

The KING'S KNEE

A SAM CALDER STORY



BRIAN MINIKIN

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This short story is the second one in the Sam Calder series. They are fictional stories based on the life and times of Sam Calder, a rather goofy and naïve Australian who was lucky enough to spend time working in sport development throughout the countries of Oceania. Any reference to a specific person or their story is purely coincidental.

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The first words Sam Calder ever spoke in the presence of a king were not suitable for a palace.

In his defence, he did not know the King was there.

He was kneeling on the concrete floor of a royal residence on the far side of the island, sweating through his shirt, trying to persuade a stubborn bolt to accept the authority of a spanner. Around him lay the half-assembled bones of a weight-training machine: steel arms, cables, pulleys, padded seats, washers, nuts, bolts, and one instruction manual that had already begun to lose its moral influence.

The bolt would not turn.

Sam leaned harder.

The spanner slipped.

His thumb took the full force of the mistake.

The word that followed was short, loud, Australian, and completely unfit for use in the presence of monarchy.

He dropped the spanner, clutched his hand, turned on his knees, and opened his eyes to find himself staring at the largest knee he had ever seen.

For a moment, that was all his mind could manage.

A knee.



A vast brown knee, smooth and solid and impossibly close, belonging to a man seated directly behind him. The knee was almost at the level of Sam's face. It seemed less like a body part than a geological feature.

Slowly, with the pain in his thumb pulsing in time with his heartbeat, Sam

looked up.

His Majesty King Tafa of Lotoa looked down at him.

The King was enormous. He wasn't merely tall, nor was he merely broad, but built on a scale that made ordinary chairs look temporary. In fact, many of his chairs had been specially made to accommodate him. Even at an advanced age, he carried traces of the athlete he had once been: the heavy shoulders, the large hands, the calm presence of a man accustomed to inhabiting space without asking permission.

Sam froze.

The technicians froze.

The guards froze less visibly, but they froze too.

By then Sam had been in Lotoa long enough to understand that the King was not simply a public figure. In this small Polynesian kingdom, monarchy was woven into family, church, ceremony, history, and national pride. Respect for the King was not theatrical. It was part of the way people organised the world.

One did not casually stare at him.

One did not swear in front of him.

One did not roll around on the floor at his feet clutching an injured thumb.

One certainly did not do all three in the same moment.

Sam lowered his head so quickly that he almost struck it against the royal knee.

“Your Majesty,” he said. “I am terribly sorry.”

A deep voice answered in the most elegant English Sam had ever heard.

“Well,” said the King, “that must have hurt.”

There are moments in life when embarrassment becomes so complete that it almost turns into peace. Sam had reached one of them. There was no recovery available. There was no elegant way back to dignity. He had met the King from the floor, by way of pain and profanity, and all that remained was honesty.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he said. “It did. But I am very sorry for my language.”

“Never mind the language,” said the King. “Sit there a moment and rest your hand. Then perhaps you can tell me what progress you are making.”

That was how Sam Calder’s first royal audience began.

There was no bow in a reception room, no formal introduction, no careful exchange of titles. It began beside a half-built exercise machine, with Sam sitting on the floor next to the King of Lotoa, holding his thumb and wondering whether there were any circumstances under which he might disappear into the carpet.

The machine had not been Sam’s responsibility in the first place, which naturally meant he had taken responsibility for it.

He had arrived in the kingdom some months earlier as a young fitness adviser attached to the national sports council. His task, at least on paper, was to help prepare national teams for regional competition. In reality, it meant doing whatever needed doing: testing athletes, writing programmes, leading warm-ups, fixing equipment, teaching coaches, carrying boxes, explaining stretching, calming federation presidents, and trying to make one set of facilities serve twenty different sports.

Lotoa was a country of generous people, deep faith, strong bodies, formal manners, and extraordinary athletes. Sam had never seen such natural strength. He had also never seen so many gifted players carrying the future consequences of too much food, too little structured exercise, and a culture where love, celebration, status, and hospitality often arrived on a very large plate.

He was young enough to have strong opinions about this.

He believed the country needed a stronger fitness culture. He believed athletes needed regular strength work. He believed older people could improve their health through controlled exercise. He believed the new fitness centre, funded with royal support and intended for wider community use, might become a symbol of change.

He also believed, with the innocence of the energetic, that when boxes arrived, they should be opened.

So he opened them.

