughout their extremely lengthy concourses. A natural fit. Everyone passing through Guam or any of the other Micronesian airports could view a gallery of the islands’ legendary sports figures.

Other possible sites for housing honored sports icons would be the governor’s/president’s office or the offices of the local National Olympic Committee.

 I also hope that the collection and preservation of data and statistics will improve and a safe and accessible place will be found to store it so it is easily available to all citizens when needed. Every Micronesian nation/state has a college/university or public library where sports statistics and data could be housed.

 The biggest obstacle in doing research for this book was the lack of written data or statistics. My thanks to Saipan’s Francisco Palacios, also respectfully known as “Tun Ko” (a legend), for his 50 years of recording baseball stats and data. When I was in Guam and Palau talking to their respective baseball legends about individual bios, it was very often suggested that I check with Tun Ko, who supposedly had everything. So I did, and found that he did indeed have impeccable and detailed baseball statistics for the Saipan Major League, Mobil Games and the Micronesian Games. I used information from Tun Ko for the bios of CNMI’s baseball legends. He also took the time to provide bios for all of the Palau and Guam baseball legends. Unfortunately, Saipan’s fastpitch softball stats were lost in a storage-locker fire some years ago. Bob Coldeen, a CNMI television sports reporter, and Tun Ko have jointly authored a book that presents all the CNMI baseball statistics.

 The sports associations in every island nation/state should have a by-law on the archiving of statistics. Its usefulness is undeniable.

Extraordinary Events

 Gathering and accumulating information and meeting with legends to acquire bios, pictures and facts proved to be the backbone of this book. Each conversation, interview or meeting connected with this book will be etched in my memory forever. None will ever be forgotten. They were all that good, and some were even GREAT.

 My regular meetings with Saipan’s Rick Duenas and Tony Rogolifoi were essential in gathering information as was being able to pick their brains regarding the CNMI’s sports legends. Both were always willing to share the treasure trove of memories and information they had accumulated during their active sports careers. Rick also had a wealth of information regarding Guam, where he attended high school in the late 1950s.

 Then, too, I will never forget the very first official conversation with a sports legend. This meeting was with “the human vacuum cleaner”, Roque Alcantara, of Guam baseball and softball fame. We spent two enjoyable hours at a pizza parlor in Guam and hit it off immediately. We found that we both shared the same ideas about sports in general. I had first read of Roque’s feats in the 1970s on the sports pages of the Pacific Daily News. He is truly an extraordinary individual. His stories and personal experiences provided a very insightful glimpse into sports on Guam.

 Another unforgettable meeting was with Patrick Lujan, a distinguished Guam television sports reporter of some 20 years (1992 - 2012). I couldn’t wait to meet him as he had put together the list of the 10 Greatest Guam Football players of all time. We met at his office in Mangilao, Guam. It was a dream come true to chat with Patrick for almost two hours about Guam sports. He truly knows his Guam sports history.

 However, the most impressive meeting of all took place in Palau. In order to facilitate the gathering of pictures and bios for legendary Palau baseball players, I had asked Lucius Marsol, a baseball legend himself, to assemble all of the great Palauan baseball legends at the same time. He fulfilled my request to the max. During the last of my three trips to Palau, I received a phone call that instructed me to be at the Rock Island Inn on a specific day, at a specific time. When I walked into the restaurant, there were eight of the greatest Palauan baseball players waiting for me; Lucius, Moses Yobech, Junior Ricric, Felix Francisco, Martin Ngchar, Ghandi Baules, Milb Tmetuchel, and Uchel Sechewas (you can read about these legends in Shuster, Don, *Baseball in Palau: Passion for the Game*). For the next 60 minutes, I was in another universe overcome with astonishment and admiration. I even had tears in my eyes. Sitting with these baseball icons certainly was one of the greatest pleasures I have ever had, and I have had many extraordinary experiences in Micronesia. They also knew of me, as I had lived in Palau in the early 70s, so the respect was mutual. After I took the necessary pictures, we joked, reminisced and bantered about some of the great moments in Palauan and Micronesian baseball history. When I first sat down, Lucius had whispered to me that this was the very first time all the great Palauan baseball players had been in the same room at the same time. I reminded myself that if any future experiences or gatherings on my fact-finding tours could match this meeting in magnitude and substance, then they would have to be on another planet. I was fairly sure that the Rock Island Cafe get-together would never be equaled again under any circumstances.

