

ODKF Sponsors Cook Island Trip to Improve Local Volleyball Skills

By Kanoa Ostrem

Earlier this year, I was contacted by expatriate Outrigger member Teanaroa "Paka" Worthington. He wanted to know if I was interested in coming down to the Cook Islands to help with their volleyball program.

Obviously, I was interested, but I didn't think that I would be able to afford the trip. Then someone suggested the Outrigger Duke Kahanamoku Foundation, so I decided to apply for an athletic grant. I was pleasantly surprised to receive a grant from the ODKF, so I packed up some donated volleyballs and headed down south with no idea what I would find.

What I found was absolute paradise. It's not just the physical beauty, which is stunning, or the warmth of the people, which is genuine. It is paradise because life revolves around the enjoyment of sports! Everyone is involved in some sport at any given time, whether it is rugby, soccer, basketball, volleyball, cricket, football or netball. If people aren't playing a sport, they are watching or talking about it.

Rorotonga is the largest of the Cook Islands, with a population of 10,000. It takes about an half hour to drive around the island, and there are no stoplights. It is one of the most beautiful places on earth, with light blue lagoons, white empty beaches and tall mountains. People take very good care of the environment, so you will very rarely see trash anywhere.

What I couldn't believe was the number of kids I saw running all over the place. The reason for this is that nobody stays inside to watch TV and they are not on the internet yet. Volleyball nets are tied up between coconut trees.

The Cook Islanders have

gone crazy for volleyball and it is quickly supplanting rugby as the national pastime.

In May, the Tahitian national team visited Rorotonga for a volleyball match that sparked national interest. The Cook Islanders played them close, but could not match the experience and strategy of the Tahitians. They did recognize that with a little experience they would be able to compete with the rest of the South Pacific.

My job was to work with the national team players and to help train a permanent coach. I ran a clinic on the beach on the first day because they wanted to learn about beach volleyball strategy. I explained to them about defenses and which shots tend to be most effective. We went through a few hours and I was impressed by their level of play. Physically, the better players have as much ability as anyone in Hawaii.

All of the national team members are extremely quick and they jump very well. They just haven't seen volleyball played at a high level except for some Olympic footage they had on videotape. They were basically sponges for any information that I had, and were eager to play against good competition.

On the second day, we practiced on a grass court with the men's national team. They do have a new gym, but they prefer to be outside because they like to play barefoot. We went through more drills and I taught them the offensive and defensive positioning we use in the U.S. They picked this up immediately and showed enormous improvement. We played for about four hours, until after dark, and the



Beach volleyball has gained popularity in the Cook Islands.

enthusiasm was incredible. Everyone cheered the good plays and laughed at the funny ones.

Mahae Daniel has been selected to be the national team coach so I spent the evening with him going over a training plan. I suggested that he visit Hawaii in the fall to watch Punahou, Kamehameha or UH work out, since it is hard to recreate the intensity of these practices.

A couple of hours of watching Scott Rigg coach would be perfect! Mahae is working out the details for a visit in October.

My third day was spent at a rugby match between the villages of Avatiu and Titikaveka. Volleyball was canceled because of rain and temperature, as it is the middle of the winter down there. Nothing stops a rugby match, however, so we joined the two villages at the Avatiu field. This sport is also played with a great deal of enthusiasm, with several large collisions and minor fights.

After the game though, there was a big party and both teams and villages attended. Sportsmanship reigned, with each team buying beers for the other. Dancing lasted late into the night, and then on Sunday I saw every person from the party at church, on time. The only thing more important than sports is the man upstairs, so no sports are allowed on Sunday.

On my last day on Rorotonga, we held a tournament at Betela beach, which is an ideal location for beach volleyball. It is a large, flat beach that is sheltered from the wind. Before we began the

tournament, we gathered around in a circle and joined in prayer. I like this tradition because it encourages sportsmanship and reminds everyone that they're on the same team.

Everyone ran, dove and jumped with reckless abandon and some of the rallies were incredible. I have never seen such enthusiasm and cooperation! Young and old played together and everyone had a great time. I can only compare it to when I first discovered sports as a 7-year-old.

Back then your mind is pure enough to just accept the rules and play the game. You don't worry too much about how people will perceive you if you lose, or wonder who is watching, or think about where this can take you. This is how volleyball is played in the Cook Islands.

The volleyball players greatly appreciated my visit and encouraged me to miss my plane. There is only one flight per week though, so I didn't really have a choice. The president of the Cook Islands Volleyball Association, Tiki Daniel, asked me to come back as soon as possible with a Hawaiian team. They want to make a big event out of the visit, with celebrations and a tournament involving other Polynesian nations.

They treated me like a king, and they will do the same to future Hawaiian visitors so please let me know if you are interested in going. Through volleyball and the ODKF, we have the opportunity now to establish a lasting relationship with this beautiful culture. ☺