



SAPNG's Surfing Grand Slam

Teresa Lyons
Photography by Jason Pini, SAPNG

It's been a huge past year for Andrew Abel and the SAPNG. The Association has celebrated twenty years since it's humble beginnings, recorded the highest ever number of visiting surfer's to PNG at the close of 2006, and has hosted the biggest national sporting event it has ever put together in Vanimo. And now, it's crowning feat... the unveiling of a World Bank endorsed Master Strategic Development Plan that will provide a definitive guideline for the growth and development of the Surfing Association of PNG for decades to come.

It's Thursday 15th of February and Lido Village, part of the small township of Vanimo in Sandaun Province, is about to host the 2007 Surfing Association of PNG National Surfing Titles. This is the biggest national sporting event the Surfing Association of PNG has ever held, and it is the first national event they have held in years. On this day, a national team will be selected to represent Papua New Guinea in the 2007 South Pacific Games to be held in Samoa. This is also a day that will set the SAPNG operation

firmly on a path to strengthen and secure its aims for sustainable operations over the coming years. Today, through

the support and assistance granted by PEP-Pacific, an extension of the World Bank Group, the SAPNG will unveil

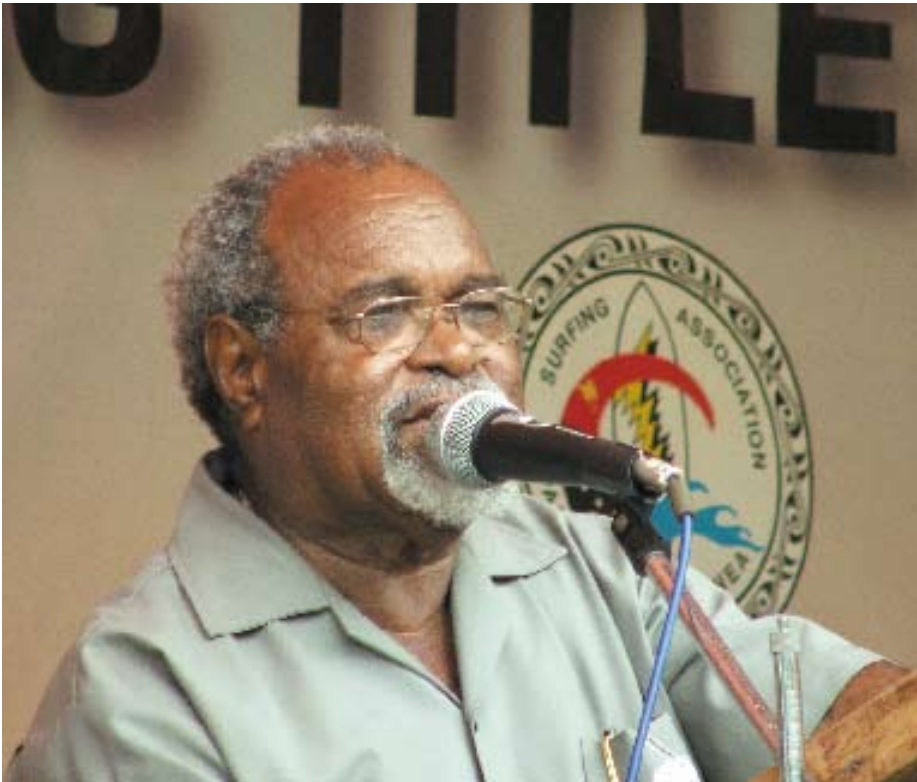
Right: Accommodation bungalows in Vanimo.





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Story: Teresa Lyons photos: Jason Pini, SAPNG



Above: Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare officially opens the tournament.

a strategic plan that will guide the Association through it's development and decision-making processes, to achieve their end goal of a secure, loyal and beneficial partnership between the Association and local, government and business communities. Today will reveal the full culmination of twenty long hard years of lobbying politicians, bureaucrats and industry leaders for an ideal that many still regard as just that – an ideal.

