

Fiji Wins First Hong Kong Sevens Of New Era

By Emil Signes

Hong Kong, China
March 27-29, 1998

Led by the magical Waisale Serevi, Fiji defeated Western Samoa 28-19 in the final to win the 1998 Hong Kong 7s. It was a year that many felt the storied event would begin its decline.

Consider the predictions of the nay-sayers:

- Hong Kong's handover to China would bring instability and repression
- The Asian financial crisis was a portent of disaster
- The loss of sponsors — first Cathay Pacific and Hong Kong Bank, who declined to continue their sponsorship, then Peregrine who went bankrupt three months before the Sevens, victims of the Asian financial crisis, would undermine the viability of the event.
- The absence of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales would diminish the interest in the event to a largely ex-pat crowd.

Nevertheless, the tournament not only took place, but was as exciting as ever. Credit Suisse First Boston took over the sponsorship in a deal that goes through the year 2000. The event was attended by more than 76,000 people over 2 1/2 days (a near-capacity 37,200 on Sunday).

Eleven of last year's top 12 teams were there (so much for the competitive importance of the Home Countries). A good time was had by all, and Fiji, Samoa and New Zealand dazzled the crowd throughout the weekend before Fiji demonstrated that their world championship performance in 1997 was no fluke. Fiji received \$120,000 (US) for winning the tournament, and more than \$500,000 in prize money was disbursed throughout the top 10 teams, including \$20,000 for Plate runners-up Papua New Guinea.

The Hong Kong Sevens is proving itself bullet-proof, to the relief and thanks of those of us who have worshipped it over the years. So start saving your money and make



Eagle Mike Coyner advances the ball during the United States 24-19 loss to Korea in the Plate quarterfinal.

those reservations for Hong Kong in March 1999, when, in addition to the new stadium and new government, a brand new airport will be in place.

COMPETITION

The tournament took place in beautiful spring weather — temperatures in the mid-70s, a mixture of clouds and sun, but no rain — perfect conditions for running rugby.

Round Robin

Hong Kong reverted to the pool system it used in 1996, with six pools of four teams. The top six went into the Cup round, along with the top two second place finishers. The bottom six went into the Bowl, along with the bottom two third place finishers. The remaining eight teams went into the Plate. Tie-breaking criteria were a) tries scored, b) tries converted, and c) point differential.

The six pools were (listed within

each pool by seeding):

Pool A: South Africa, Spain, Netherlands, Thailand

Pool B: France, Canada, Zimbabwe, Malaysia

Pool C: Fiji, Argentina, Papua New Guinea, Chinese Taipei

Pool D: Samoa, Tonga, Morocco, China

Pool E: New Zealand, Korea, USA, Singapore

Pool F: Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, Sri Lanka

In a tribute to those responsible for seeding, all finishes were 1-2-3-4, exactly as seeded.

Surprises

That didn't mean there weren't a couple of big surprises. The biggest had to be Argentina's shocking 21-21 tie of Fiji. In fact, Argentina should have won the game — the referee blew the whistle as 20-year old Felipe Contepomi was scoring a try that would have given Argentina a 14-0 lead — then gave a penalty to Argentina, a clear case of advantage not applied. Amazingly, after Fiji seemingly put the game away, 21-7, Argentina scored two tries in the last two minutes to tie the game. Fiji scraped through to the first seed based on 16 tries to Argentina's 14.

In pool A, 4th seed Thailand upset 2nd seed Spain with superior speed and capitalizing on Spain's sweeping deficiencies. Thailand then lost to the Netherlands, whom Spain crushed. The tie breaker sorted out the three 1-2 teams in the order they'd been seeded.

There were two "almost upsets": in Pool D, where Canada, which played well throughout, nearly knocked off France, 21-26, and in Pool E, where 3rd seeded US nearly upset Korea. In a defensive battle between the two long-time rivals, Korea prevailed 10-5, in the lowest scoring match of the tournament.

Post-Pool Seeds

Following the pool round, the teams were seeded 1-24, with 1-8 in the Cup, 9-16 in the Plate, and 17-24 in the Bowl, as follows:

Cup

1. Samoa
2. New Zealand
3. Australia
4. South Africa
5. France
6. Fiji

7. Argentina
8. Canada

Plate

9. Korea
10. Hong Kong
11. Tonga
12. Spain
13. Netherlands
14. Papua New Guinea
15. Japan
16. USA

Bowl

17. Morocco
18. Zimbabwe
19. Thailand
20. Singapore
21. Malaysia
22. Chinese Taipei
23. Sri Lanka
24. China

Bowl

Top seed Morocco defeated China (29-5), Malaysia (17-10) and Chinese Taipei 31-14 to win the Bowl, a non-prize money bracket. This was China's first-ever participation in the Hong Kong Sevens, but with rugby becoming an official sport in the 3,000,000-man People's Liberation Army, one wonders how long it will be before Chinese rugby will turn a few heads.

