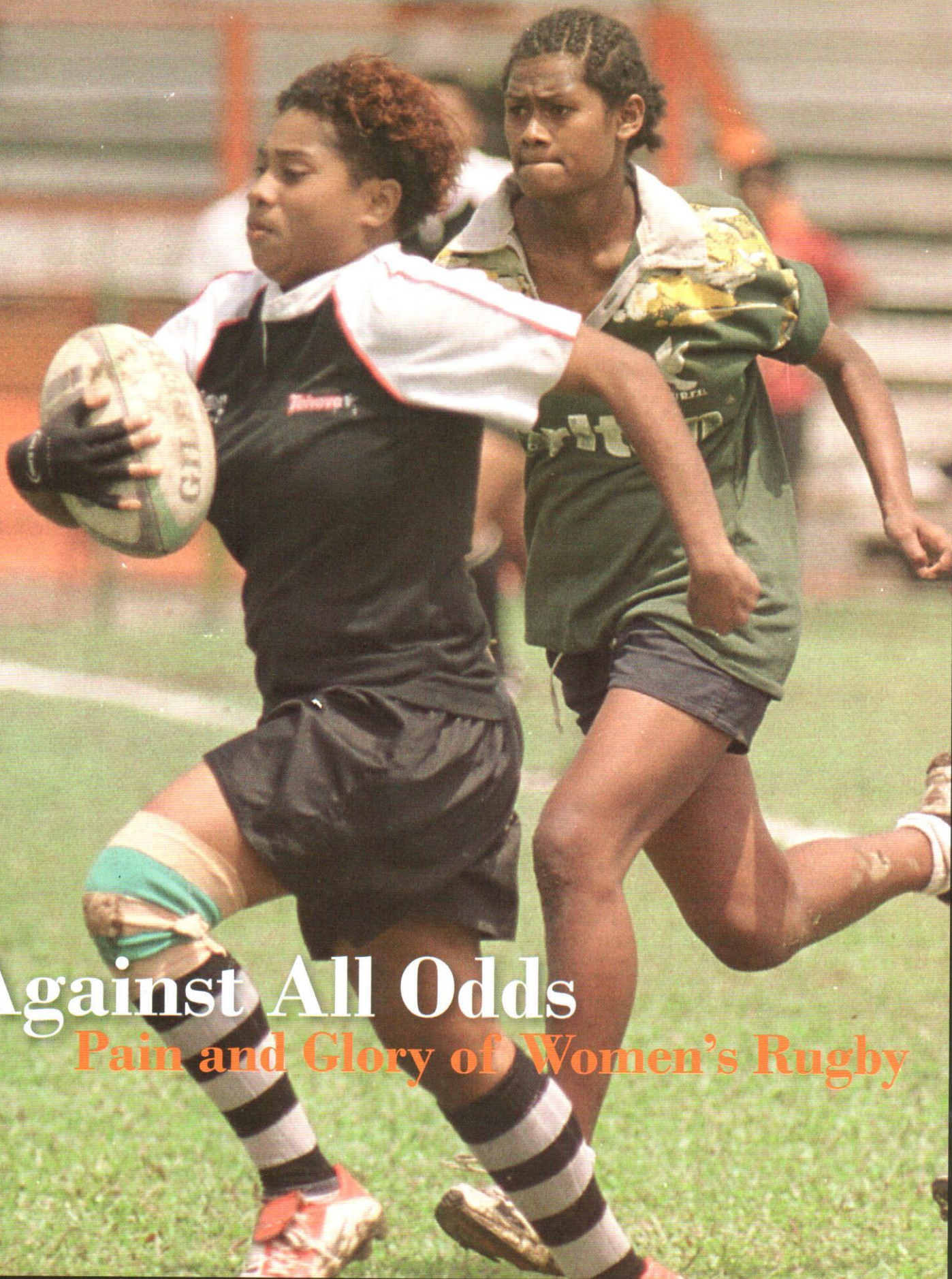
