

## **New format the key to a brighter future for Pacific hockey?**

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**By Richard Ewart in Port Moresby**

There is a new sport in town at the Pacific Games in Papua New Guinea – after rugby sevens, Twenty20 cricket and rugby league nines, now comes hockey fives.

And those charged with running the sport in the Pacific say it could be the saviour of game.

Hockey has only featured in the Pacific Games on three previous occasions, and until Port Moresby there has never been a tournament for both men and women. The reasons for that are straightforward: hockey has never been a heavy hitter on the sporting scene in the region.

It is expensive to take an 18 player squad to compete in an international tournament and most Pacific countries cannot afford to do it.

In recent times, Fiji's men's and women's teams qualified to play in the next stage of the World League, but neither side went because there was no money to send them. But with five-a-side hockey the picture is very different. Half the number of players are required, so naturally costs are significantly reduced as well.

Hence five teams have made it to PNG and the hope is more will follow at future Pacific Games.

Fiji's team manager Senimili Rose said hockey fives make perfect sense. "We're just happy to be involved instead of being left out of the Games as has so often been the case in the past," she said. "This new format makes it more affordable in terms of preparations, getting athletes to the competition, getting proper uniforms. "It just makes things easier on people's pockets because we all struggle financially."

For the team from Vanuatu to suggest that getting to Port Moresby was a struggle would be an understatement. In the wake of Cyclone Pam, their hockey facilities were devastated and women's team captain Mary Siro said the team had been doing it tough. "The cyclone destroyed our field so our training was badly disrupted. We had to be bussed as a team to a temporary base, and it hit our finances hard," Ms Siro said. "We had only two months to prepare for the Pacific Games because the repairs to our field will be expensive and will take a long time."

But all the teams at the hockey fives tournament are learning to adapt to the new format, so Vanuatu have not entirely been left behind.

The Fiji squad may have an edge, having played five-a-side hockey in the past, but only indoors, not outdoors on the brand new all-weather surface in PNG.

**With just a goalkeeper and four outfield players on each team, hockey fives is fast, near enough non-stop and you can shoot from anywhere.**

Matches are played over three 12-minute periods (with just a couple of two-minute breaks), and boards all around the field mean the ball is constantly in play. Good crowds have turned up to get a first glimpse of hockey fives and they seem to like what they see.

PNG women's coach Ossie Kekesan says his players have really taken to this new form of the game. "It's a new concept to us and we only started playing last year, before our new centre was ready. But the girls have picked it up very quickly, and they love it, once they start playing, they don't want to stop," he said.

When the Pacific Games are over Kekesan wants hockey officials to keep the momentum going. "This concept I think can be great driver for hockey in the Pacific and we should have an annual tournament and involve as many Pacific islands as possible," he said.

"It's ideal for schools and getting kids involved. We'd like everybody to get behind us, especially our federations. That would be great."

But more immediately there are Pacific Games gold medals to be won, and the hockey medals will be the last to be decided on the final day of the Games on Saturday. So expect big crowds because every medal counts and for the host nation in particular, as PNG strives to take the Pacific Games crown away from New Caledonia.