



# Life After Rugby

*Fiji's Disposable Heroes?*

Photographs by FEROUZ KHALIL

Respected sociologist, the late Simone Durutalo, once said: “Indigenous Fijian culture can be succinctly summarised in four R’s: Ratuism, Royalism, Religion and Rugby.” These days, royalism (attachment to the British Crown) may not be as strong as in the past, but rugby certainly remains a primary source of pride and identity for many Fijians. While it was originally introduced as a foreign sport, rugby has over the years become integrated with the Fijian way of life and tradition. Many even see it as a symbol of unique Fijian culture and values. Men (and increasingly women) and children playing rugby is a common sight in all parts of Fiji, making its player-to-population ratio one of the highest among rugby-playing nations. It would be undoubtedly difficult to find many other countries where rugby is loved, practiced, and excelled in so much by the local people as Fiji.

Since the professionalisation of the game in 1995, Fijian rugby players have been in high demand across the globe. Today, up to 500 Fijian players are estimated to be contracted in foreign leagues. According to some statistics, their collective remittances totalled over \$18 million in 2006. Perhaps we can say that Fiji (along with Samoa and Tonga) plays a role of a key “talent supplier” in international rugby that is similar to Brazil’s in football.

It is no wonder, then, that a successful professional rugby career attracts countless young men in Fiji. Numerous boys and men dedicate their passion, time and effort to rugby, dreaming of becoming the next Serevi, Tuqiri or Samo. The rugby stars that we see on the TV screen are powerful, invincible warriors who dazzle the world with their mastery of athletic skills and ‘Fijian magic’. We celebrate them as our heroes who put Fiji on the world map. Few other sports in Fiji are so invested with national pride and aspirations. The Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama, has been quoted of describing it as “a sport that touches all communities and goes to the very heart of this nation.”

In contrast to this glamorous perception of prominent rugby players, often little is known about the realities and challenges of rugby players’ lives after their active playing career. Public attention is almost always on the current stars and their success stories and we never seem to stop to think: what happens to the many rugby players of Fiji, both those who made it into professional rugby and those who didn’t, when their playing career is over? This is the topic that inspired two rugby researchers (who also happen to be fans of Fiji rugby), Dr Yoko Kanemasu of the University of the South Pacific and Dr Gyozo Molnar of the University of Worcester, England, to start their ‘Life After Rugby’ research project. The two academics have been studying various aspects of Fiji rugby since 2010. As they learned more about it they became more aware of the need to understand and address the challenges faced by many former players. So to document stories of life after rugby, they started interviewing former international (professional) and domestic (non-professional) players and collecting their experiences in their pursuit of professional rugby and post-rugby life. They found that the realities of life after rugby are often rife with great difficulties and hardships.

Kanemasu and Molnar found that although wearing the white jersey to represent their country is the ultimate dream of most rugby players in Fiji, increasingly this dream is connected to securing an overseas professional contract. According to some reports, Fijian players contracted to top-tier clubs can earn up to £380,000 (F\$1.1 million) per year. In New Zealand, the average annual salary of a Super Rugby player is believed to be around NZ\$200,000 (F\$281,000), and in France, the average salary of a professional player is approximately €144,000 (F\$334,000). These form a stark contrast to the national average income of F\$12,753 per year. It is easy to see why so many rugby players set their mind to securing an overseas professional career.

Some critics would say that these aspiring players are ill-advised to focus all their time and energy on turning professional, given the small chance they stand. But we need to understand that many of these players see foreign contracts as a real opportunity, not a distant dream. In fact, the odds of success may not be as unrealistic as we might first assume. Although accurate statistics are not available, simple math based on the total registered player population of 23,000 and approximately 500 professional players suggests that an estimated 2.2% (1 out of every 45) of serious players might achieve their rugby dream. (These statistics do not include many lower-level migrant players whose movements are not officially recorded.) If this estimation had any credibility, it would mean that a Fijian rugby player has a higher probability of ‘making it’ than, for instance, the high-school-to-pro odds of 0.03% for basketball and 0.08% for American football in the United States. In addition, many players have friends, relatives and acquaintances who have gone professional. Newspapers abound with stories of young players securing lucrative contracts. This, combined with the absence of comparable – or any – employment opportunities in Fiji, professional rugby is seen by these young men as a challenging yet achievable aim. So from the point of view of those who see no immediate alternative, the pursuit of the ‘rugby dream’ is not necessarily a misguided effort but a conscious choice based on their evaluation of life chances.

