

## GRIZZLY TOUR TO OUR FIFTIETH STATE



Two tour diaries follow, from a referee and from an organizer:

Report by Joe Zevin (Eastern Rockies and West):

Mid-September I received an e-mail from my old friend Bruce Carter, a big Kahuna in NorCal rugby referee circles. There were six or seven names in the address bar. The message stated that the recipients were included because not only could we referee good, fast rugby but were certified IRB referee educators. How would we like to travel with the Pacific Coast Grizzly U-17 squad, ref their games and teach Level One Official courses in - are you sitting down? - Hawaii.

I hit the reply button as fast as I could.

Turns out I was the second to pounce on the opportunity. Sean McDonough, a well-respected referee and coach from Canada, had beaten me to the punch. Good thing the request was for two to make the trip, for the spots were filled within ten minutes of posting.

I was put in touch with Frank Merrill from the Bay Area who had already put in countless hours as Tour Director. Frank had visited the islands in the past and knew all the contacts I would need there. Two months of exchanging e-mails and phone calls with those folks and we had a rough idea of how many courses and participants we would have. I could tell from these communications that the leaders of Hawaii Youth Rugby were dedicated gentlemen, willing to put time and money into their passion. They all had the best interests of the kids at heart. Meanwhile Frank had our travel arrangements well in hand. Here, thought I, is one competent individual. He left us nothing to worry about.

On 15 December I caught a plane from Denver to San Jose where I was met by Mike Smith who proudly calls himself Frank's Bitch. In his role of Tour Manager, Mike got most of the grunt work involving kit, balls, scheduling and laundry. He accepted all this and more with aplomb and ease. A night at Frank's, followed by an early wake-up and a drive to the Oakland airport where we met up with the rest of the team and coaches, saw us on our way, winging over the eastern Pacific.

Five hours later we landed at the Kahului airport on the island of Maui. One can fly to any number of airports around the world and not feel much of a difference but here there was no doubt we were in a new environment. The concourse and terminal had no doors, being open to the calm, warm outside. We were greeted by Jack Breen, the driving force behind youth rugby on Maui. Jack is an attorney from eastern Pennsylvania who is "trying to retire" and has lived on Maui for some twenty years. His passion is the group of youngsters that make up his team. Through our conversations it becomes evident that Jack has poured thousands of his own dollars and as many hours into Maui rugby.

After collecting our luggage our first stop was at the local branch of Costco where the team had a lunch of hot dogs and pizza while the referees assisted Jack in stocking on food and supplies for the next few days.

While the NorCal team was to stay at the Kihei Youth Center, sleeping on air mattresses, Sean and I were guests of Jack who, along with Maureen his wife of 30 years, proved to be excellent hosts. Jack lives well up the slope of one of the West Maui Mountains. Lush, green and steep, these mountains are the second rainiest spot on the planet, getting daily showers of an inch or more.

After settling in Jack took us to the Lahaina area on Maui's west coast where he ran a training session of the island's U-17 select side. Sean and I were given the temporary use of a Jeep which we drove to a nearby beach for a few hours of relaxation. While I was poking through the sand and coral at my feet Sean was twice treated to the sight of whales breaching on the horizon. By the time I could look up all that remained visible were sailboats.

The Jeep was returned and a short walk made to the Lahaina commercial district where burgers and the local Kona brew were sampled.

The next day, Thursday 17 December was game day. Jack drove us to a local golf course where Sean and I easily set course records, losing four balls but finding six. Two over for the day. Not bad. Jack retrieved us and we spent the next several hours dashing about picking up members of the U-17 team and making sure others had rides to the match.

We arrived at the game, met the rest of the coaching staff and were introduced to Levi, a gentleman who flew over from Oahu to deliver a motivational talk to the team. In addition we met Aisea Tuikolovai, the fellow who leads the referee efforts on the Big Island of Hawaii. As game time neared the park filled up with local fans, a large sound system was assembled, tents were erected. Just before kickoff the host team performed a Haka, laying down the challenge. The visitors showed their respect by watching unafraid from their side of the pitch.