No one had told him that an overseas crew was coming to assemble the equipment. No one had told the overseas crew that Sam Calder existed. This was not unusual in Lotoa, where information often travelled through family, office, church, sport, and government in circles of its own choosing, arriving only when it felt ready.

The crates sat in the national fitness centre for two days.

Sam asked questions. No one knew. Someone thought maybe the equipment belonged to the sports

council. Someone else thought maybe the palace had arranged it. Someone promised to check. No one came back.

On the third day, Sam lost patience.

By mid-morning, he had unpacked most of the equipment and spread the pieces across the floor according to the diagrams in the manual. By lunchtime, he had assembled the first bench. By mid-afternoon, he had completed two stations, one rack, and enough of a cable machine to make himself believe he had a future in engineering.

He was admiring his work when four overseas technicians arrived.

They stood in the doorway wearing tool belts and expressions of professional confusion.

Sam wiped his hands on his shorts.

“Morning,” he said.

The oldest technician looked past him at the assembled machines.

“You did this?”

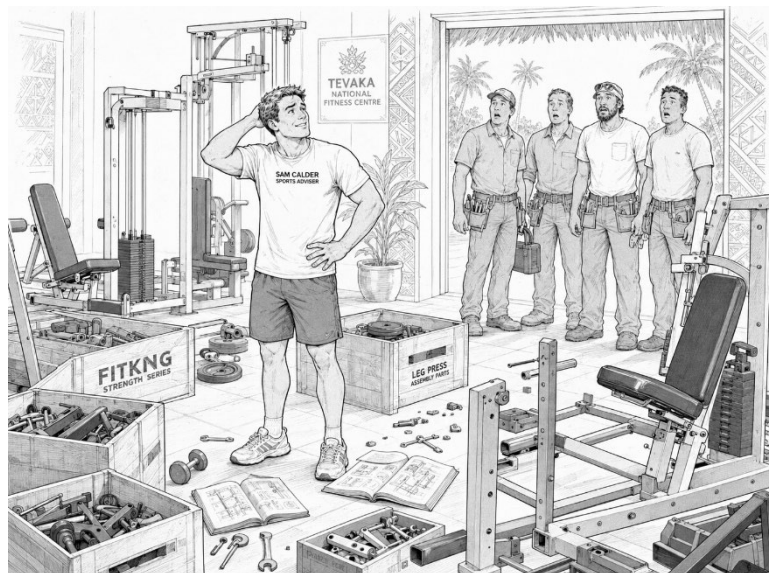
“Yes.”

“You were told to?”

“No.”

The technician considered this.

Sam prepared himself for anger. He imagined liability warnings, warranty issues, procedural complaints, and the kind of technical disapproval only men with tool belts can properly deliver.



Instead, the technician laughed.

“Well,” he said, “let’s hope you can read better than most of our apprentices.”

They checked his work. Some of it was correct. Some of it was nearly correct. Some of it, they agreed, had been assembled with enthusiasm rather than understanding. By the end of the day, they had accepted him as an unpaid assistant. By the second day, they were calling him “Coach.” By the third, they invited him to help install a multi-station machine at the King’s coastal residence.

Sam tried not to look too pleased.

He had never met a king.

He had grown up with a distant reverence for royalty, the kind inherited without much examination by children raised under old flags, coins, portraits, and solemn television broadcasts. Kings and queens belonged to ceremonies. They appeared on stamps. They opened parliaments. They waved from balconies. They did not, in Sam’s imagination, sit in gymnasiums, ask about repetitions, or train with weights.

King Tafa was different.

By then, Sam knew the outline of the story. His Majesty had been a great athlete in his youth, a powerful man whose physical presence had become part of national memory. In later life he had taken his health seriously. He exercised regularly, lost weight, and spoke often about the need for his people to care for their bodies.

This impressed Sam.

It also made him nervous.

The coastal residence was quieter than he expected. There were palms, clipped lawns, white walls, shaded verandas, and a view of the reef bright enough to distract a man from the proper

arrangement of washers. Guards moved about with soft efficiency. Household staff appeared and vanished. The technicians behaved as men behave when working somewhere important: loudly at first, then gradually quieter.

Sam was assigned one side of the multi-station.

He concentrated fiercely.

The machine was complex, and he did not want to make a fool of himself in front of the technicians, let alone in a royal residence. He sorted bolts by length. He checked the diagrams twice. He tightened frame sections, attached guide rods, fitted plates, and tried not to think about the possibility of the King appearing.

