



Portfolio / Writing Sample

Travel writing piece

There is a certain atmosphere in the air when the SP Hunters play a game at their home stadium in Port Moresby. It translates into slight tension that fills the expatriates driving air conditioned four wheel drives into the stadium grounds, passing crowds cooking 'lamb flaps' and selling warm cans of soft drink. It can be felt in the buzz in the conversations among spectators before the team comes out onto the field, the slight edge in the raucous laughter and chatter that is so much a part of any Papua New Guinean experience.

Rugby League is almost a religion in the most populous nation in the Pacific. Even weeks after their beloved Queensland lost the State of Origin, taxis and cars on the gritty roads were still bedecked in maroon, increasingly tattered flags waving in the wind as they weave through the crammed traffic. Every evening, the ovals and fields of the city, normally little more than sand and hard rocks, fill with teams of young men eager to show off their skills. Cars pile up off the road, children run laughing, food sizzles on open flames, as men play rough games against each other, dust flying in their wake and covering their uniforms. Rugby League in PNG is the sport that brings people together, bonds them in one united front in a way that is truly difficult to achieve in a country so dominated by tribal bonds and concept of family before all else. It is also, for a lucky few in the big time, a chance to escape their crushing poverty and leave their homes for a better life.

However, Rugby League is also associated with, unfortunately, an excessively violent and negative kind of masculinity that is harmful for women. Australia was rocked by scandals over the last few years of rugby players behaving in ways that we cannot, and should not, tolerate any longer. But in Papua New Guinea, such scandals are drowned beneath the daily weight of massive social and cultural violence and corruption. The Australian Government, and others, use Rugby League games and players to share more healthy messages about women's rights and ending violence against them, but it is a long term generational issue that is still tragically evident in every day life.

All of these thoughts were playing in my mind when the opportunity came up to watch the nation's beloved Hunters play the Radcliffe Dolphins. At only four months in Port Moresby, my experience has been limited to watching a hard fought loss from the balcony of Port Moresby's most notorious and biggest nightclub, a huge screen on its back wall that drew every eye in the room. So I could hardly say no. But these same thoughts played in my mind again and again as I watched the crowd and the game.



As I walked to my seat, the crowd was already boisterous and mingling as they streamed to their seats. Some people had clearly started their celebrations earlier than the others, as a few men (again, always men) were stumbling worse for wear in gutters, sometimes yelling or cursing incoherently. I saw mothers pull their children just a little closer as they walked past.

Everyone there was united by a desire to watch the Hunters beat the Dolphins, but, as the game progressed, it became clear that the game was not going to go their way. Ten minutes before the end, when all hope was dashed, the crowds in the stalls started to trickle away, lured by the promise of a bit of shade rather than watching their team take another defeat. Those dedicated fans had been sitting in the sun for hours, some having arrived a full two hours before the main event even began to watch the local match that took place earlier. United in a common interest and purpose, everyone, locals and expatriates alike, chatted freely and shared commiserations and celebrations as the Hunters battled their way through the game, bonding in that brief sweaty moment over a shared love of their team, or a shared frustration when one more try slipped past our defenders.

Alas, the Dolphins played the better game on the day, and the Hunters went home disappointed. But as the game ended, and the players gave their interviews, a small group of men emerged from the players entrance and started to painstakingly set up what would become an entry corridor for the next team to play. The conveyor belt of rugby games on a Sunday afternoon. And as we made our way back to my car, to where it had been watched over by zealous guards behind high fences, remembering that buzz and vibrant atmosphere, the sun on the green grass and blue sky, I thought, *how can I ever explain this back home?*