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It's early and eerily quiet on a Thursday morning in the village of Lido, in the Saundaun Province. The muffled sounds of sleepers stirring comes from a colourful row of beach huts with "Sunset Surf Club Vanimo" painted on their railings. A few shirtless, board-shorted figures emerge, stretching and yawning, while others sit nearby with a cup of steaming coffee.

Andrew Abel has been up for hours. He's looking anxiously to the surf, praying for decent surges that will crest and fall to perfect left-handers and decent barrels. Like all of us, he's very far from where he was twenty years ago.

The young boy with big dreams who begged at the doors of the country's tourism heavyweights is gone, and in his

place is a determined father and gifted surfer with nothing else in his sights except a lasting, prosperous future for his boy and the local communities he has bonded with over the years. In his own right, he now wields considerable influence within the industry and those that laughed at him twenty years ago scramble to keep up with his innovative ideas.

The air is thick with excitement and anticipation, and the rich scent of traditional oils used on the skin of dancing performers grows stronger as the celebrations for the Opening Ceremony edge closer. Sensing the mood, young children are gathering in droves near the waterline, playing quirky games that seem to involve standing on their heads with no clothes on.

Photographers and cameramen can be seen cutting swathes through the ever growing crowds, their pale complexions drawing many an eye.

A media crew from Australia's Surfing Life has flown up for the event, and Surfing Australia's head judge, Glenn Elliott, is present to officiate.

The SAPNG arranged for Elliott to visit PNG in 2004 to conduct a Level 1 surf judging and officiating course, approved and affiliated with

the International Surfing Association (ISA) and Surfing Australia, as part of the SAPNG vision to educate and train it's surfing members. Seven of Elliott's students from 2004 are assisting him with judging individual events, including Jason Pini, David Joel, Kym Gole, James Victor, Richard Evans, Albert Taligatus, Lawrence Taligatus and David James.

The day wears on and last minute preparations are under way. The judges' hut is finished, standing on sturdy stilts with a 180° view of the surf breaks of Wepili Beach. Sponsors' banners and flags are attached to trees, make-shift frames and huts. Everywhere stark corporate logos and paraphernalia clash with the sight of grinning bare foot villagers and palm trees leaning out over the water. The scene paints an almost perfect analogy of what the Association is all about.

A grand stage is decked out in yards and yards of sunset yellow and scarlet cloth, its rows of chairs empty and waiting patiently for invited VIPs. One particular chair is reserved for a very special guest; the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare. Andy has invited the Prime Minister to officially open the tournament, and the Grand Chief has graciously accepted. It is hoped that the publicity the Prime Minister will bring to the event will prove invaluable, and

The entrants – 2007 South Pacific Games.

Three surfers have been chosen to represent Papua New Guinea at the 2007 South Pacific Games in Samoa based on their performances at the 2007 SAPNG National Surfing Titles. These three will attend training sessions in Australia under the tutelage of Sasha Stoker from Australia's High Performance Training Centre on the Gold Coast. Augelus Lepahi, Lesley Umpa and Andrew Abel will all get the opportunity to achieve gold in Samoa later this year with Shane Clark as team manager and coach. From all at *Niugini Blue*, we wish the team the best of luck and every success.



Above: Thousands of people gathered at the Wepili beach to watch the tournament. Below left and right: Competing surfers slice up a couple of left handers during competition.

will ensure a sound media platform on which to secure sponsorship for future events and, more importantly, to help promote the strategic plan being unveiled today which is rumoured to be attracting the attention of major international organisations with interests in third world development.

Crowds are every where now, the white dirt roads a colourful scene of some 200 surfers and an estimated throng of 5000 local residents. Bright flashes come from the cameras of a dozen tourists from Europe, talking excitedly to one another. Traditional dancers decked out in bright cloth, shells and green foliage thread their way through the crowds, making their way to the stage area where they will perform for the surfers and guests.

The Prime Minister's flight has touched down and he's on his way to Lido. Bodyguards and security personnel can be seen checking out surrounding

areas, profiling the crowds.