As a result, the pursuit of a professional career becomes many players’ sole focus. This is well described by a coach/trainer interviewed for the project:

“One thing I tell the boys is ‘If you go overseas, your talent buys you a house, a car, clothes, and buys you food. If you miss a minute of training, you grow old by a minute, if you miss an hour, you grow old by an hour, if you miss a day, you grow old by a day. So while you still have it, you make use of it.”

In their earnest and sometimes desperate pursuit, aspiring players sacrifice many things, often including formal education. Many do not complete secondary school, in some cases dropping out after Form 4 or earlier to devote all their time to rugby. One former player explained: “My Form teacher said, ‘You shouldn’t be in school; you should just go and play rugby.’ Because my school work wasn’t good. I was in the papers [for prominent rugby performance]. So the teacher said ‘Just go. You might get something out of it.”

A majority of these players are also unemployed and sustained by their families (although some are in the police, the military or the construction industry). In this way, playing rugby becomes many players’ primary daily engagement, and a professional career their single aim in life. As explained by another former player: “I guess it’s my bread-and-butter thing. I left studies early and started playing rugby. They told me that you have to get a test debut for Fiji, then you could get a contract. I applied, I applied, and I applied. I was hoping that one day I would get a contract.” Many lack resources even to meet basic needs such as bus fares and have to walk several miles to training grounds every day. Most are not covered by medical insurance and pay their own medical expenses at times of injury or cope with insufficient (or no) medical attention. In other words, aspiring players (and families) strive to develop their athletic skills/talent at a great material and physical cost.

Unfortunately, during this process of player development, players are often not fully supported by rugby bodies or other institutions until and unless they reach elite level. Career development support is not available to most players, except for the guidance offered by local clubs, coaches and individual mentors such as older players, ex-players, family and friends. Unlike the better-resourced Tier 1 (and some Tier 2) unions with large corporate sponsorships and private revenues,



the Fiji Rugby Union has faced challenges in securing sufficient sponsorships and grants and in addressing governance issues over the decades, which has made it difficult to sufficiently assist, monitor or guide grassroots player development at all stages. Educational support, livelihood support, career guidance and counselling, vocational training, medical insurance, et cetera are considered essential services in major rugby-playing countries, but are sadly unavailable to the many thousands of grassroots players in Fiji.

The end result is that the players devote all their time and energy – often sacrificing education, training, employment and a basic standard of living – to their rugby quest with little or no institutional support along the way. One of the key consequences of this type of sport development is that many players are left without employable skills and qualifications or essential knowledge and skills of financial management, health and safety, which impacts critically on their own career management and post-career livelihood capacities. It is on the basis of such a high level of sacrifice of masses of athletes that Fiji produces its outstanding elite players.

Of course, even if Fijian rugby players stand a slightly better chance of going professional than American basketballers, it is only a handful that actually achieve their dream. The rest never do, despite all their dedication and sacrifice. The end of career comes to both groups, though, as a result of injury, contract termination, dropping out, et cetera. Currently no form of support is available to retiring players, and no formal record of their number or status exists. Kanemasu and Molnar documented the stories of 'life after rugby' by interviewing both former professional and non-professional players, and found that both groups often struggle to cope with their post-rugby life.

One of the key challenges is employment. There are four main options for ex-players: 1. farming; 2. Police/Army/Navy/Prison employment (in the case of prominent players) 3. self-employment (in the case of former professional players who invested their rugby income) and 4. non-rugby related employment (especially if the player is educated/skilled). But many also become unemployed. We must acknowledge that some ex-players do develop rewarding second careers as coaches, trainers and business owners (e.g., taxi, property management, etc.) or in the armed/correctional forces. Those with skills and qualifications and those who reached international fame are well placed for these second career paths. But there are also a large number of ex-players who struggle to establish a second career or even to make a living.