I refed the game that day with Sean and Aisea as Assistant Referees. It was a spirited match between the well-drilled Grizzlies and a raw Maui squad. What the local lads lacked in experience and coordination they made up in enthusiasm. The contact zone was hotly contested and their size and strength often gave the visitors much to worry about. However many repeated offenses and a language barrier between the referee and the many Tongan-born players

led to a stop - start affair. One yellow card was issued but the problem was not solved until half time when the Maui coaching staff could talk to their charges and instruct them in proper play at the tackle. The second half was much smoother, more rugby was played and the Pacific Coast ran out to a 42 - 0 final score converting only the last of their eight tries.

After the game we were treated to a dinner of chicken, rice, soda and a local favorite called Musubi a sort of Hawaiian burrito made of Spam and rice wrapped in seaweed leaves. Speeches were made, Man of the Match awards given and leis distributed. Then the adults retired to the Pioneer Bar on the waterfront for a pint, conversation and the comradeship found only among fellow ruggers.

Friday the 18th was to be our first Level One Match Official clinic on the islands. Jack again acted as host and we set up shop in his very adequate basement. Three attendees showed up, ready to learn and practice the art of refereeing rugby. I took on the administrative duties of the course with Sean teaching many of the modules and Aisea leading two. The students were keen and able, grasping each concept quickly. It was a successful day in that we were able to certify three new referees on Maui.

That night Sean and I were treated to a bit of Hawaiian culture as Jack drove us to the Royal Lahaina Resort for a Luau. A buffet dinner was complemented by bottomless Mai-tais. The entertainment was all one could expect. The performers danced tirelessly and made several costume changes, ranging from traditional grass skirts and coconut bras to dresses that had been the code during the days of the missionaries and the glitter and sparkle of Elvis' Blue Hawaii influence. It was evident they enjoyed practicing the craft and traditions of the Polynesian people. Beautiful, sensuous movements followed by the controlled frenzy of the fire dancers made for a well-choreographed show.

A walk around the water front shops revealed art galleries, many of which had special showings. Some of the paintings on display were of magical color, texture and subject, showing fanciful scenes representative of the shores and cliffs of an imaginary sub-tropical island. I was quite tempted to make a purchase but discretion got the better of the Mai-tais

Throughout our stay on Maui Jack was a wealth of information on the history and culture of Hawaii. From the intrepid Polynesians who sailed the ocean to first colonize the islands to the British who were treated as gods until they returned in broken ships and were stoned to death on the beaches (the ships of gods don't break down) and the Portuguese settlers who built plantations and brought the ukulele. The coming and going of pineapple, sugar cane, cattle, sheep, huge ranches covering half an island were all parts of Jack's stories. We also learned of a weather phenomenon known as "vog" which is caused by smoke from the Kilauea volcano on the Big Island.

We flew to Oahu early the next morning, catching up with the rest of the group who had made the transit the previous day. We were met at the airport by Dave Wendt, a long standing figure in Oahu rugby. Known by the honorific Maafu (Big Chief) Dave made our first stop the Honolulu Sam's Club (there is a pattern developing here) where he loaded the back of his pickup with food for that afternoon's post-game feast. We then drove on to our hotel in Waikiki, just a few blocks from the ocean. A bit of beach time on that fabled strip of sand was a must-do, the sun instantly bronzing the mainlanders.

The main event of the day was a three o'clock kickoff between the tourists and the Oahu U-17. A short walk from the hotel brought us early to the pitch and I assisted the sole member of the grounds crew in lining the pitch. Sean, being the referee on the day saved his energy for the match. Teams arrived, crowds of parents and friends massed and two of the local Referee Society came to run the sidelines. The Oahu team was better organized than the Maui group and had some good speed, turning the corner on the Grizz a number of times. However the tourists again proved too strong turning in a 53 - 0 performance.