Plate

Korea, after a second bruising battle with the US, cruised through its semifinal match with Spain, 40-0, and then defeated a tough Papua New Guinea side 40-14 to win the Plate. First round Plate upsets included Japan's 27-21 shock of Hong Kong (they had lost to Hong Kong 33-7 in pool play) and Papua NG's 19-12 defeat of Tonga.

CUP Quarterfinals

Canada couldn't carry their excellent pool play into the Cup competition, and Samoa scored yet another impressive victory, 52-7. Fiji and New Zealand both secured relatively close yet secure victories over Australia (21-7) and Argentina (19-7), respectively. Argentina, in particular, continued to impress.

The real barnburner was France-South Africa, which went into double overtime before Vlok Cilliers finally scored the winning try to give South Africa a 24-19 win. By this time, however, neither team was really prepared for a semi-final match with Samoa.

Semifinals

Samoa took advantage of South Africa's exhaustion and racked up 26 unanswered first-half points en route to a 45-7 demolition of last year's finalists. Fiji similarly took a 21 point halftime lead and finished off New Zealand by 24-7.

Championship Final

Despite the All Blacks' absence in the final, the crowd got to cheer the Manu Samoa, the Samoans' version of the Haka. This didn't phase the Fijians, however, who got on the board first with a Marika Vunibaka try. Samoa hung in however, scoring on a break from a scrum. Fiji turned a Samoa turnover into a 14-7 lead at halftime.

After a very tense first two minutes in the 2nd half, a Vunibaka try stretched Fiji's lead to 21-7. Samoa wouldn't die, however, and with two minutes to go, the lead was reduced to 21-19. Ironically, Bruce Rauqe, a player dropped earlier in the year from the Fijian squad and picked up by Australia, was back playing for Fiji as an injury reserve, and scored his 8th try of the tournament (the first seven being for Australia) to ice the game at the nine minute mark.

US Eagles

USA 5,
Korea 10

In a pool game whose watchword was defense, the US lost a heart-breaker to Korea, 10-5. Trouble started on the opening kickoff, when Korea counterattacked and scored 30 seconds into the match. The US got back into the game almost immediately when Malakai Delai's kick ahead was well supported and resulted in a Vaea Anitoni try in the left corner.

More than seven minutes elapsed before Korea scored. The next four minutes were marked by intense play but the US ended up a disappointed second.

USA 0,

New Zealand 45

It's surprising how good efforts can result in 45 point losses, and yet the US did have several good spells against the All Blacks. The firepower of the NZ team, drawn from a squad of 20 full-time professionals, however, was too much for the Eagles. Seven relatively evenly spaced New Zealand tries, including two each by Rua Tipoki and Damian Karauna, spelled defeat.

USA 29,

Singapore 26

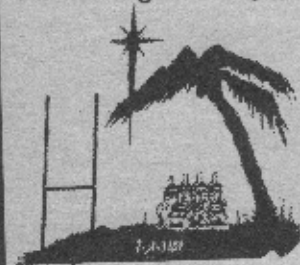
This is one of those games where the score doesn't reflect the final outcome. The objective for the US was to score enough tries to get into the Plate (point differential was only the fourth tie breaker). The US thought the required number would be about six, and after getting quickly ahead (19) four minutes into the game, it seemed that number would be well within their reach. Singapore struck back for a try, however, and the US began pressing.

Trying hard to score, they let Singapore get a couple of cheap tries and made the result look close. Vuka Tau scored the Eagles' first try on a beautifully executed "shield" play, while Malakai Delai, Al Dekin, Willie Mahoni and Vaea Anitoni scored the rest. Dekin and Delai each had a conversion.

In the end, by the bare margin of one try, the US clawed its way back into the Plate and a rematch with Korea.

Plate Quarterfinal:

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USA 19,
Korea 24

This was the heartbreaker of heartbreakers. On the attack, and 40 yards away from redemption in overtime, the US cleared the ball from pressure. Unfortunately, the ball was cleared to a Korean defender lying on the ground sucking wind, and Korea turned a potential US try into the game winner. It was a tragedy because the US had come back from a tough Saturday and outplayed Korea for most of the game.

The US scored on a Willie Mahoni try, but Korea came back with two first half and one second half tries to lead 19-7. The US caught fire in the last three minutes with Vaea Anitoni and Malakai Delai scoring tries to tie the game, 19-19.

Korea got a free kick when the US grub kickoff failed to go 10 meters. The US, however, forced a turnover and was attacking down the left touchline when the clearing pass went astray.

