15. Sports

Fiji is a sporting nation.

Fijians engaged in traditional spear throwing games in ancient times but these died out after the arrival of the British. Yet it was some years later before sports became a part of regular life. An Irishman introduced rugby in 1916 and it quickly gained popularity among Fijians, who played it in bare feet. But it wasn’t until the 1930s that a team went to New Zealand and won every game on tour, a feat never repeated. Chiefs like Ratu George and Ratu Penaia excelled at the game and gave it great impetus. Ratu Penaia would spend a lifetime as player, administrator and president of the union. Once, at an international rugby conference in Cambridge, he addressed the gathering and said, ‘I have often thought what a funny lot we rugby folk are, sitting in an ancient hall, tied by a set of rules that no one agrees on, in pursuit of a ball that won’t even bounce straight.’

As a 15s team, Fiji has always been at the middle of the international ladder, though individuals have done very well overseas. In 2013, it was stated that over 200 Fijian rugby players were linked to clubs in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, China, Europe and the United States, and many have excelled. But it is in the sevens code that Fiji won international fame. I was attending a national sevens competition in 1989, just before the selection of the team to go to Hong Kong where the most prestigious international competition is held. A diminutive young man, who no one had ever heard of, began showing up the recognised stars by racing all over the ground, scoring try after try. The crowd loved him and began calling out ‘Hong Kong, Hong Kong.’ He was Waisale Serevi, who was selected that year and every year thereafter that until he retired. He became the world’s best player and was known by such sobriquets as Sir-revi, the Magician, and the Maestro. He was a small man, humble, cheeky, and yet lovable, who became a household name throughout Fiji and a role model for the youth of the nation.

The British colonial officers brought cricket to the islands. One who devoted much of his life to cricket was Philip Snow, brother of the famous author C. P. Snow. Philip came to Taveuni as a District Officer when I was a boy and spent a great deal of his time fostering the game on the island. My father was no slouch at it, having been captain of the Geelong Grammar School team, and he and Philip did much to popularise the game. Even after Philip retired from the colonial service, he remained an advocate of Fiji cricket and arranged overseas tours, coaching and financial support. But the game never really became universally popular. Perhaps it was too slow and Fiji was certainly too hot and wet for cricket.
The Indian people took to soccer, perhaps because it was less of a contact sport than rugby, and up until the middle of the 20th century it was almost exclusively Indian. But by the end of the century, nearly all the players were Fijian, while the administrators were Indian. Soccer is played to huge crowds throughout Fiji.

When I came to Suva in 1968 I decided that, as Suva was such a wet place, I would take up squash and I never regretted that decision. The beauty of it was that you could always play at the appointed time regardless of the weather and I played three or four times a week. All levels of people competed and many were very good. One of those was a young Chinese man named Devlin Ah Sam. He was not only a good player but was super fit, so he decided to have a crack at the Guinness Book of Records world record for continuous play. All of the squash players were rostered to take turns with him as he played through day and night for 75 hours. Under the rules he was allowed short breaks to go to the toilet and have meals. Otherwise, he had to keep playing game after game, hour after hour. It was hot and tedious and at times he began to flag. But we cheered him on and he set a new world record.

Golf was another game brought in by the British and Australians. The district administrators made small courses at the main centres, and CSR made other courses at each of their mills for their own staff. During the first half of the 20th century, only Europeans played, but as racial barriers collapsed and the CSR staff was localised, other races took it up. In the 1970s a young man in Nadi, named Vijay Singh, began swinging a club. Despite the lack of expert coaching and competition, he was destined to go on and win the US PGA and the Masters. He became the top ranked player in the world. This was quite an achievement when one considers there are millions of players throughout the world. Although Vijay always carried the Fiji flag and was a great ambassador for the country, he seldom came home. On the one occasion that he did, he played in a fundraiser at the Denarau course in Nadi. Many local golfers went to see him and were quite awed at his expertise. He and another Australian professional, who came with him, offered to give us lessons but I am sure they quickly realised we were hopeless cases.

Prior to the establishment of the Denarau course, the early golf courses in Fiji were rather ordinary, providing little challenge. The first real international 18-hole course was designed by the famed Robert Trent Jones Jr at the Pacific Harbour development at Navua. This was also the first major international standard development, which it was hoped would put Fiji on the map. Indeed it was a wonderful complex and the golf course was the centrepiece, with fairways winding through jungle covered ranges and skirting waterways and luxury villas. Some fairways were so skillfully located between hills and bush that one got the feeling that man had played little part in their construction except to mow the grass.
On one occasion, the Eisenhower Cup, the world's team championship, was held at Pacific Harbour. It was a great event for Fiji to host. The course was in pristine condition. Golfers came from all over the world. For us locals it was a rare opportunity to see the best in action. At one stage I was following a young, up-and-coming American golfer, who hooked his ball into the bush. He went in to find it, and shortly after he came running out with hornets buzzing all round him. These little yellow insects get very angry when their nest is disturbed and can give a painful sting. The poor golfer had quite a few on his arms, neck and face and was in considerable agony until I came to his assistance. The old Fijian cure for a hornet sting is a creeper aptly named mile-a-minute. When this is crushed in your hand and mixed with saliva it is rubbed into the sting and gives instant relief. I think I saved the golfer's day.