Another massive feast followed the game. Maafu acted as cook, server, host and cleanup crew, eschewing any assistance. The kids made their way back to the hotel and were safely tucked in for the night with a few short-straw adults remaining with them.

Sean and I took the opportunity to sample the local night life but the pace of the past few days caught up with us and we turned in at an embarrassingly early 11:00

The Oahu referees had recently been subjected to a Level One clinic and had not produced any additional candidates so Sunday was an off day for the referees. We used the chance to make the cross town journey to Pearl Harbor where they toured a WWII submarine and the Pacific Aviation Museum. The USS Missouri, the battleship on which the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Harbor took place ending WWII, was in dry dock and not open to the public.

That disappointment was overshadowed by the visit to the USS Arizona Memorial. A somber experience for all, the room at the far end of the memorial, listing the names of those who died on 7 December 1941 was particularly moving. In the lower left of the panel was another slab of white marble showing the names of those who had survived the attack but made had had their remains returned to the Arizona to rest with their shipmates.

The first day of winter made it easy to understand why people live here. Temperatures hovered around 80 for our entire stay, winds were light and the sun shone nearly all day. The group quit the hotel and flew to the Big Island, landing at Kona on the west side. The kids were shuttled north to Waimea and housed in the loft of a horse barn owned by another of the many people who give their hearts to the development of youth rugby in Hawaii. After the obligatory stop at Costco, Sean and I were hosted by Aisea, his wife Clover and their three children. Aisea is another great story teller, doing so with a slant towards the Tongan view. He tells of playing rugby with a coconut shell for a ball and other adventures not known by ruggers of greater means.

In fact the vast majority of the rugby community we met is of Tongan origin, most having come to Hawaii in the last generation or two. These are a wonderful, hospitable people, easy with a smile and passionate about their sport, their families and their faith. The three are so intertwined that one follows the others at every turn. Each feast is preceded by a blessing. Each gathering is a reunion of cousins. Tongan names all have meanings that represent their status in the traditional community. For example Aisea's family name of Tuikolovai translates to Chief Rock Thrower, denoting he comes from the line of the king's body guard.

Aisea's house is a wonder of plants and animals. In addition to his dog Ilo

(wisdom) his yard is graced by two wandering chickens and a feathered alarm clock with another handful of birds in a coop. Each morning, before the first hint of light the roosters begin crowing in stereo and don't stop until well after we had left for the day's activities. Needing all the sleep I could get, the great temptation was to go out and throttle a rooster.

The yard also boasts several varieties of banana tree, an avocado tree, papaya, mango and a row of taro. Aisea climbed a ladder and twisted a coconut from its trunk.

Back on the ground he proceeded to hack at it with a heavy knife, exposing its juice. We sipped the sweet nectar through straws. Aisea then split the husk into thirds and scooped the fresh coconut meat out with a chip of the shell. Tender and tasty, this was nothing like the dried shredded stuff we find at the grocery at home.

That night Aisea fired up the barbecue and grilled three different cuts of beef and chicken all of which had been marinated in a sauce so secret he would not tell of its ingredients. Again the food, though excellent and full of the protein athletes need, was secondary to the conversation and sharing of stories common to people everywhere but unique to those who share a love of rugby.

Tuesday 22 December was our second Level One clinic. Seven attendees and one auditor came. As with the clinic on Maui, all were well versed in rugby and very keen to learn. Sean took the lead with Aisea and I dividing up the rest. Aisea is an Instructor in Training and performed well in the modules he led. It is evident he holds a place of respect among his peers, both in and out of rugby. All seven passed the course and Hawaii rugby will now enjoy the services of a new crop of referees.

That night was a reception at the horse barn in Waimea and we made the drive over the high road which afforded vast vistas of the island and its volcanoes. From the barn, which sits 2500 feet above sea level we could see patches of snow near the top of Mauna Kea and we experienced our first Hawaiian rain.