The US Team:

Al Dekin	Unattached
Vaea Anitoni	San Mateo
Mike Coyner	Washington
Malakai Delai	OMBAC
Thad Hill	Fort Worth
Dave Hodges	Llanelli
Willie Mahoni	San Mateo
Rich Matiszik	Milwaukee
Vuka Tau	San Mateo
Eric Tuipulotu	San Mateo
Bill Russell	Coach
John Tyler	Manager
Ed Ayub	Physiotherapist

The leading points scorer was Toa Samania of Samoa, with 71 points (5 tries and 23 conversions). Both in tries and points, this tournament fell far short of a dominant superstar such as Christian Cullen

The US in Hong Kong: (FRONT, L-R) Malakai Delai, Vaea Anitoni, Vuka Tau, Eric Tuipulotu, Thad Hill. (BACK) Ed Ayub, John Tyler, Mike Coyner, Willie Mahoni, Rick Matiszik, Dave Hodges, Al Dekin and Bill Russell.

in 1996 (18 tries and 136 points). Waisale Serevi, with only two tries, was again (fourth time) selected as MVP for his brilliant play making. Samoa led the team scoring with 42 tries, followed by Korea with 30, Fiji with 29, and New Zealand with 26. In total, 388 tries were scored in 57 games, a whopping 6.8 per game (or 1 every 2.1 minutes, a continuing testament to the explosiveness of sevens).

Once again, dancing in the stands to a theme piece was the order of the weekend. Last year it was the Macarena; this year's song to remember was "Tubthumper" by

Chumbawamba.

Why Hong Kong?

Why go to Hong Kong for rugby, one might ask . . . or even, why go to Hong Kong at all?

To the cognoscenti, the answer to the first question is obvious. Or at least it was obvious until 1997. Hong Kong is the home of the single greatest rugby event, and unquestionably one of the most exciting sporting events in the world — the Credit Suisse First Boston Hong Kong Sevens. And just to answer the "is" or "was" question — this year's Hong Kong Sevens was just as great as ever. The rugby was fantastic, the crowds were large and enthusiastic, and the late night streets of Wan Chai (home of Suzie Wong) and Lan Kwai Fong were crowded with partiers — local and tourist — before and after the event. Hong Kong itself remains one of the most exotic places in the world — true to the cliché of "where old and new, East and West meet". The contrasts are endless: financier and Buddhist priest, rugby and Tai Chi, junks and jetfoils, glamour and greenery, skyscraper and temple mingle in happy togetherness.

Despite the "handover" of Hong Kong to China in July 1997, I noticed virtually no changes at all on this, my 10th trip to the Fragrant Harbor. Literally the only changes were a) the Queen's portrait has been removed from the currency (the currency itself, however, remains the Hong Kong Dollar, pegged at 7.7 to the US dollar), and b) the flag, a five petalled white flower ("the forever blooming Bauhinia") on a red background, has replaced one based on the Union Jack. Hong Kong is no longer referred to as a colony or a territory, but a "Special Administrative Region" of China. Hong Kong residents retain Hong Kong passports and residents of mainland China require a visa to enter. "One country, two systems" is working. The very last thing that should deter you from visiting Hong Kong is the handover.

For those thinking of visiting Hong Kong for the Sevens with a non-rugby-loving spouse or friend, I guarantee that the wonders of Hong Kong can keep anyone fascinated for days on end. Whether it be shopping (if you want to shop till you drop, Hong Kong is the place to do it), food (with 13,000 restaurants Hong Kong may have the

highest per capita number of eating places in the world), sightseeing (despite Hong Kong's bustling streets, 80% of the Special Administrative Region is countryside, with ancient temples and walled villages, banana plantations, rural markets, boat-people and fish farms), island hopping (Hong Kong is a land of 236 islands!), or just as an observer of Hong Kong's Chinese heritage, only the lazy can have an excuse for not enjoying their visit.

And, lest I forget: The Sevens and Hong Kong Stadium. Built specially to hold the Sevens, Hong

Kong Stadium is a spectacular site where 40,000 people can get a great view of the action and party at the same time. Designed by the people who built Camden Yard in Baltimore, it is perfectly suited to the event.

Finally, air fares are better than ever (\$700 round trip from NY) — great, in fact. Hong Kong hasn't changed, and The Sevens are unparalleled. . . To paraphrase the favorite Hong Kong expat greeting, "See you at the Sevens!"

US Scoring Summary

	T	C	Pts
Vaea Anitoni	3	0	15
Malakai Delai	2	1	12
Willie Mahoni	2	0	10
Vuka Tau	1	2	9
Al Dekin	1	1	7
Total	9	4	53

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Leading Try Scorers

	Tries	Con	Points
Aliaoa Samania, Samoa	11	1	57
Toala Filipo, Samoa	8	0	40
Bruce Rauqe, Australia	8	0	40
Marika Vunibaka, Fiji	8	0	40
Kwak Chul-Woong, Korea	7	0	35
Semo Sititi, Samoa	7	0	35
Vlok Cilliers, South Africa	6	11	52
Rick Nalutu, Australia	6	1	32
Mohamed Karim El Oula, Mor.	6	0	30
Daniel Villen, Argentina	6	0	30

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