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!