Coaches and referees caught up on their conversation and we learned of a few near-drownings at a black sand beach with a strong undertow. A few of the kids

were swept out from shore. Frank and some of the other kids went to help. By the time they had gotten most of the distressed swimmers in they themselves were tired and had to struggle to regain land. All were safe and now the incident is just another story to tell.

We also met the Big Island coaches, among them is another Island rugby legend, Kevin Perry. As so often happens in rugby circles Kevin and I knew we had met before but couldn't quite place where. Surely it will come in a flash in the near future.

A good night's sleep was again cut short by the roosters, but we wanted to get an early start and head to the beaches. On the way we turned in to the fishing and pleasure boat marina and took a short walk to the shore where the Ancients had built a clever fish trap. Rectangles of rock filled with water and fish at high tide and then, as the water receded, trapped the fish within the ring for easy collection.

Two sea turtles poked their head up and waved flippers to the visitors. There was also a large flat pile of black volcanic rocks, many of them dressed to fit neatly in. Signs asked that no one climb on the altar as it was a site sacred to the natives and should not be entered without the proper ceremony and chants. A little further south is a spot called Magic Sands. Great curling waves invited but no one was allowed in deep without flippers. A quick dip and a few hours basking proved sufficient.

The third and final game of the tour was expected to be the stiffest competition faced by the Grizz. Expectations were well met. I refereed the game with Sean and Aisea assisting. Strong tackling by the hosts forced the visitors to buckle down to a simple game plan: Run straight and hard, support the breakdown and make sure passes stuck. Though they were well trained the host team could not hold off the visitors indefinitely. A week of working together and a week of top-level coaching had formed this team into a dedicated unit. Nine tries and five conversions led to a final score of 55 - 5. The hosts scored the only points against the Grizzlies with a fine multi-phase try that stretched the defense too far for recovery. They had another chance at a score driving across the line only to have the ball held up in goal.

The game was followed by another feast of a wide variety of foods both common and specific to Island culture. The team went to a nearby hotel for their last night and the adults gathered at the Kona Brewpub for libations and decompression.

Having become somewhat immune to their racket, we slept through the first of the daily rooster cacophony, rising at the crack of eight. Sean went for one last bit of beach time while I showered and packed for the trip home.

The next order of business was a quick four hour flight to Oakland, a pick up by Frank's wife Clarisse and a round of dropping off Sean at an airport hotel, Mike at his daughter's in San Francisco and a few players for their Christmas Eve with family.

Joe was quite surprised when Frank graciously invited him to join in the celebration at a daughter's house. A quick meal and drink postponed the trip to the San Jose airport where I planned to spend the night typing memories.

Back home in icy-cold Denver, I sat down to finish and edit this tome. Even before I left for the islands I had a feeling I would fall in love with them, fall in love to the point of wanting to move. Colorado is home and will always be so, but the lure of Hawaii is very strong. The mild climate, the ocean, the sights I saw, the knowledge of sights yet unseen draw me back.

However, like any trip I have taken involving rugby, it is the people who are the highlight. Greeting us with open arms, I have never felt so welcomed, so respected or so awed by their dedication as I did in Hawaii. Sean, as coach of the Ottawa U-17 Select Side, and Frank are planning a return trip and camp. With my meager skills, I can only hope to join them.

Report by Frank Merrill:

Coaches: Josh Fitzgerald, Jesuit and Granite Bay; Paul Keeler, SFGG; Chris Strudwick, Queensland Reds

Managers: Mike Smith, SFGG; David Howie, Queensland Reds; Frank Merrill, Northern Sierra All Stars

First game vs. Mana o Maui -

Grizzlies were hosted by the Kihei Youth Center, a facility run by a non-profit for kids from the Kihei area as an afternoon and early evening facility where kids can come for homework help, games and athletics.

The young Grizzlies were feted as honored guests and celebrities, much to their amazement. The beach was directly across the street. Boys slept on air mattresses and rollaway beds and were fed by the staff at the youth center. Manager (Frank Merrill) and coach (Josh Fitzgerald, Granite Bay and Jesuit) spent the night at the Youth Center to ensure that the boys stayed in the Youth Center and not across the street in the water, which was (naturally) hard to ignore.