 My expeditions through the islands of FSM and the Republic of the Marshalls were also extremely valuable. My time spent with Clark Graham in Weno, Chuuk was extraordinary and worthwhile. We share similar Peace Corps experiences, he arriving in Chuuk in 1966 and having never left except for vacations, and I landing on Saipan in early 1967.

Director of the Pohnpei Sports and Recreation Department, Mikael Loyola, was able to gather 40 of the 50 Pohnpeian sports icons over a two-day period for a picture-taking session. Some waited hours for me to show up at the central meeting place in Kolonia.

Sterling Skilling, a tennis and official legend of Kosrae, also was able to schedule 15 Kosraean sports legends to get their pictures taken and provide information for their bios. Of interest to me was the magnificent physical condition many of the male legends were in. Kun Killian, for example, though in his early 40s, still looked capable of winning a wrestling gold medal in the same weight class he wrestled in as a muscular 25-year-old.

My time spent at the Marshall Island National Olympic Committee main office was also an absolutely joy. Listening to some of the great fast-pitch softball and volleyball legends recount their experiences over the past 40 years will never be forgotten. Jaimada Kabua related how, in one ten-year stretch, he had never struck out. Incredible but true. I checked with some softball pitching legends and they nodded in agreement with his statement, not that I ever doubted Jaimada.

At times, I remember wishing the experiences I was listening to from legends all across Micronesia would never stop. So many of the stories, so much of the chit-chat had never before been written down. In many cases, these accounts and narratives have never been heard before by a non-indigenous person. Perhaps someday I will write a book based on the conversations and interviews I’ve had with the many sports legends in Micronesia.

Legendary Tales and Humanities Content

The book is an attempt at historical documentation of sports in Micronesia. As such, it should meet the Humanities content requirement. However, to increase the interest for the readership and to provide a more insightful and dynamic document, a humanities section has been included. This section will include reflections on some of the legendary sports heroes and relate some out-of-the-ordinary stories. Most, if not all, will be appearing in print for the very first time. A few of these reflections are included at the end of this introduction.

My travels throughout Micronesia brought me into contact with numerous sports experts who have countless stories to tell about athletes and athletic situations. Some of these stories and tales, legendary in their own right, are included in this book and will make up the reflection section of this book. I was very fortunate to have obtained at least one legendary reflection in four of the eight major Micronesian island groups.

I am excited about the contents of this book. The committees and the other major contributors are also. I hope you are eager to read and scrutinize the pages of this book. I am sure you will be as impressed with the individuals who make up the *Sports Legends of Micronesia: 1966 to 2012* as I am.

ISLAND MAGIC

By

Dr. Kurt Barnes

I arrived on Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands in January of 1967 as a Peace Corps volunteer. My assignment was to teach English and physical education to elementary students at the Chalan Kanoa Elementary School. My Peace Corps training group’s (Phase III) language instructor was Felix F. Rabauliman who took great interest in insuring that the eleven NMI volunteers were comfortable in their new surroundings.

After being on Saipan for about 3 months, Felix approached me one day and asked me to coach the Oleai women’s team in the Saipan fast-pitch softball league. I was extremely proud to have been asked to coach this vaunted team as I had heard many tales of their greatness and achievements.

The women were even better than I was led to believe and had fabulous basic softball skills. During the 4-month-long league, the team was highly successful and finished with only one loss. The whole island was captivated every Sunday afternoon when the games were played at the softball field, which is now the site of the JoeTen-Kiyo Library. I spent many hours practicing these young ladies, instructing them in various strategies and tactics they had never been exposed to before. Their dynamic pitcher, a lanky, powerful young lady, was required to throw 50 pitches at every practice. Except for the week before the game they lost (a village wedding took priority), the ladies were always better prepared mentally and physically than their opponents.