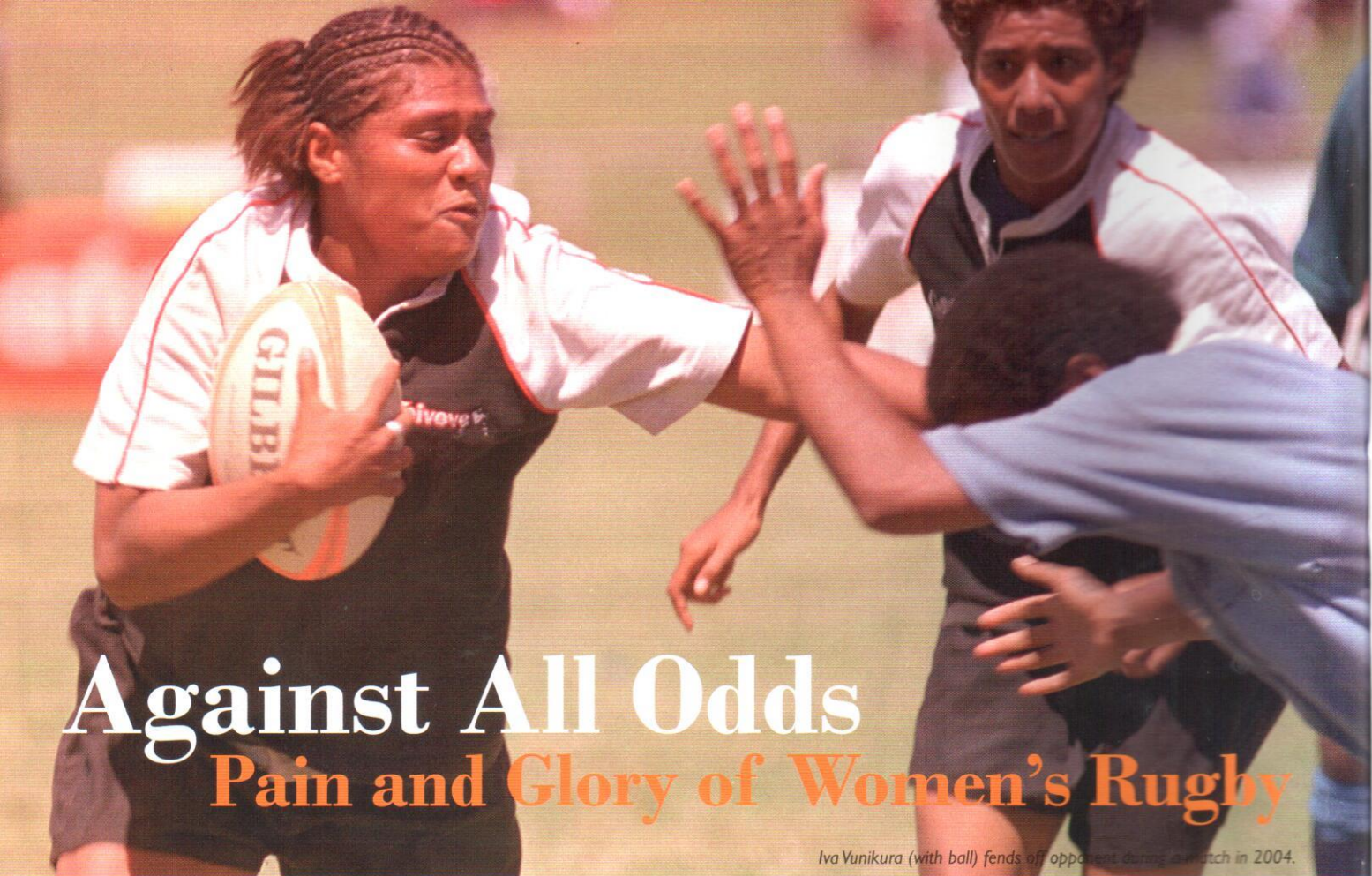