All have gathered in front of the stage; VIPs are seated and the Grand Chief is ushered to his seat. The crowd shifts restlessly and cameras flash. In his opening speech, Abel describes how he came to Lido as a young boy fresh out of school, and tells of how he bonded with the people of Lido and Vanimo. "Thank you people of Lido for sharing my dream and accepting me all those years ago," he says.

The Prime Minister is introduced to a round of applause and a flurry of more camera flashes. He reminisces on his day, as a young village boy, and of how he once surfed these same waves on bits of carved wood. "I am honoured to be asked to open this somewhat more skilful sport of surfing that will unfurl like the waves over the next three days at this beautiful location, Lido Village." He then went on to surprise everyone by announcing a public holiday for the event, and in partnership with the Sandaun Governor committed K60,000 to the SAPNG to fund a double-storey classroom for the local school.

As the commotion died down, World Bank representatives Jennifer Bartlett and Hugh Walton officially handed over the Master Strategic Development Plan to Andrew Abel. The plan takes into account the past achievements of the SAPNG and current projects, providing a definitive guideline for the Association to continue on its path of

growth and development over the next twenty years. Tellingly, the master plan has been created through and based upon the development of what is now known as the Abel Reverse Spiral Model and the Abel Parallel Approach. Both are socio-economic models created by Andrew Abel, encompassing a mutual relationship between local communities, government and business bodies. In perhaps what will turn out to be the most significant impact of the plan is that it now provides the SAPNG with a legitimate platform on which to base their next long term goal: the implementation of its own legislative Act of Parliament. The Surfing Association of PNG is careful not to reveal too much, but essentially they are aiming to secure legal channels of prevention and action for all associated surfing entities to protect and preserve their mutual interests and long term development. Indeed, in a dramatic





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move the Prime Minister in his opening speech assured the SAPNG of the NEC's support when the time came to push the bill through.

The event now officially open, Sir Michael and a cast of thousands make their way down to Wepili Beach, where the Grand Chief pushes a surf board out to sea to symbolise the beginning of the tournament.

Whilst celebrations are underway, Abel and the Prime Minister withdraw to the judges hut, where they talk quietly about the SAPNG's achievements and the Association's on going efforts. The sun sets and the Grand Chief is whisked away, to leave the SAPNG officials, surfers and their guests to enjoy the evening's celebrations.

The revelation of a strategic master development plan for the Association is a huge weight off Andrew Abel's shoulders. Whilst it's been twenty long years, it must be hard for him to forget how his ideal for an equal partnership between local communities, government bodies and business operators was laughed down all those years ago. Today, with living proof of the dangers Abel warned about occurring in Fiji,

Indonesia and here in our own nation - caused by an imbalance of power and operative control between communities and operating bodies - Andy's critics are finding it harder to dismiss his ideology. In an interview conducted months ago, Andrew Abel stressed his concern that should anything happen to him, without some sort of legacy in place for those left behind, all that the Association has been working for would be lost. I have no doubt that the Association is now more at ease, knowing that all of their ideals and plans for the future are now immortalised in the Master Strategic Development Plan and as a consequence, the SAPNG is now unlikely to fail. ■

Teresa Lyons

Above: Kieran Nash and Andrew Abel at the awards ceremony. Right: Images from the tournament.

Results - 2007 SAPNG National Surfing Titles

Men's Open Bodyboard

Joshua Wekere, Vanimo Surf Club

Women's Open Bodyboard

Rachael James, Kavieng Surf Club

Men's Open Longboard

Shaun Keane, Kavieng Surf Club

Women's Open Longboard

Maryanne Longa, Sunset Surf Club

Junior Shortboard

Titima Mange, Kavieng Surf Club

Masters Longboard

Andrew Abel, Sero Surf Club

Women's Open Shortboard

Lesley Umpa, Vanimo Surf Club

Masters Shortboard

Shaun Keane, Kavieng Surf Club

Men's Open Shortboard

Angelus Lepahi, Sunset Surf Club