Game was held in Lahaina at the Boys and Girls club field. Crowd was entertained by a "color commentator" with a microphone and music (all in Tongan) which added to the atmosphere. There was a crowd of several hundred spectators including a former Grizzlies (Kevin \_\_\_) who played in Arizona, unable to get his card and cannot remember his last name, but he had the Grizzly sweater to "prove" it). The post-match function was hosted by the Maui folks (special mention of Reverend Fonua and Jack Breen) on the field area and provided our boys the opportunity to meet the locals, some of whom ended up back at the Kihei Center later where they ended up on the basketball court for hours playing hoops (Grizzly coaches admonishing their players "Do NOT sprain an ankle, gentlemen..."). Boys retreated to the Youth Center for the night and got up early the next morning for travel to Oahu.

Game Two - vs. Oahu All Stars

Team was met by our local hosts Ma'afu (David Wendt) and former Grizzly and Eagle Joe Santos, and after a visit to the USS Arizona Memorial, was put up at the Kamaole Sands hotel in Waikiki (about a block off the strip) (NOTE - the USS Arizona Memorial trip was cultural and also educational - it appeared at the beginning of the visit that perhaps 30% of the players had ever heard of the event, but at the end, a sincere group of about 7 players encircled me and said, "Frank, this was the 9/11 event of the 1940's" - I think they "got" it. And are likely not going to forget it either).

Team trained at Kapiolani Park, one of the most beautiful urban parks in the US (or the Kingdom of Hawai'i, depending on your particular outlook), just a short walk from the hotel.

Game was also here there, and featured the "official tour photo" being taken under the profile of Diamond Head. Crowd was not as large as in Maui but did include Mark Deaton, former Palo Alto/Cal/Old Blue rugger who regaled the young Grizzlies with tales of games past, including defeats of Italy, Tunisia and in fact, the Eagles themselves (he said it, I sort of remember it, but it might need some independent verification); and Jon Wilbur, Stanford rugger and also NFL Hall of Fame member (Dallas Cowboys, Washington Redskins, pre-dates the Eagles). Team returned to the hotel where in spite of two bed checks by the managers (Frank Merrill and Mike Smith of SFGG) at 10:00 pm and then again at 11:30 pm some of the rascals managed to break one of the tour rules, as suggested by evidence discovered by the mostly Filipino hotel housekeeping staff the next morning.

Manager Merrill, speaking his best Tagalog to the head housekeeper determined the miscreant room and its occupants and after an assessment by managers and coaching staff, it was decided that instead of a free day at Waikiki, the team would have a "team bonding" session in the hotel pool and then at the beach on the way to Kapiolani Park, where the King Kamehameha Municipal Band was having a regular Sunday afternoon concert. The entire team participated in this physical event, led mostly by Paul Keeler (SFGG) (bad cop) while coach Fitzgerald acted as the "athletic supporter" (good cop).

All of the team members survived without incident and then were fed, watered and put to bed. (No need for bed check: after about 9 pm, they were all asleep.)

Game Three - vs. Big Island Select -

After traveling to the Big Island (Hawai'i) and arriving to see old friend Kevin Perry (OMBAC and the Old Blues), the travelers went from the airport to Hapuna Beach. At Hapuna Beach, the coaches put the players through a series of fun drills and "grab ass" rugby on the beach, then allowed the players to

frolic in the warm water for about an hour before departing for Ainslie's Barn in Waimea.

