

**THE 93<sup>rd</sup> ANNUAL TONGAN NATIONAL & INTER-COLLEGIATE ATHLETICS  
CHAMPIONSHIPS  
Teufaiva Stadium, Nuku'alofa 25 - 28 April, 2017**

When the Oceania Athletics officials travelled from Fua'amotu International Airport to the Teufaiva Sports' Stadium, the preparations for the Opening Ceremony were in full swing. The massed brass bands were rehearsing a series of impressive musical numbers. Towards the end of the rehearsals a most emotional and haunting rendition of *The Last Post* echoed around the stadium. This was a reminder that the Championships would start on Anzac Day – a public holiday in many countries around the Pacific, including The Kingdom of Tonga.

Tonga is in the process of working up to the hosting of the 2019 Pacific Games, and these championships would let the local organizing committee know what must be done in the next two years to provide a solid foundation for the Pacific Games. After all, Athletics is the centre-piece sport of any multi-sport games. With 44 gold medals at stake, countries, which are genuinely in the race for medals, must take the preparation of their athletes very seriously. Tonga is no exception.

During the four days of competition the friendly rivalry between the 20 participating colleges was evident throughout. In addition a small number of national athletes (over 21 years of age) competed in a variety of events. They would be vying with the best from the colleges for selection to the National Team.

Tonga's strength has traditionally been in the sprints, jumps, hurdles and throws – the explosive events. This is still the situation today. In Full Pacific Games competition since 1963, Tonga has won a total of 23 Athletics gold, and only two have been outside of the "explosive events" category. The odd-ones-out were gold in the Men's 1500m in the 1963 Suva Games and the Women's Marathon in the 1995 Tahiti Games. In addition there have been 16 silver medals (all from the same category), and 31 bronze, with only the Women's 1500m in 1995 proving the exception to the rule.

In the 2015 Oceania Athletics Championships in Cairns bronze medals were won by Atamaama Tu'ufaiva in the Senior Women's Shot, and by Sitiveni Larry Sulunga in the U18 110m Hurdles. Siueni Filimone and Taina Halasima, Tonga's Rio Olympians, took part in the championships. They were all in action at Teufaiva over the four days of competition.

For the first time in nearly 25 years we have four Tongan men who can run the 100m in under 11.00 seconds. This augurs well for the return to the podium for the 4 x 100m Relay Team, which regularly won medals in the late 1980's and early 1990's.

While there was no wind gauge used, and the wind was extremely changeable, the following excellent fully-automatic times were recorded –

Siueni Filimone – 10.70  
Larry Sulunga - 10.82

Pila Minoneti - 10.83

In addition Peauope Suli Fifita, based in New Zealand, is slowly returning to his form of three years ago when he broke 11.00 seconds on three occasions and represented Tonga at the World Junior (U20) Championships in Eugene, Oregon, USA. His pb is 10.80 seconds, and has run a windy 10.68 seconds in "Windy Wellington". Peauope is returning to the sport after two years' missionary work with the Mormon Church.

Several of the athletes mentioned above have already represented Tonga at Oceania and Pacific Games competitions. One athlete on the comeback trail is Heamatangi Tu'ivai who has won a total of 3 Mini Pacific Games silver medals (2009 and 2013) in the 400m and the 400m Hurdles.

Coach of the sub-11 seconds runners, former sprinter and long jumper, Tevita Fauonuku, (newly appointed Tongan Head Coach), is confident that by the time of the final selections for Port Vila they will have many more challenging for the sprint relay and the individual positions for the 100m and 200m. Now is the time to work on the depth of the 400m runners to once again be a strong contender for a medal in the 4 x 400m relay.

#### **Other highlights from the Boys Divisions were :-**

Inter 100m - Tapasu Paea - 11.17  
Inter 200m - Tapasu Paea - 22.70  
Senior 200m - Larry Sulunga - 22.22  
Open 400m - Sosaia Fine Tokai - 50.52  
Senior 400m - Ronald Fotofili - 50.64  
Inter 110m Hurdles (91cm) - Kaliopasi Movete - 15.23  
Senior 110m Hurdles (99cm) - Larry Sulunga - 14.13  
Open 110m Hurdles (1.067m) - Talatala Po'oi - 15.87  
Senior 400m Hurdles (91cm) - Ronald Fotofili - 57.70  
Open 400m Hurdles (91cm) - Sosaia Fine Tokai - 55.26  
Senior High Jump - Mosese Foliaki - 1.95m  
Junior Pole Vault - Viliami Penitani - 3.02m  
Intermediate Pole Vault - Kaisa Pakileata - 3.30m  
Senior Pole Vault - Larry Sulunga - 3.40m  
Senior Pole Vault - Mosese Foliaki - 3.40m  
National Pole Vault - Soape Polutele - 3.40m  
Senior Shot Put (6kg) - Mafi Fakatene 14.17m  
National Shot Put (7.26kg) - Paea Fisi'ahoi - 12.15m  
Inter Discus (1.5kg) - Ma'asi Fehoko - 39.51m  
Inter Discus (1.5kg) - John Suli - 39.14m  
Senior Discus (1.75kg) - Mafi Fakatene - 39.48m  
Open Discus (2.0kg) - Sione Kava - 35.30m