For former domestic players who sought but never achieved an international career, their post-rugby options are usually limited to farming, unskilled and minimum wage work and unemployment. The most common choice is farming. Unemployment is not uncommon particularly among those who suffered major injury or are without livelihood skills or formal qualifications. Those ex-players who took part in the study spoke of their own experiences and of fellow players whose careers had been abruptly ended by a major injury without insurance protection and were facing long-term unemployment. To make things even more difficult, while a successful rugby career brings a great amount of prestige, an 'unsuccessful' one is often associated with shame and failure. One of the ex-players interviewed explained: "It's seen as a failure. Because they see you go training and don't get any outcomes. People abuse them: 'Just a waste of time.' I've seen it. There are a lot of good players, but not all go up to the professional

level. People say 'You are not good enough' and 'We're tired of seeing you.'"

This could cause ex-players a deep sense of embarrassment, which, for those living in urban areas, often forces them to move to their village: "Most of my friends went back to the village... not to be embarrassed. Just imagine what it feels like. You were struggling all your life to reach that [professional career], and you never made it. How would you feel? They don't want to face the embarrassment."

By comparison, more employment options are open to former professional players, but they also face many difficulties. Returning to farming in the village is a common choice in this group as well. An ex-international rugby star explained: "Because I was brought up in the village, and I don't have a good education background, when I finished rugby, the first thing that came to my mind was 'Just go back to the village.'" Surprisingly, some who used to enjoy international fame today work as security guards, bartenders or in other unskilled, low-paid jobs. In fact, because of the lack of career/finance management skills, major injury and/or generous sharing of rugby incomes among families and in communities, some former rugby stars find themselves jobless.

With no formal support available and their only skill set lost for good, these players face severe difficulties. One former rugby icon shared this telling story: "After I came back to Fiji, I looked for a job and I could not find any. I was famous in Fiji. Everybody in Fiji knows me, but there was no job. That's why I'm staying home. Sometimes, I'm... thinking about when I represented my country... Starting from then, till now, you [the researcher] are the first person to come home. You're the first one to ask me how I am coping. That's about 16 years or 20 years. I look at my family, trying to buy dalo or cassava. I try to buy them but can't. That's why I'm praying to God, for him to one day give me a job to help me."

These economic hardships are often compounded by emotional difficulties. One former professional player recounted a major on-field injury that had changed his career prospects: "You are lying down and you think: 'Rugby is all I know. There's nothing else. I can't go and find a good job because I didn't finish my education.' That's the sad thing about it. I would get all these ideas while I was lying down injured, thinking about all that."

For both domestic and international players, these difficulties at times escalate into serious physical, emotional and mental health problems, including depression, drug, alcohol, and kava abuse, and marital/relationship crises. Former players explained: "Most people I know find it [end of career] very difficult. Some become a burden. Some people get involved in what I did, drugs and everything."

"A lot of people are very badly affected [by career termination]. I know of one player who almost had a nervous breakdown. All the money and everything, he geared to this [his career]. At the end of that, he didn't get what he wanted. He was devastated. That's just one. There are quite a few others. And it affects them – deeply."

As Fiji has a low coverage of government social protection, with only 22% of the target population assisted by social welfare programmes, ex-players have no access to unemployment benefits or other types of social protection. This means that ex-players, with no systematic support from stakeholders or the government, are left to their own devices to cope with the post-career challenges.

In most cases, families and communities once again stand in as

a critical source of support for ex-players and bear the brunt of sustaining them financially and emotionally. Just as they did during their development stage, families help struggling retired players. In the case of former stars, they may also receive a sense of reward and fulfilment from the wider communities. Because of rugby's privileged status in the country, these players continue to receive high social status, regardless of their present circumstances. A participant in the research described one such case: "He works as a security guard. I was there the other day, and somebody went up to him and shook his hand and said 'I saw you on TV. He still commands respect. Rugby holds a special place in people's hearts, you know.'"

Some community members offer gifts to former rugby stars in token of their appreciation of their service to the nation. One former international star expressed: "By the government and by the Fiji Rugby Union, it's [the reward for athletic achievements] nothing. But by the people! The people are always good. When I go to the market or something, they say, 'This is for you' and 'Come and have juice or a pineapple.'"

Notably, these community and family 'safety nets' are under increasing pressure today and showing signs of weakening as a result of urbanisation, growing poverty, and other rapid changes in society. Families and communities that have long borne the burden of player development and retirement may not be able to carry on having this role to the same extent in the future. In fact, the experiences of the struggling former players show that the safety-nets do not function effectively in some urban areas and that the consequences can be tragic.