Since two teams had tied for first place during the round-robin league, a playoff game to determine the league champion was to be played.

The morning of the playoff game, I walked into the Rabauliman house in Oleai. Upon entering the house, I noticed a very elderly lady of Carolinian descent sitting in a chair near the kitchen. Felix’s wife, Kina, was also present and acknowledged my presence. She then said, “See this lady? If she wants you to win today, you will win. If she wants you to lose, there’s nothing you can do about it.” I quickly countered, “Then I hope she wants us to win!”

I then walked outside to reflect on what had just transpired. I felt a genuine rush of excitement. The village of Oleai really took their women’s softball games seriously. Obviously, the elderly lady was the most powerful and perceptive lady in the village. How could the Oleai team lose? They had the combination of this magically powerful village woman influencing their every move and their own superior softball skills and strategy to dominate every game.

The Oleai women won that game 7-0 and never allowed a runner to reach 2nd base. Total domination! Oleai’s pitcher was phenomenal and virtually unhittable, and the Oleai hitters hammered the ball to all parts of the field.

Was it the mystical influence or the dominating playing skills that won the game? To me it has never mattered. What mattered most was that the players were confident, intense and focused throughout the entire game. Players have the right to rely on supernatural powers. I am sure that the opposing team was also applying or believing in some type of mystic force.

Another instance involving the talk of magic happened on the eve of the opening of the 1969 Micronesian Olympics (Games). Felix Rabauliman, who chaired the Micronesian Olympics Local Organizing Committee, and I were leaning on my pickup truck outside his house in Oleai Village on Saipan. It was dark and only a few hours before the opening ceremonies were to begin.

During a lull in our conversation, Felix looked at me and, in a very assuring and knowledgeable tone of voice, said “Prim, tomorrow and in the next few days you will see the power of the Trukese (Chuukese now) magic. They will win most of the medals.”

I waited a while before I replied: knowing that Felix had watched me play volleyball and basketball in the island-wide leagues at a very high level and knowing the degree and level of intensity I brought to each game I played.

I finally asked “Would the magic work on me? Would I be as successful an athlete if the magic was used on me?”

Several minutes went by before Felix answered my questions. He was in deep thought the entire two or three minutes, certainly recalling memories of my playing ability and intensity and attempting to interpret it in the context of the Micronesian culture he had grown up in. He finally answered in just one word, “No!” I didn’t respond and the conversation moved on to another topic. However, it has always been my perception that at that moment Felix came to the realization that, in some situations, perhaps island magic would have no influence.

Felix was correct. Preceding the opening of the Games, talk of witch-doctors being present throughout the competition to bedevil and hex opposing athletes was rampant. I would guess that these rumors and speculation were likely a product of the nervousness and apprehension felt by the six island groups coming together for the very first time. Not only did Chuuk apply their famous voodoo practices, but a member of their official entourage was their great cheerleader. Masitoki Steven added enormous and entertaining pageantry to the Games by way of his efforts to jinx and bewitch opposing athletes. Gyrating women from Palau and Ponape also enhanced the colorful spectacle of the Games. In the end, happily, the games fostered only camaraderie and life-long friendships among participants.

While not wishing to take anything away from the Chuukese and their beliefs and culture, it was Palau that dominated in the medal standings during the 1st Micronesian Games on Saipan in 1969.

1969 MICRONESIAN OLYMPICS

Reflections of a Yapese Athlete

By Ted Rutun

I was very fortunate to have represented Yap as an athlete during the inaugural 1969 Micronesian Olympics. As the Micronesian Olympics was the first off-island competition for most Micronesian athletes, some very entertaining stories and situations are associated with this first-of-a-kind competition, and many of these resulted from a lack of experience in competing at such high-level athletic events.