INSIGHT



Against All Odds
Pain and Glory of Women's Rugby



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Iva Yunikura (with ball) fends off opponent during a match in 2004.

Photographs by VELA NAUCUKIDI

In September 2014, The Fiji Times published on its front page a large colour photo of the Fijiana, the national women's rugby team proudly showing off their gold medal, having won the World Rugby Women's Sevens Series qualifier tournament in Hong Kong. The young women in the photo looked confident, powerful, athletic, and beaming with pride. This was an historic moment: they had won all of their games at the regional tournament and the national paper featured their success as a top story of the day. Many readers would have taken a moment to look at the picture, felt glad for the women and moved onto the next page. But only few would have known how much this and other achievements meant to the players, how much struggle, pain and suffering they had gone through to get where they were, and how much more they were ready to endure to pursue their dream of making their mark on global rugby.

Among the people who have come to know these women's stories are Dr Yoko Kanemasu of the University of the South Pacific and Dr Gyozo Molnar of the University of Worcester, England. *maiLife* reported in the previous issue the two academics' research on 'life after rugby' – Fijian rugby players' post-athletic career challenges. In this issue, they invite us to take a glimpse of the world of female rugby players. Since 2012, when Kanemasu met some female players whose passion for the game inspired her and Molnar, they have been interviewing players, coaches and officials to collect their untold stories of pursuing the sport that had long been considered off limits to women.

Everyone knows the special place that rugby holds in the hearts of the Fijian people. While sports in general are important in national identity-making around the world, rugby in Fiji plays a key role of embodying the aspirations and pride of the people in a broader, international context. In the face of the widespread Western image of Fiji (and other Pacific island nations) as small, poor and helplessly dependent on Western assistance for survival, rugby has provided a key cultural medium by which Fijians have asserted their strength,

pro prowess and autonomy. This was aptly expressed by Winston Thompson, Fiji's Ambassador to the USA, when he recently said: "As a Fijian I'm very proud that our [rugby] team with very little resources can still compete with the best on the world stage. They compete with countries that provide millions of dollars into the preparation of their teams". The success of our rugby players is an expression of our pride as a small yet, in sporting terms, powerful nation.

This 'national' sport has a heavily gendered and indigenised nature. Along with the widely-made claims about Fijians' natural flair and physical suitability for the sport, rugby has close links to indigenous tradition and culture. In particular, the precolonial tradition of warfare and masculinism is often seen as inseparable from the physical, combative and collective nature of the game. Rugby players are modern warriors who express the bati heritage on the rugby field. So, at times of international matches, we rally behind the young warriors who put their bodies on the line to fight for our dignity as a nation. No wonder that rugby is entrenched in Fijian society as a pinnacle of masculinity and warrior identity.

But despite rugby's status as exclusively male, and although never documented or acknowledged, women have always played rugby in Fiji. While we don't know the exact origin, women have played rugby in an organised manner at least since the late 1980s. In 1997, Fiji's first women's rugby team played in the Hong Kong Women's Rugby Sevens tournament, funded by the St. John's Marist Rugby Club. By 1999/2000 they had established about six women's rugby clubs in Suva. The Fiji Women's Rugby Union (FWRU) was established in 2006. Today, there are five clubs in Suva affiliated with the FWRU, and several clubs/teams are emerging in Nadi, Labasa and elsewhere. The player population is tiny compared to that of men's rugby: World Rugby statistics show only 270 senior female players and 100 teen players.

But this small community of rugby players, led by a number of visionary pioneers such as Laijipa Naulivou, Merewai Sokovata, Elise Huffer, Merewalesi Bulou, Loraini Toga, Melita Solei, Akanisi Taubale, Salote Tikoisuva, Leba Silika and others, has worked with determination and dedication for three decades, and is finally starting



Laisani Bai dashes past the Northern Seals during a match in 2004.

to see the fruit of their hard work. Especially in the past five years, the Fijiana have had some remarkable achievements. In 2011, they won the gold medal in women's rugby sevens at the Pacific Games. In 2012, they qualified for the 2013 IRB Rugby World Cup Sevens by winning all of their matches at the Asian Women's Sevens Championship. In 2013, they won the Bowl at the IRB Rugby World Cup Sevens in Russia. In 2014, they qualified for the 2014–15 World Rugby Women's Sevens Series by again winning all of their matches at the qualifier tournament in Hong Kong. Most recently they won another gold medal at the 2015 Pacific Games. They are currently aiming to qualify for the 2016 Rio Olympics at the 2015 Oceania Women's Sevens Championship in November. The Fijiana actually stand a realistic chance of reaching this milestone. They (along with the men's team, who have already qualified) could carry our hopes for the ultimate dream of winning Fiji's first Olympic medal.

