

Lifting the Pacific Way

Let's admit: we are spoilt, most of us. We don't think twice to express our discontent if the Internet does not work, or complain over the slightly inferior quality of accommodation, meals, or the comfort of the facilities in world or continental events. And then, when we read a report on athletes who are less fortunate and have to fight elementary hardships day by day, we stop to think and – stop complaining.

Just read the following lines sent by PAUL COFFA, General Secretary of the Oceania and Commonwealth Weightlifting Federations, creator and coach of the OWF Institute in Apia, Samoa, etc. etc. – in one word: Our 'Missionary' in the Pacific.

It is not winning that counts. It is participation. That has been the way Pacific Island lifters have approached events in the past, with the exception of Marcus Stephen from Nauru.

Today the Pacific Island lifters have a different perception about what international competition is all about. The attitude that they take now is "winning medals is important, not just participation". They have now accepted Marcus Stephen's philosophy of saying, "we island lifters are as good as anyone else in the world".

But what is it that makes these Pacific Islanders so motivated towards the sport of weightlifting? What makes them train five to six hours a day, twice per day, every day, at a temperature of 30 to 35 degrees Celsius? It certainly is not money.

What is it that makes Ele Opeloge from Samoa, a young girl weighing 95kg, fifteen months ago doing 65 – 80, and only 15 months later she does 110 – 145. On top of this she handles the weights just like toys. Ele squats 240kg. But let's remember that 157kg clean & jerk placed 3rd at the World Championships. She improved 61kg in the clean & jerk in 15 months. What can she



The Oceania Weightlifting Institute in Samoa

do by the Olympics? Yet at the other end of the scale, what makes some of these superb young athletes, just suddenly walk away from almost reaching the ultimate dream of becoming medalists at World Championships, give up the sport without a care in the world. Just like if all that work meant nothing to them. Whilst lifters from Europe, Asia, Middle East and other parts of the world, want to be rewarded for their accomplishment and they expect it, instead Pacific Islanders go to world championships without tracksuits or shoes because they cannot afford them. Quite a few come back from these events successfully and go back to training the next day as if nothing great has happened and

expect nothing in return for their performance. Take Manuel Minginfel from FSM (Federated States of Micronesia). His 165kg clean & jerk in Santo Domingo was only 3kg away from gold. If he had succeeded with 165kg on his second attempt and not miss it, who knows he could have given the Chinese a real go. He didn't cry, all he said was "I'll beat him next time". And the day he arrived back in Samoa, after 36 hours of flying, he was back at the Institute training like nothing great had happened. After all, as far as Manuel was concerned, he only won a silver medal, so what was the big deal. Can you imagine a German lifter winning a silver medal or lifters from Italy, Spain, or Greece or any

other countries for that matter, there would have been celebration and rightly so. After all it is a world medal.

So what makes these Pacific Islanders so unique? I don't have the answer to this. But let me give you some insight on how they operate on the island. I am sure the readers will find this interesting.

I have an average of 25 lifters stay at the Institute, coming from some of the smallest countries on earth. Most of them are assisted with accommodation and a small allowance to cover food costs for the week, by the IOC Solidarity funds and their respective national Olympic committees. There is no para-medical assistance at all available to them. Soreness after a heavy training session is alleviated by dipping themselves into the Pacific Ocean or in the river near-by the Institute.

If they are lucky to get hold of a tube of liniment from the pharmacy, like *Metsal* or *Deep Heat*, then that becomes very valuable to them and they guard it safely and use it only for competition. Reason being that it is too expensive to buy or simply not available when they really need it. They make sure that exercises are done properly so that injuries are avoided at



The Institute training hall

all times. Prevention is far better than cure. They have no concept of what is a proper diet. And the more you try and explain it, the more it confuses them. So who am I to change their way of life: after all they are not doing too bad. Why try to implement a diet which these kids are not used to, nor can they get access to it? I asked this young Samoan lifter, Ele Opeloge early in the year to put on some weight. 95kg is really not heavy enough to compete against international lifters in the 75+kg category. So she put on 11kg body-weight within one month. She had no access to protein or vitamins. Far too expensive to buy and that is if you can find them. So she sticks to local food, what her people have eaten for generations. Fish, taro, breadfruit, coconut, bananas, pawpaw and other fruits and vegetable which grow in the Pacific. Meat is too expensive. Every Sunday, it costs my family a fortune to feed them. My wife Lilly and my children every Sunday, and I mean every single Sunday, get up early to cook for them. And this is what my family normally prepares. 120 pieces of chicken, lots of rice, 5 dozen eggs, salads, sometimes fish, egg-plants, and then of course

cake and ice cream on top. Within half an hour everything disappears. It is wonderful to see how clean the dishes are once they finish eating. There is not one single piece of food left. Sunday is the only rest day they have during the week. These young athletes from so many different islands of the Pacific, with different cultures and history, thanks to the Institute have developed a special bond. They all speak different languages but comes weightlifting then it becomes one family. Regardless of whether they compete against each other or not. To my own family, well the whole 25 of them are part of the family. It is a fairly unique situation. In training weightlifting belts are shared amongst the lifters because they cannot afford to buy them. They also share straps and sometimes even lifting boots. But no-one complains. And for some reason they all love solid heavy training sessions. There are times where I will give them a session off and they become extremely concerned and ask, "What have we done wrong?" The latest entrant to the Institute is a young junior lifter from Kiribati. To get to Samoa from Kiribati he has to fly 14 hours. Of course you are still in the

Oceania region. This young man weighs 86kg and clean & jerks 180kg, with no shoes. If he lifts with shoes, he tells me he can't lift properly. I tell him he needs to wear shoes, it is compulsory. He looked at me asking why? What do you say to him, that he is breaking the rules? In fact he told me, "why should I use shoes, that's cheating." Talk about human tragedies: Yukio Peter's mother died on the week that he was in Santo Domingo (placing 8th), his father died a long time ago when he poured petrol over

Athens Olympics, broke her toe at the Commonwealth Games, trying to win gold, but nobody knew including me that she was already two months pregnant. And she cleaned 110kg to try and win the gold medal with a broken toe and two months pregnant. Sioe Haioti from Niue, that pretty super heavyweight girl, she tried to beat the New Zealand girl at the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. She needed 131kg to win bronze. She cleaned it twice, missing the jerks twice. She was three



Sunday lunch at the Coffa's place

himself and burnt himself to death in front of Yukio who was only seven years old at the time. He still remembers everything. Manuel Minginfel's father died whilst Manuel was preparing in Nauru for the 2000 Olympics. His mother died shortly after. So he has no parents. A young 15 year old lifter, Bronco, also from Nauru, 56kg totaled 220. He has Grade 2 Primary education. His father has 24 children, he has no mother, she died a few years ago. Kefilini from Tonga, her parents both died last year before the Commonwealth Games. She only has weightlifting. Dika Toua from PNG, 6th at the

months pregnant when she cleaned 131kg. Nobody knew, including me of course. She had a little girl in September. I don't know what the future holds for these lifters but they have certainly given the world of weightlifting, as Mr. Gottfried Schödl said a few years ago, "a breath of fresh air to our sport".

Paul Coffa

P.S.: Countries that are presently represented by their lifters at the Institute: American Samoa, Micronesia, Tonga, Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Samoa.