One such story is that of Florencio Yamada, a Palauan by birth.  He was off-island for the practices and preparation of the Palauan delegation to the 1969 MicrOlympics, so he arrived back in Palau after the official roster had been finalized and submitted to the Northern Marianas Local Organizing Committee. Knowing that he was a solid contender for a medal in athletics, he flew to Saipan at his own expense to find a roster spot with another island nation. When he arrived on Saipan he immediately met with the Yapese delegation to humbly request a chance to compete on their behalf. The quota for each island nation was 75 athletes, coaches, and officials. Yap’s contingent only numbered 70, so there was a slot available for Florencio. I happened to be a high jumper representing Yap, but seeing Florencio’s towering height and sensing his great athletic skill, I gladly conceded my spot to Florencio in the high-jump competition.

Florencio Yamada was sure he could deliver what he promised and declared that he would finish closely behind Tony Towai of Palau in the high jump.  He assured the Yapese delegation that the only way he would not win a medal was if Tony finished third or lower.  As I now reflect on that particular conversation some 40 years back, I had the feeling that Florencio thought that Tony, invincible as he seemed, would definitely be the one to beat.  Still, that was the first Micro Games and nobody had ever heard of Henry Edwin of Ponape (Pohnpei). Edwin was, in many ways, perhaps only one of two other athletes (Rick Duenas of CNMI being the other) in Micronesia with the same caliber of talent and versatility as Tony Towai.

The rest is history, as Florencio did win a medal, placing third in the high jump. Tony and Henry had been tied for first place, but due to Tony having one more try, Henry won the gold medal and Tony earned the silver.

It is funny but, until now, I have been under the impression that it was in the 200-yard free-style relay that Yap earned third place. Instead, it was actually the 200-yard medley relay. I was in both relays, swimming the first leg in the free-style and the butterfly segment in the medley.  Our third-leg swimmer in the free-style crossed into the adjacent Chuukese lane, thus being disqualified, or so I assumed. After seeing the infraction, I immediately left the swimming venue believing we had been disqualified. It was a very long walk back to Hopwood, the athletes’ village, but I was very disappointed and frustrated, and I needed that long walk to calm down. Certainly the last thing I wanted to do was to remain at the swimming pool.  We had been assured prior to the swimming competition that crossing into another lane would lead to an automatic disqualification.  Luckily, as I later learned, it turned out Yap had not been DQ’d as there wasn't any material advantage gained by being in the wrong lane as Chuuk was swimming "away" when we crossed behind their swimmer. It was a long, solitary walk I didn’t have to make.

Peter Tuwun of Micro-all-around fame was also quite amazing. In coconut tree climbing, he ascended the tree like a monkey and descended like a lizard.  He was faster than the second fastest climber by about a 2:1 ratio. By the time it came down to the final event (spear throwing for accuracy), Tuwun was well ahead of the great Palauan, Katsushi Skang, despite the fact that the Palauan had beaten Peter in three of the four previous events.

However, Katsushi snatched the gold medal from Tuwun because Peter was never serious about what he was doing.  For instance, immediately before releasing the spear, he would take his eyes off the target, and after a quick glance to both the left and the right (as though he was a baseball pitcher in a bases-loaded situation), he would then throw the spear.  Because he never took aim, there were times when his spear landed sideways in front of the coconut targets, thus earning no points. Tuwun, though, eventually earned the bronze medal.

But non-conformity and lack of seriousness was and is Peter Tuwun's trademark. This was most likely due to the fact that he had never had to develop a higher level of intensity since his natural athletic skills were always good enough for him to prevail in Yap. In the coconut-husking segment of the Micro-all-around, he would lay down with legs spread-eagled, a small gesture of courtesy for the photographers.  Furthermore, he was the only athlete who was not in uniform as he always wore his "thuw" (lion cloth) in all the events. He also ran a leg in the 4x100 relay in track where he put on a little ‘show’ for the audience ---while still running with the relay baton in hand.

Yap created another interesting scene, this one in connection with sailing. Knowing that their canoe was not as fast as the Pohnpeian canoe, the sailors tried to cut corners by crossing over the reef in order to travel via the shortest distance which was the only possible strategy that could be employed to narrow the lead held by Pohnpei.  The problem was the sailing competition was held during low tide and the Yapese canoe was constantly running aground. So one of the sailors always climbed out of the canoe and dragged it over the reef, but his companion was not about to join him in the water; he was scared of the sea cucumbers that littered the reef.  It was truly a funny and memorable incident as it was unbecoming for Micronesian men to be scared of anything in the water.  So spectators standing on the shore could see an open sail billowing in the sea breezes, yet the canoe remained almost stationary on the reef with one of the sailors still on board and not about to get out to lighten the load so the canoe could be freed. Yap’s medal attempt fell prey to the fearsome sea cumbers that lay throughout the reef.