Waimea is at approx. 2500 feet elevation and looks much like the San Mateo County coast (think La Honda), not at all like what one would expect so close to the ocean. The Ainslies provided the team with a very large upstairs over their barn, fully carpeted, where the players were able to spread out and relax. In addition, the Ainslies have a 4 bedroom, unoccupied home a short distance away where the coaches and some of the traveling Dads were able to spend the night in beds, avoiding the floor, with an absolutely majestic vista of the hillsides. The following day, after training on the rugby field walking distance from the barn, the team journeyed to Waipaio Overlook and beach about 20 minutes away. This black sand beach also is the endpoint of the Waipaio River, where the fresh water meets the sea. The "walk" from the overlook to the beach is very steep and about a mile long, including many stretches of nearly 45 degree angle downslope (meaning, you must also go up in order to get back to the vehicles). The boys jumped in the water (swells perhaps 1-2 feet) and enjoyed the warm water. Suddenly, swells were reaching 6-8 feet and retreating out of the water became increasingly difficult with a severe undertow. After assessing the situation, manager (Merrill) and parents (Matt Taylor, Norm Boccone, Joe Rosenbaum and Mark Godfrey) began to extract the boys, with some significant difficulty but entirely successfully. (NOTE - more to mention later\*). After the water, we were faced with walking the (essentially) vertical mile back to the vans. Luckily, an empty pickup driven by a local came by and offered to bring the boys to the top (don't forget, manager was the first to get into the vehicle). The team then retreated back to the Ainslie's Barn for some well-deserved rest.

The last full day we traveled to Kona and set up at the Kona Seaside Hotel to prepare for our last game vs. the Big Island Select, a team made up of the best players out of the three regular teams in the island.

Game was the most professionally run of all three, with full sideline ropes and viewing/filming area that allowed the best view yet. Two of our athletes commented after the game, "I'm glad we played this game last (after a full week of training) and not first, these guys were good." Very nice post match function, including reconnecting with former Seahawk, Raymond Ta'ala who

now is helping to coach the Kona team.

\*(management decision led by Coach Chris Strudwick - "we will only go to patrolled beaches from this point on, and never back to an unpatrolled beach" <"patrolled" must be an Aussie term J>)

After returning to the hotel, the players and management had a pizza party (maybe an hour and a half after they ate a full post-game meal ) where the coaches announced the tour awards:

Best forward, Nikki Miholivic, Chuckanut Bay (special jersey provided by International Athletics and former Grizzly Jeff Lombard)

Best forward, Connor Rosenbaum, Marin (same)

Best Rookie, Sean Osborn, Motherlode (provided a special jersey by Chris Strudwick of Struddy's Sports of Australia)

Most inspirational, Jeff Calzaretta, Marin (provided a CIA t-shirt by Mike Smith)

Tour captains - Travis Moscone, PITS; Lemoto Filikitonga, San Mateo Warriors; Jeff Calzaretta, Marin

The team returned home on Christmas Eve at about 6:30 pm without a single "peep" from Rugby Mom about coming back so close to the holiday.

Special thanks must go to our Australian friends Mr. Strudwick and Mr. Howie who traveled over on their own dime to assist and participate. They did NOT get back to Oz until the middle of Christmas Day, to no ill effect.

Other special thanks go to our traveling referees Joe Zevin and Sean McDonough who created referee courses on Maui and Kona and who certified 11 referees. In the grand scheme of things, this "cross-pollination" will help the game grow faster in the state and was an investment that the PCRFU was glad to assist with.

And final special thanks to Mike Smith (former Eagle manager and SFGG stalwart) who spent the majority of his time for the months of October and November and December babysitting the whole tour. Well done, Mr. Smith.

Some photos from the first game are posted here (Maui):

<http://picasaweb.google.com/dropslowly/PCRFUU17Maui?feat=directlink>

Second game (Oahu):

[http://picasaweb.google.com/dropslowly/2009\\_12\\_19\\_PCRFU\\_U17Oahu?feat=directlink](http://picasaweb.google.com/dropslowly/2009_12_19_PCRFU_U17Oahu?feat=directlink)

Here are the photos from the third and final game (Big Island):

[http://picasaweb.google.com/dropslowly/2009\\_12\\_23\\_PCRFU\\_U17BigIsland#](http://picasaweb.google.com/dropslowly/2009_12_23_PCRFU_U17BigIsland#)