This may sound like an amazing success story, and it certainly is. But as Kanemasu and Molnar spoke to the players and officials, they were struck by the many struggles and hardships hidden behind their achievements, making their success story even more remarkable. For instance, at the most basic level of funding and technical support, the women have pulled off their feats with little external support until only recently. Through much of the history of women's rugby in Fiji, there was little recognition of or support from the community. The assistance they received came mostly from individuals (including some current and former FRU officers who continue to support them until today, such as Pio Bosco, Sale Sorovaki, Solo Finau, Franck Boivert and others). It should be stressed that the FRU is today fully supportive of women's rugby and finances and assists the Iliessa Tanivula-coached national team's selections, training camps, tours and other activities. The current players are receiving far more support than the former generation did. And yet, even today, the FRU cannot always provide sufficient resources to match those available to men's rugby, and female players continue to face a multitude of challenges on a daily basis.

Unable to secure sufficient grants or consistent corporate sponsorships, the FWRU and the clubs organise and finance most of their games and training at their own cost. In fact, most clubs are operating completely on their own, fundraising to sustain their existence. The players struggle to secure consistent playing schedules, fields, referees, medical support and other facilities/services, and even to meet the most basic needs for jerseys, shoes, appropriate diet or bus fares to reach training grounds. Many run or walk several miles

to training grounds every day. Even the Fijiana do not have a long-term corporate sponsor, with squad members sometimes having to fundraise to cover some of the costs of their training. In other words, these women play the sport literally at their own risk and expense. Their pursuit of the sport has been made possible solely by their passion, and against all the odds.

And the odds are many. In addition to the issue of financial and technical support, the players face challenges at community and family levels. As Kanemasu and Molnar interviewed these women, what astonished them the most was the discouragement, ridicule, and sometimes severe punishment that many had had to face just to play the sport. The players agree that the negative reaction comes from the stigma of challenging a staunch gender norm of their society. By playing rugby, they are seen as transgressing a male enclave and privilege, which in turn often invites critical scrutiny of their sexual orientation. As one player explained: "It's a sad story, the community thing. They think, 'because your daughter is playing rugby, she's a lesbian.'" As a result, some families have discouraged or prohibited their daughters from playing. Sadly, some players who don't give in to negative sanctions have been subjected to severe punishments – even beaten or chased out of their family homes. According to the players who spoke to Kanemasu and Molnar: "I was training and my father found out. And he was unhappy. He stopped me and he beat me up. So I said, 'Okay, I won't go.' I was enjoying the sport. I was enjoying the training. You know, men can play the game; I wanted to play too. But I stopped, until a few years ago.

"There was a young woman who was playing rugby, and her brother found out. And he beat her up. When her father came home, she was bleeding and everything. The father asked her mum, "What happened?" When the mother told him, he said to his daughter, "Good for you!"

To escape disapproval and punishment, some players in the past have chosen to leave their family home and stay at friends' or share small lodgings with other players. This is what sets women's rugby completely apart from men's. Although male rugby players also face lack of resources, they can count on their families and communities who encourage and support them to pursue their rugby career. Male players are not alone in their struggle; the whole family, community, and nation, celebrates their dedication to rugby. But these women have had to make so much sacrifice – some even forfeiting the comfort of their family homes – just so they could play.

What is more, even as they play the game, the women face further

negative reactions. The most common instance is the jeering and laughing by spectators. During women's games at domestic sevens tournaments or at training grounds, spectators and bystanders openly ridicule and laugh at the players. According to one experienced player: "When we walk out into the field they [spectators] make faces, they call us names. It really discourages us if we hear them calling us lesbians and telling us to go home. [Spectators shout:] 'Go home. Go cook food. Go cook dinner.' They call us names, like, 'You bunch of lesbians.'"

Negative reactions also spill into other areas of their daily life. Another senior player described her experiences and feelings of alienation: "Even when you finish training there would be comments coming from guys and some women. Women tell you: 'You should just go home and wash the dishes, you belong in the kitchen.' And people laugh at us when we play, when we make mistakes. Even when you are walking in town, in public places, you are trying to put your head up, but you can't, because people are looking at you in a way that says, 'What are you doing? Why are you making a fool of yourself?'"