Though Peter Tuwun was one of our star Yapese athletes on Saipan, many, including myself, thought he could have performed much better if he had tried harder.  But there was at least one person who took delight in the way Tuwun acted and competed.  At the end of the Games, the Yap delegation received a special dinner invitation from Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands High Commissioner Edward Johnston, with specific instructions that they bring Tuwun along as the guest of honor.

The ’69 Micronesian Games were an outstanding experience for all who participated or watched. There was magnificent and flamboyant pageantry from all six participating nations, hilarious situations and lots and lots of stories of achievements or failures from novice sportsmen and sportswomen. Indeed, it surely was an event to savor and cherish for a lifetime!  It was the initial chapter of sport in Yap and the beginning of higher-level competition in our region. Though most of us were only small-time athletes back then, we were all big-time sports pioneers in the Micronesia region!

HAROLD “HAL” SHIROMA

The Godfather of Guam Football

April 22, 1930 – April 19, 2002

 The island’s favorite sport of football has a date to remember: April 22, 1930. On this date in Maui, Harold “Hal” Shiroma was born. Known by many as the “Godfather of Guam Football”, Hal, the youngest among three sisters and one brother, was raised in the old Hawaiian style, which is not commonly seen in Hawaii today.

 After his first team practice in organized football, the coach quickly assigned Shiroma to offensive center and defensive-linebacker duties based on his size and strength. His accomplishments are still recognized today as school officials at Farrington High School honored him and other valuable players over the years by placing pictorial memories in their facilities.

 On September 18, 1952, Hal, with one suitcase and his flamboyant Hawaiian style, arrived on Guam to assist his sister in managing a small family restaurant she had recently opened. Shiroma initially took up residence in the village of Asan.

 After 5 years on island, Hal finally found the Chamorrita he had been looking for and, in 1957 married Ms. Lourdes Wusstig Santos of Yigo. Not long after, Bill, Buzz, Ivan, Tai and Blu made up the first generation of the Shiroma family to be born on Guam.

 Shiroma continued his bowling career and achieved his most notable accomplishment in November of 1958. A match game was set between a visiting off-island professional and Shiroma who, at the time, was one of the most respected bowlers. In front of 800 local bowling enthusiasts, Shiroma bowled a 300 game, making bowling history at the Guam Bowling Center.

 After the small family restaurant closed in 1960, Shiroma began work for Mr. F. L. Moylan and spent 17 years with the company, which is still in business today. Shiroma then decided to become an entrepreneur, opening Hal’s Acres (fast food, beer garden and pool hall) which lasted until Typhoon Pamela ripped through Guam. Shiroma then acquired rental units and sought consultation contracts to provide for his family.

 As his children grew older and began to participate in both baseball and football leagues, it was then that Hal found his calling and established his creed “Tradition of Champions”. Shiroma assumed offensive coaching duties for the midget division of the Tamuning Eagles in 1969 which, at the time, was a Navy-sponsored youth league.

 Being a supportive father, Shiroma followed his sons as they began competing at the high-school level. Shiroma not only coached for the high school his sons attended, but also continued coaching at the youth level. Shiroma’s visionary capabilities made him an integral part of the youth organization, and he quickly moved up the organizational ranks. His commitment to the sport and its growth, led to the community’s bestowing upon him the honorary title of “Godfather of Guam Football.”

 With two of his sons, Ivan and Buzzy, Shiroma would accomplish yet another astonishing feat by winning the 1976-1977 high school championship with the VocTech Friars. The championship was the first for the Friars. The Friars were unable to repeat as champions until the 1992-1993 season.