#### **The highlights from the Girls Divisions :-**

Senior 100m - Lavinia Tauhalaliku - 13.22  
Open 100m - Ofa La'akulu - 13.21  
Senior 100m Hurdles (84cm) - Lose Puhafisi - 16.42

Open Shot Put (4kg) - Atamaama Tu'utafaiva - 13.84m  
National Shot Put (4kg) - Ofa 'Oneone - 11.12m  
Open Discus (1kg) - Atamaama Tu'utafaiva - 35.78m  
Intermediate Discus (1kg) - Leva Suli - 36.02m  
Open Javelin (600g) - Losalina Fe'ao - 34.05m

The divisions for the championships are as follows –

Midget	12 & 13 years
Junior	14 & 15 years
Intermediate	16 & 17 years
Senior	18 & 19 years
Open	20 & 21 years
National	Over 21 years of age

At the end of the four-day championships, the Tongan National Selectors will meet to select their team for the Oceania Athletics Championships in Suva (28<sup>th</sup> June – 1<sup>st</sup> July), and we will have some idea of the team composition for the Mini Games in Port Vila (Athletics to be held 11 – 14 December). It is a big year in Pacific Islands' Athletics.

With no warm-up track, all of the athletes used the main field to warm up, do their drills, work on hurdle technique, perfect baton changing, but thankfully not randomly throw javelins or discus. The stadium was constantly on the move with action on the six-lane track, in the jumping and throwing areas, on the infield, and definitely in the stands of supporters. Large tents had been erected to provide shade from the burning Tongan sun. And it was *Hot, Hot Hot* – a song that frequently could be heard chanted from the terraces. Many schools provided their own sound systems.

The Athletics officials were dressed in a variety of outfits, with the majority in dignified traditional Tongan attire, including the ta'ovala around their waist. Their presence on the field added much to the overall status of the event.

With so few Pacific Island countries having the hurdles and pole vault in their schools' competitions, Tonga has a huge advantage over many of its rivals in having young athletes with quite advanced techniques by the time they leave school. Over the years it has paid dividends with Tonga finding it easier than many countries to produce Decathletes. Around the islands most are happy with the Octathlon, because it means they do not have to face the difficulties of the pole vault. Since 1963 Tonga has won 14 medals in Pacific Games and Mini Games competition.

Like many other Pacific Island nations, Tonga has found it hard to keep the most talented athletes in the sport. The lure of Rugby and Netball has proved to be nearly irresistible. With 2019 on the horizon, they might have more luck in the next two years. What athlete would not want to represent their home country on home turf!

Impressively many of the schools had uniforms or banners that promoted worthwhile health and public awareness programmes. *Clean Water, Tobacco*

*Free School & The Women and Children's Crisis Centre* were some prominently displayed messages.

Extremely enthusiastic mothers, aunts and sisters could be seen running along the stands as they cheered-on their favoured relative. Many got so enthusiastic that they ran alongside the track urging more endurance and more speed. The police had to politely request that they return to the stands. All good natured – it being a joyous celebration of sport, culture and community.

Support for such a championships ranges from the very top of society with members of the Royal Family and the top echelon of politicians down to the youngest primary school students and toddlers who were enjoying every minute of this special occasion. The King's niece, The Honorable Tupou Mohefo Aleamotua, officially opened the 93rd Championship and the Tongan Prime Minister, The Honorable Akilisi Pohiva, provided the keynote speech. VIP's were in attendance for all of the four days of competition.

Jamaica has *The Champs*, and Fiji has the *Coke Games*, but the *Tongan Inter-Collegiate Athletics Competition* is totally unique. It is a wonderful blend of sport, community solidarity, custom (both high and low) and sheer exuberance. If you ever have a chance to visit Tonga when it is held, then do yourself a favour and check it out. As the 2019 Pacific Games draw closer, it promises to be bigger and better in the next two years. Just check the Oceania Athletics website to find out the dates.

Many photos taken over the four-day event have been posted on the Oceania Athletics Facebook site, and the full results of the championships can be found on the Oceania Athletics website.