

INAUGURAL SURFING TITLES A ROARING SUCCESS

By Colin Taimbari

Vanimo (Lido) Village is used to hosting three or even five surfers wandering into their village at any one time. They could be local surfers or from overseas wanting to try out the Mabubu Break at the Right Hander on Iblehwan Beach or the Mehna Break at the Left Hander out of Wepili Beach.

But on February 15, 2007, it was like a giant 12 foot wave had come crashing through their village as more than 200 surfers converged on Lido for the first ever Papua New Guinea National Titles to be staged that weekend (Feb 16 – 18).

Even the Prime Minister Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare was in Vanimo to be part of history for the surfing movement in PNG. Teams from Port Moresby (Sero Board Riders & Taurama Surf Club), Wewak (Dolf Surf Club), Kavieng Surf Club and the two local teams Sunset Surf Club and pioneer club Vanimo Surf Club came out in numbers to celebrate the realization of a dream born 20 years ago when a rather strange looking young man strolled into their village in search of big waves.

Today, as President of the Surfing Association of PNG, Andrew Abel recalled at the official opening of the national titles how he first entered the village without whiskers, plenty of hair on his head and a surf board tucked under his arm.

“As you'd understand, I came here by canoe from Milne Bay 20 years ago and somehow I've fell in love with Lido and its people. Thank you people of Lido for sharing my dream and accepting me all those years ago,” he said.

“This (national titles) is a culmination of 20 years of hard work not by politicians (with due respect), not by bureaucrats, but by us surfers, we've done the hard yards.”

Sir Michael was truly impressed and recalled his youth growing up beside the sea surfing on splinted wood.

“I am honored to be asked to open this somewhat more skillful sport of surfing that will “unfurl like the waves” over the next three days at this beautiful location, Lido Village,” he said.

Sir Michael then moved on to Wepili Beach where he pushed out a surfboard to sea to signal the start of the inaugural PNG surfing titles.

Over the next three days, there were perfect conditions with solid 4 – 6 foot waves. More than 5000 people lined up the beach under the shade trees and cheered for their teams.

The SAPNG Perpetual Trophy was decided in the final event of the championships on Sunday when Angelus Lipahi of Sunset Surf club took out the mens open shortboard title over Kavieng's Shaun Keen.

The Kavieng Surf Club led by Keen and Adam Smith almost caused a major boil over missing out only by a whisker although they won four of the nine events on offer at the national titles.

Sunset's sister club and PNG's pioneer surf club Vanimo was disappointing, managing only to win the men open bodyboard final with Joshua Wekre and teenager Lesley Umpa winning the women's open shortboard final by a mile over her opponents.

Youngster Titima Mange from Kavieng was the find of the tournament scoring the only score of a perfect 10 in the semis of the junior boys' shortboard which he went on to claim the title by beating fierce competition from Jeffery Mana of Vanimo in the final.

Young lass Rachael James of Kavieng also defied the local challenge to become the PNG women's champion in the womens open bodyboard by overcoming Stella Longa of Sunset.

On a bright sunny day and perfect conditions off shore with solid four foot waves at the left handers' Mehna Break off Wepili Beach, Shaun Keen was not going to be denied and took out the mens open longboard title over Andrew Abel of Port Moresby's Sero Board Riders Club.

Maryanne Longa of Sunset was crowned the queen of the womens open longboard over Jenny Baing of Sero while Abel fought back to claim the title in the masters longboard over Kavieng's Adam Smith.

Shaun Keen made sure of a double by also taking out the masters' shortboard title over Steve Tekwie of Sunset.

Head judge Glenn Elliot of Surfing Australia was impressed with the conditions and overall high level of competition displayed at the championships for the three days.

"I think the way the competitors embraced the competitive spirit was fantastic and I like the way the villagers got behind their respective competitors from the clubs. I thought that was really one of the highlights."

Elliot was absolutely proud to be part of the inaugural PNG surfing titles saying it was an overwhelming success and can only get better.

"I believe this is the start of something that's going to be really huge for PNG - Surfing and eco-tourism – for the simple fact that surfing is the best sport in the world and I think you have one of the most beautiful countries in the world so you have two of the best things going for you, so PNG rocks, I reckon," he quipped with a smile and a thumbs up.

To Andy Abel from all the surfers at the inaugural PNG national surfing titles – Thank you for sharing your dream with us.

Ends.