 Shiroma again followed his older sons, as they intended to participate in the military’s varsity league. Shiroma assumed head coach responsibilities for the University of Guam Tritons and won three straight championships from 1979 through 1981. The varsity league, after close to 33 years, folded following Shiroma’s third championship.

 Shiroma again proved his commitment to the growth of football, when he decided to leave the powerhouse Tamuning Eagles to provide parity in the youth league. During the 1983 season, Hal’s Angels’ expansion season, with initial intentions to field only a midget-division team, Shiroma astonished league coordinators by fielding a team in all three divisions.

 Shiroma became involved in the development and completion of the Wettengel Field also known as “Angel Field” in 1984. Shiroma’s efforts to enhance the level of competition and provide appropriate fields of play continued. Some fields are still in use today, including Barrigada’s Marauder Field. The Ipan Southern Cowboy Field no longer exists. Shiroma was so successful in these endeavors, that Governor Bordallo asked Shiroma to build other baseball fields, which to date are still in use: Yona, Asan, Agat, and the Dededo field near Angel Field. In addition, Shiroma began work on the 18-hole Guam Municipal Golf Course in Dededo.

 Shiroma assisted league organizers to provide island youth with an opportunity to compete off-island, as well as broaden their horizons’ and outlook on life when, in 1970, youth football initiated a series of annual goodwill trips. Shiroma has traveled annually since 1970 to the Philippines, Okinawa, Japan, and Hawaii, never losing a midget-division game.

 Although many of Shiroma’s accomplishment may be eventually forgotten, his legacy as one of the most feared and loved local football legends will live forever. His commitment to the growth of football and to thousands of Guam’s football players, cheerleaders, parents, community leaders, private industries, and numerous military families will always be remembered. Hal Shiroma, you are indeed a sports legend and will be missed.

Ben Saures

By

Dr. Kurt Barnes

The 5th South Pacific Games were held on Guam in August of 1975. At that time, the Micronesian islands were governed by the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, and were aligned with the United States. Since Guam was in the backyard of Micronesia, the Micronesian Sports Council decided to send a team to these Games.

Six years had gone by since the 1st Micronesian Games, held on Saipan in July of 1969. The Games had not only been a tremendous success, but provided the first opportunity for athletes from the six districts of the TTPI to come together for athletic competition. Micronesian athletes in the ‘75 South Pacific Games would be taking the next step in developing higher standards of athletic performance, and be competing on the international stage for the first time.

Stories about animosity between the American-aligned and French-speaking countries abounded in the year preceding the Guam games. Obviously, the rivalry between American Samoa and Guam vs. Tahiti, New Caledonia, and the New Hebrides had taken a wrong turn someplace in one of the preceding SPGs. Now, a third American-associated country was entering the mix.

One of the sports that Micronesia competed in was men’s volleyball. Players on the volleyball team represented most of the Micronesian district centers. However, the best and most talented player was Vicente (Ben) Saures of the Northern Mariana Islands. Ben was an outstanding setter. He possessed the most talented pair of hands any setter could dream of owning. His sets were always picture perfect, absolutely no spin and coming off of Ben’s fingertips with no noise. The perfect set from the perfect setter.

The Micronesian-French Polynesia (Tahiti) volleyball match proved to be more than just a volleyball game. Ben was absolutely awesome and dominating as Micronesia’s setter. Though the Micronesian athletes were significantly smaller than their Tahitian counterparts, Ben kept the score close in each of the three games. In the end, Tahitian height and experience prevailed, but the Micronesians had no reason to hang their heads as they had given an excellent account of themselves.

After the match, the entire Tahiti team and their coach rushed under the net and went right up to Ben. Though thoughts of the French-American conflict were still on the minds of some players, coaches and spectators, the Tahitians had another purpose in approaching Ben.

Ben was the best setter this Tahitian team had ever seen. They shook his hand having been completely mesmerized by his skill level. The leader of the Tahitians asked Ben to move to Tahiti to live and play on their national volleyball team. What an honor for Ben to be recognized for his setting skills and to be asked to play for another country’s national team. What a contrast to the previous bad-blood which seemed to just evaporate out of respect for a Micronesian player who had never played at this international level before.