Ratu Mara was a very keen golfer and while he was Prime Minister, touring the world, he met and played with many of the world's leaders. I occasionally had a game with him and in 1995, when he was President, I was paired with him. I happened to putt so badly that we lost the game. Shortly after, I went to Government House to receive one of the first Fiji awards, Member of the Order of Fiji, from him. There were 30 other recipients, all formally dressed, seated in the splendor of Government House. When my name was called I had to rise, walk down the red carpet to where the President was standing, bow, and wait stiffly before him as he pinned the medal on my coat. It was a very solemn moment, so I could hardly keep a straight face when he said quietly, out of the corner of his mouth, as he was trying to attach the medal, 'I am only giving you this in the hope you will putt better when we play next.'

While attending Melbourne Grammar I discovered that I was quite a talented boxer and I went through Grammar undefeated. When I went back to Taveuni, I was still interested in the sport and with Dad's agreement we began to stage boxing events. We set up a ring that could seat 500 people and brought in boxers from all over Fiji. The boxing event was a gala occasion. The little bay off our wharf was crowded with a flotilla of small craft that brought people from all surrounding islands, and nearly every taxi, car and lorry and bus on the island was parked outside the ring. At that time there was a lot of corruption in the sport and promoters were more interested in making money than promoting the sport and giving fighters a fair go. Our objective was to cover expenses and give all the proceeds to the fighters. It was a resounding success which helped to give the sport credibility in other parts of Fiji, and in due course a few Commonwealth Champions were to emerge.

While there were many talented boxers in Fiji, corruption and mismanagement continued to plague development and the sport fell into disrepute.
As we lived on islands surrounded by the sea, nautical sports were very popular. Fishing was the prerogative of everyone. Indian farmers with small punts and outboard engines fished for food, or to sell and supplement their income. Fijian villagers went netting or spear fishing for the same reasons. In urban areas many had small boats and went out at night to bottom fish. But no matter what the reason, fishing was fun, fishing was sport. There were, of course, the real sports fishermen who owned large boats that carried tourists after bill fish, tuna and wahu. International game fishermen came from all over the world and many world records were set. Annual competitions were held and the newspapers were splashed with photos of unkempt, salty looking characters, standing beside mighty fish, hanging from scales. It was good for tourism.

When I joined the Sugar Board, my chairman, Sir Charles Marsack, owned a 30-footer and was a very keen fisherman. His preference was for bottom fishing at night. Knowing of my background as a fisherman on Taveuni, I was always included in his weekend expeditions. His fishing crony at the time was the Governor, Sir Robert Foster. The other members were Marsack’s son, Ray, who skippered the boat, and a friend of Ray’s. We would leave on Saturday morning for a pre-determined destination, arrive there in the afternoon, and begin fishing at dusk. If we were lucky, we would pull up fish all night. Other times, we would get nothing and have to raise the anchor time and time again till we found the right spot. It was either lots of fun or rather tedious. The first chore at daylight was to go ashore at a small sand spit and clean the fish. We stripped down to our underpants and sat on our haunches on the sand gutting and scaling fish, then go into the sea to perform our own ablutions. I have often reflected on the image of the mighty British Governor of Fiji squatting on the sand in his underpants cleaning fish and thought governors were, after all, mere mortals like any of us.

Perhaps the most widely published and popular athletics event in Fiji is the annual Coca Cola games. This brings together students of all ages and those in the senior groups often go on to represent Fiji at international events such as the Olympic, Commonwealth and South Pacific Games. The South Pacific Games began in Suva and have been held every four years in other Pacific nations. Fiji has not been very successful in the Olympic and Commonwealth Games but in 2013 a one-legged high jumper from Fiji won gold at the Paralympics in London.

Hockey and mens’ and womens’ basketball are immensely popular and in recent times volleyball, which can be played anywhere at little cost, has become a favourite. Another marine sport that has brought Fiji international fame is windsailing. One family, the Philips, have excelled at windsailing. Tony took it up at a young age and for years was among the top ten in the world. He took part in many Olympic and Commonwealth Games and put Fiji on the international circuit. It is, of course, popular at most of the tourist resorts.
Another sport for which Fiji is gaining international prestige is surfing, as there is a venue off Nadi that is now part of the international circuit.

However, rugby and football remain the dominant sports in the country. While a few very talented sportsmen, such as Serevi, Vijay Singh, and a few Fijians who have played rugby for Australia and New Zealand, have done well, it is unlikely that our teams will ever reach the highest rungs in the international sporting arena. In Fiji, as in other Pacific Islands, the people are rather laid back and lack the motivation and discipline to reach the top. For them sport is fun, and perhaps that is the way it should be.