The picture that emerges from Kanemasu and Molnar's research is that the success of Fiji rugby rests on the sacrifice of many uninsured, unpaid and often unsupported players who develop their athletic skills at their own expense and deal with the consequences of their life after rugby on their own.

Formal rugby bodies engage with selected athletes almost only at the prime of their career and have little to no involvement at grassroots-level and retirement stages. What this means is that Fiji rugby relies on the community and family support mechanism for both the development of local talent and retirement. Moreover, overseas professional clubs that systematically procure Fijian talent in pursuit of professional and commercial interests make no consistent investment in or contribution towards local player development and retirement – other than the compensation paid to the FRU for contracted players. In line with World Rugby guidelines and regulations, professionally contracted players do receive medical and welfare services in host countries. They may also be encouraged to access social insurance schemes and educational and vocational training opportunities. But beyond providing such support for contractually employed athletes, these clubs and unions do not recompense the local rugby community – i.e., grassroots players as well as their families and communities who finance and facilitate their athletic development – on which they rely for sourcing athletic talent.

Securing highly skilled players is a major prerequisite for the commercial success of these clubs that depend on generating high revenues. In this context, Fijian rugby players represent 'low-investment – high-return' athletic resource, since much of the necessary financial and human investment and social insurance is provided by the local communities.

The participants in the research expressed their frustration at what they considered the "use and abuse" of local athletic talent:

"Let's be frank. Players have been used as a revenue generating source. They just know you when you are at your best. It's a sad story.

"When their time is over, they are treated just like old clothes. You just use new clothes, and old clothes, you throw them away. That is the way they are treating rugby players."

Individual athletes, families and communities, who produce some of the finest athletic labour coveted by the national union and overseas clubs, do so at a considerable and sometimes incommensurable cost. While some players, families and communities do receive returns from their investment, the vast majority only contribute to the creation of a rugby-centred lifestyle and culture conducive to the production of elite athletic talent, but themselves never making it to the top. They also make up a 'reserve army of athletes', which enables the continued lack of institutional attention or support for athletes, since they can be replaced by others at any time. The result of this is that when the rugby world is done with them, both professional and non-professional players are left to their own devices to re-invent their lives and to earn a living, and many families and communities today struggle to continue to bear the weight of this rugby dream.

The situation of Fijian rugby players is a typical example of the consequences of what is often described as the 'neoliberalisation' of sport. Since its professionalisation, rugby has become one of the commercial sports that revolve around free markets, individual self-interest and profit making. This requires the privatisation of risk and responsibility, which is assumed by individual athletes in most Western societies, with welfare support from clubs and players' associations as well as government welfare provision. But in societies like Fiji that rely on an informal support mechanism, these risks and responsibility are transferred almost entirely to families and communities.

While the underlying principles of commercial sports are the same everywhere, the case of Fiji and possibly other Pacific island countries that supply elite rugby talent is noteworthy. First, it is not just individual players but larger communities that subsidise the professional rugby system by absorbing risks incurred by non-selection, injury, etc. and by bearing almost all the cost of elite player production. This means that a substantial part of the Fijian population subsidises commercial rugby by taking on the deficits of the rugby 'muscle trade' between Fiji and talent-importing countries. Second, since the family and community safety-net mechanism may be weakening as a result of globalising influences, the well-being of the former, current and future players faces bleak prospects. Clearly, something must be done for the sake of continued success of Fiji rugby, and most importantly, for the many thousands of young men who dedicate all their passion, time and effort to the sport that carries the pride of the nation.

Dr Kanemasu and Dr Molnar recommend the establishment of formal, central support structures to complement and relieve the informal ones. It should not be the community who exclusively picks up the tab of player development and retirement.

Perhaps the FRU, but most certainly overseas professional clubs that benefit the most from Fiji's athletic talent, should share these expenses. Formal support could take various forms: education strategy for registered players; regular career counselling for registered players and school players; a database of former registered players and their current status; and a formal social protection scheme for current and former players. Dr Kanemasu and Dr Molnar believe creating these formal support structures would be a first step towards a healthier, sustainable future of Fiji rugby, and above all, a fair due owed to the heroes of this great rugby nation. 