The Tahitian coach then asked Ben to conduct a short clinic for his setters, the ultimate compliment for Ben. He was teaching world-class athletes who all had been trained in France on the intricacies of setting. Ben graciously took the challenge and for 20 minutes spent time with Tahiti’s setters. No one will ever know if Ben’s clinic improved the Tahitians’ setting skills or if these setters really needed any improvement at all. Maybe Ben was just that much better than all the other setters.

Conflicts between some of the nations competing in the South Pacific Games that year were certainly reduced if not eliminated entirely. Harmony, always a primary aim of International Sport, had a new beginning because of a ball leaving a setter’s hands with no spin or sound.

Way to go Ben.

Tony Towai: A Tribute

By

Dr. Kurt Barnes

Since the late sixties, I have always believed that the best all-around athlete in Micronesia was Tony Towai from Palau. He was a solid six-footer, weighing about 160 pounds. He had cat-like reflexes, fantastic quickness in changing direction, brilliant straight-ahead speed, exceptional eye-hand coordination, and always the master of any situation he found himself in. Humble and down-to-earth, he had a stature and demeanor that generated respect from everyone who knew him. Modest by anyone’s standard, Tony was dynamic and assertive when he needed to be. He excelled in baseball as a pitcher and hitter, softball as a hitter, track as a pole-vaulter, high jumper, and sprinter, and as an outside-hitter in volleyball.

 I first heard of Tony Towai in 1967 while I was a Peace Corps volunteer living on Saipan. One evening I was surfing the radio for something interesting when I hit on a radio station from Guam. It was a baseball game and so I decided to listen. It was the first inning and was either Babe Ruth or Joe DiMaggio-level competition for under-18-year-old baseball players. The pitcher was Tony Towai and he had just faced three batters and each one had walked. Since this was where I joined the game, I did not know the pitch count for each batter, or if Tony was throwing strikes as well as balls. At any rate, he proceeded to strike out the next three batters on nine pitches. Since I was desperate to listen to or watch sports (there was no TV on Saipan at that time), I was fascinated to have found the perfect station to catch this incredible performance by Tony. This was the beginning of my friendship with Tony, even though he would not know about it for the next couple of years. I believe Tony was 17 or 18 at the time and he may have been on his way to the Military.

I didn’t even get to see Tony until 1969 at the 1st Micronesian Games held on Saipan. Though I had heard about his athletic prowess over the previous few years, it wasn’t until the 69 Games that I was actually able to observe Tony perform and stand out in three different sports; baseball, track and field, and volleyball. In track, he won a silver medal in the pole vault, tied for first in the high jump, garnered a silver medal in the 110m hurdles, and was on the gold medal winning 4 X 100 meter relay team. In baseball, undoubtedly his best sport, he pitched and played left-field for the Palau national team. Though he did not pitch in the championship game against Chuuk, (won by Palau 1-0), he pitched and won the semi-final game against Pohnpei to insure that Palau played for the gold medal. Playing on the Palau volleyball team, which won the silver medal, he was an incredible outside hitter with his extraordinary jumping ability, quickness, and general all-around court sense. No other athlete had competed in so many events and done so well. Tony won a medal in every event that he entered in those 1st Micronesian Games.

From August 1970 to August 1974, I was very fortunate to have lived in Palau where I worked at the Micronesian Occupation Center (MOC) and helped open the doors to this Micronesia-wide vocational college. Knowing that I would be in charge of evening and weekend recreation and athletic programs, my first task was to hire Tony, who was back in Palau at this time. He was an outstanding worker and many times kept the lid on tensions between MOC students and the Palauan community. Without Tony’s cool head, there would have been numerous conflicts and his presence kept the natural animosities to a minimum.

Tony played in the Palau Baseball League during these four years, always with Red Torch, the team from his native village, Ngaraard. Red Torch won the league and playoff championships in two of the four years I was in Palau. Though Red Torch was loaded with highly skilled players, without Tony’s pitching and batting skills, they likely would not have won their championships. After I left Palau, Red Torch won the Palau league championship an unprecedented five straight years from 1976 to 1980. Tony was vital to this achievement and was always one of the leading hitters, if not the leader. He was also always one of the league’s best pitchers.