Fortunately, such harsh reactions have recently decreased as a result of the greater public profile achieved by the Fijiana and concerted efforts by the FRU, FWRU and clubs to encourage public support. But the negativity remains. Kanemasu notes witnessing the jeering and laughing at some of the most recent tournament games.

The picture emerging is that while the whole nation exalts male rugby players as heroes who carry its pride, their female counterparts must jump countless hurdles and endure condemnation, harassment, punishment and sometimes even ostracism, only to play their 'national' sport. It may be worth noting that while many male players are motivated by the hope of making a living out of rugby (i.e. securing an overseas professional club contract), female players continue to play without prospects of going pro.

Such overwhelming hardship can only be overcome by extraordinary courage and determination. The women have shown that they are true warriors, no less than male rugby players, by never giving up, never losing hope, and having the strength to stand up to the crowd and to change the hostile world around them. One seasoned player spoke of her passion: "All I do is for rugby. That's all I can think about. I eat well because I need to play well. Most of us, we do that. That's what drives us." Clearly, playing rugby is everything to these women, central to their identity and worthy of all sacrifice. Their relentless pursuit is also made possible by their ability to imagine a new vision of the sport, which defines them as active players, not passive bystanders, of the game long associated with national identity. A senior player explained how they deal with jeering crowds: "Most of the girls are not used to the crowd. I always tell them [before a game]: 'The crowd is there. Shut your ears [to the jeering] and just play. And show those people that we can play rugby.' Yes. That's how I always feel when I play in front of a big crowd. I feel motivated. Like I have to tell these people watching that women too can play rugby!"

Surely, such courage and strength is what the white jersey is meant to represent. The Fijiana deserve their jerseys, and more – they and other players deserve the nation's respect and support. The women's rugby community has been working tirelessly for three decades to bring itself up to the international standard with little support along the way. As the FRU chairman Filimone Waqabaca recently said, these women "have toiled on quietly to ... be fine ambassadors of FRU and Fiji. There is much to learn from them. Their selfless desire to represent the country is refreshing and uplifting". If rugby is truly our national sport, then it belongs to everyone – women, Fijians of Indian descent, people with disabilities, people of different gender and sexual identities and all the other diverse groups that make up our country.

Change is clearly happening. A national television channel has started broadcasting the women's games in domestic sevens rugby tournaments. These days the national newspapers frequently report on the Fijiana's tours and achievements. The FRU today has a Women's Rugby Development Officer (former rugby player and journalist Vela Naucikidi) who works assiduously to organise initiatives to develop and promote women's rugby around the country. With the Fijiana's increasing international success, a new public perception is gradually emerging, one that sees women's rugby as a pride of the nation, far from something to be ridiculed or condemned – an idea that women "can also bring joy to the nation just like the men do on the rugby field" as the FRU recently stated.

This new perception is growing at personal, family levels too. Families are slowly starting to accept their rugby-playing daughters and sisters as they see their genuine passion, skills and commitment. A senior member of the women's rugby community recounted one such case of reparation: "One of the girls, her dad came to watch her play for the first time. She scored the winning try. He shook everybody's hand in the grandstand and then he sat down and started crying. 'All of these years, I've heard about her playing, but I've never bothered to support her, to watch her.' He shed tears for his daughter."

The day may come, in the not so distant future, when the nation thanks these women for putting Fiji on the world map. The Fijiana's achievements today prove a prediction that Solo Finau, FRU Development Officer and long-term supporter of the community, made to Kanemasu and Molnar a few years ago when he discussed women's and Indo-Fijian rugby: "Women's rugby, we get laughed at. Fiji Indo rugby, we get laughed at. But take on the challenge. Take on the challenge. You might get laughed at now, but who's gonna laugh later on, in two, three years' time? They've got to give you the respect that you deserve."

Given the women's unswerving and resolute commitment, his prediction will probably be proven true time and again in the years to come. **M**



Elaine McDonald passes the ball to a team mate during a match in 2004.