

The Four Hundred Steps to Gold.

The village of Baba is on the Island of Ovalau -Fiji, situated on top of the mountain looking over the town of Levuka. Levuka was at one time the old capital of Fiji. The mountain where the village is located is extraordinarily steep and there are no roads at all to reach the village of Baba. **The only way up is to climb 400 steps.** And to do this every day is an ultimate challenge. To do shopping, to go to school, to visit friends, or to get medical service, you need to go down 400 steps and then go back up again. This is a daily routine for the people of Baba.

In 2002, one of the top lifters in Fiji, Peni Tawai, a school teacher himself, decided to build a small gym on top of the mountain, which he called the **'Jungle Gym'**. And in the last 15 years, hundreds of young students after school would climb the 400 steps every afternoon, train and then go back down again.



The ultimate challenge- the 400 steps to the jungle gym.



The mountain where the village is situated



The Jungle Gym in Baba



2012 and 2016 Olympic representative Manueli Tulo



The gym destroyed after cyclone Winston. devastated Levuka

During 2002, Paul Coffa also established the Oceania Weightlifting Institute in Sigatoka, Fiji. Most of the best lifters of Fiji, like Della Shaw, Joe Vueti, Rupeni Varea, Ivy Shaw, Kesa Tawai and others at that time took advantage of training at the institute and continued with the institute, even when the institute moved to Samoa and then to New Caledonia - they moved with the Institute. Those lifters competed at Commonwealth Games and quite a few at the Olympic Games. Della Shaw -Elder become one the best female lifter in the Oceania region and later become a Category One International Technical Official and presently is the 1st Vice President of Weightlifting Fiji.

Joe Vueti on the other hand, after competing at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne and 2008 Beijing Olympics retired as a competitor and returned to his village. Here he continued with coaching at the 'Jungle Gym', and together with Peni Tawai a tremendous combination was established. Peni as a school teacher, identifying the students who had talent and then sending them up to the 'Jungle Gym', where Joe and Peni himself would coach the kids.

In 2014 whilst running the OTIP program (Oceania Talent Identification Program) for all the students in Levuka, Peni discovered a young 14 year old girl by the name of Eileen Cikamatana. For the next two years she climbed up and down those 400 steps day in and day out and was coached by Joe. By this time, Joe had become the national coach of Fiji.

Eileen's talent was so obvious, that in January 2016, Joe Vueti asked Paul Coffa if he would accept her at the Oceania Weightlifting Institute in New Caledonia. So with the assistance of Weightlifting Fiji, Eileen moved to the institute. By October 2016, she became the gold medallist at the World Youth Championships in the clean and jerk. In 2017 she won gold at the Commonwealth Championships, gold at the Oceania Championships, silver medal at the World Junior Championships and gold at the Pacific Mini Games. However, her best came in Ashgabat, during the Asian Indoor Martial Art Games, Eileen won gold creating 12 new Oceania and Commonwealth records in the process.



Eileen Cikamatana, clean & jerk 141Kg at the 2017 Commonwealth Championships at the Gold Coast, setting a new Oceania and Commonwealth records.

Today, at the age of 18, her sight is firmly set on the Gold Coast. She wants nothing but the Gold Medal. After that, her sight is set to break the world junior clean & jerk record held by the Russian superstar and many times world champion Tatianna Kashirina.

Another gold medallist in the making is Apolonia Vaivai, and again another product of the ‘Jungle Gym’. Apolonia spent many years at the Oceania institute. She won a bronze medal at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games in the 75kg category. She made the Rio Olympic Games where she finished 11th in the 69Kg category. Competing at the 2017 Commonwealth Championships last year at the Gold Coast, she produced her best ever performance, lifting a total of 225kg and placing first in the Commonwealth rankings. She lifted well again in Ashgabat last September during the Asian Indoor Martial Art Games, winning a silver medal. She too, has her sight set firmly on the gold medal at the Gold Coast.



Apolonia Vaivai eyes are set on Gold at the Gold Coast next month. She ranks first in her category in the Commonwealth

The Fijian team is presently at the Oceania Weightlifting Institute, training in preparation for the Commonwealth Games. Coach, Joe Vueti, does not believe that the two girls are the only ones in line for medals. In the team, you have dual Olympic Games representative and Commonwealth Games representative, Manueli Tulo. Also their 85kg category, teenager, Taniela Rainibogi, and in the 62kg category, young Poama Qaqa, all of them medal chances.

Time will tell, just how successful Fiji will be in two and half weeks time.



Fiji team- from left Joe Vueti -Coach, Eileen Cikamatana, Apolonia Vaivai, Manueli Tulo, Poama Qaqa and Taniela Rainibogi



Della Shaw -Elder Category One International technical official will referee at the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games.