 While working at MOC, Tony also ran track. He could have won the sprints anytime he wanted to compete, but as a coach of the college track team, he always let students have the chance to run. In spite of this, he did run on MOC’s relay teams.

Another incredible chapter in Tony’s legacy was his participation in the 1975 5th South Pacific Games held on Guam. Given that the Micronesian islands were still under the governance of a United Nations trusteeship, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), regional all-star teams in various individual sports were put together to allow Micronesia to compete for the first time on an international basis. Tony was selected for both track and field and men’s fast-pitch softball. As amazing as it seems, Tony had never faced fast-pitch-softball pitching until March of 1975 when the selection team evaluated athletes in all sports in Palau and the rest of the Micronesian islands.

Tony practiced softball for only two-and-a-half months before the South Pacific Games. All athletes were housed at Marianas High School for the intensive practices leading up to the Games. Tony played first base and immediately showed himself to be the best hitter on the team. It was as if Tony had played fast-pitch softball his whole life. He hit everything that crossed the plate. And the pitchers on the Micronesian team were outstanding in their own right. One of the pitchers was a tall, lanky Carolinian lad from Saipan by the name of Tony Satur. Satur was usually unhittable, even as a teenager, but Tony Towai was the only Micronesian softball team player who consistently made contact when Satur was pitching.

 In preparation for the SPG competition, the Micronesian team played many games against local Saipan teams. In these practice games, Satur would pitch for the opposition against the Micronesian all-star team. One night, at the Mt. Carmel ball field, which was located next to the Mt. Carmel Cathedral and across Beach Road from Payless Super Market, Tony hit a ball that is still talked about today. When the ball left Tony’s bat, it flew out of the ballpark, across Beach Road, and was certainly going to land in the PayLess parking lot, some 500 feet from home plate. However, as the ball continued to climb, it hit a wire that connected the field lights. Sensing that the ball was going to go a long way, the fielder was racing toward the street and was totally surprised when the ball suddenly dropped near his feet. Even though the ball never made it across the street, just to hit one of Satur’s pitches square and that far was a tremendous accomplishment. I have talked to Satur many times about Tony’s hit and he cannot remember a ball ever being hit that hard, that far, and that square as Tony’s was that night. To add to this Herculean effort, no one on Saipan can ever remember a ball being hit over Beach Road, either before or after that night.

If Tony needed any more super-human plays to establish himself as the best athlete in the history of Micronesia, this would have been the final one.

Tony also ran on the Micronesian 4 X 400-meter relay team. As the anchor runner, Tony came within one meter of bringing Micronesia from 25 meters behind to almost claiming the third place bronze medal. A poor third leg put Micronesia out of medal contention, and only Tony’s competitiveness and desire gave Micronesia a chance to medal. Incredibly, although Fiji, Tahiti, New Caledonia, New Hebrides (now known as Vanuatu), both Samoas, and Papua New Guinea were track powerhouses in the middle 70s, Micronesia placed ahead of four of them in that 1600m relay.

I consider Tony to be one of my three best friends ever (Rick Duenas and Jim Belyea being the others). If there were an award for the Most Outstanding Humanitarian in Micronesia, Tony would have won it hands down every year. He was, I believe, the best ambassador that Palau has ever had. He was an incredibly talented athlete and a decent, warm person. His determination to have Micronesians live harmoniously, no matter their home island, was extraordinary. He was respected by every MOC student at all times.

He certainly was a man ahead of his time.

In 1987, while I was living in California, I received word that Tony had been struck by a car and seriously injured. The accident happened late at night in Koror. Tony, as athletically gifted as any human being I’ve ever known, was not able to get out of the way of the vehicle which hit him as he walked along the narrow main road. He lingered in a coma for some hours and then passed away. The day Tony died was the saddest day of my life. He continues to be in my thoughts and prayers. Today, Tony is missed by all who knew him. Truly, he will always be celebrated as an iconic figure among Micronesian legends who maintained the highest standards of athletic performances and personal integrity.

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