Then, of course, the King appeared.

Sam did not notice.

He was half turned away, head down, one knee on the floor, wrestling with the bolt that would shortly introduce him to history. King Tafa entered without fuss and sat behind him. There was no announcement, no trumpet, no court official to rescue Sam from ignorance.

The King simply arrived.

Then the spanner slipped.

Then Sam swore.

Then he met the knee.

For the rest of his life, whenever Sam heard people speak of royal audiences, he thought first of pain, steel, sweat, and the absurd intimacy of looking up from the floor at a sovereign who was trying not to smile.

“Tell me,” The King said, after Sam had recovered enough to speak, “what is this machine supposed to do?”

Sam explained, clumsily at first. Then, as his thumb stopped shouting at him, he began to find his way.

He spoke about resistance, range of movement, progressive loading, and the value of strength training for older adults. He explained that muscle loss was not simply a matter of age, that careful training could improve balance, protect joints, support independence, and make walking, rising, lifting, and daily life easier.

The King listened with serious attention.

This surprised Sam. He had expected politeness. He had not expected technical curiosity.

The King asked about repetitions.

Sam answered.

The King asked about breathing.

Sam answered.

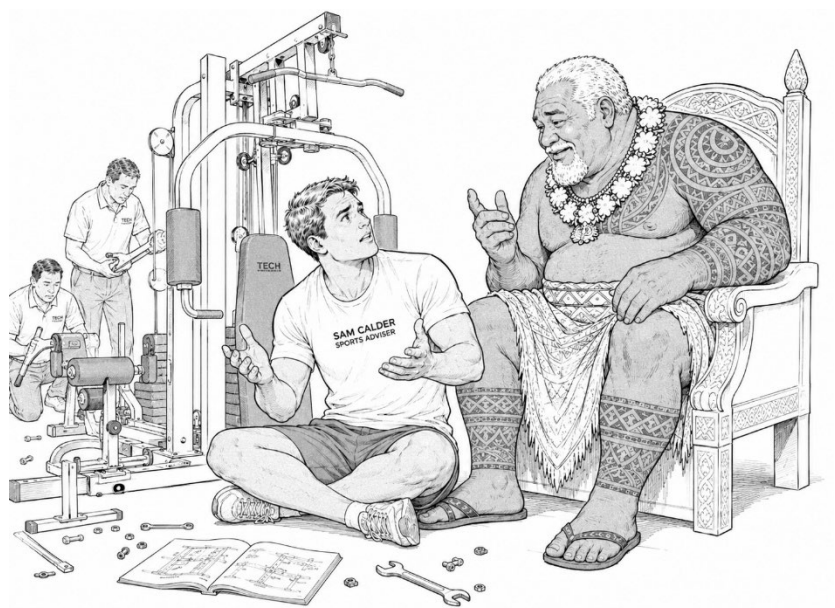
The King asked whether heavy training was dangerous for older people.

Sam said it could be, if done foolishly, but that inactivity was often more dangerous.

The King nodded.

“Many of my people are strong,” he said, “but strength and health are not always the same thing.”

Sam looked at him.



It was exactly the kind of sentence a young adviser might have used in a report after three months of consultation, believing he had discovered something. The King had said it without paper, without jargon, without needing to prove that the thought belonged to him.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Sam said. “That is exactly right.”

The King asked about athletes next. Then diet. Then walking. Then cycling. Then whether young men who could lift heavy things were always fit. Then whether women should train with weights. Then knees, backs, balance, and the difficulty of changing habits in a country where celebration, family, respect, church, and food were intricately woven together.

Sam forgot, for a while, to be embarrassed.

He found himself speaking not to a symbol, but to a man of intelligence, curiosity, discipline, and humour. The King was proud of his people, but not blind to the challenges they faced. He was interested in fitness not as a foreign programme, but as a matter of dignity, example, and national wellbeing.

The King knew more than Sam expected.

More importantly, he understood that health was not merely physical. It was cultural. It involved status, food, family, church, pride, shame, and example.

Sam had come to Lotoa thinking he would help athletes train better.

Sitting on the floor beside the King, he began to see that bodies belonged to societies before they belonged to programmes.

The technicians worked around them, occasionally glancing over. The guards stood nearby, unreadable. Sam’s thumb throbbed. The King continued asking questions.

It was one of the strangest conversations of Sam’s life. It was also one of the best.

He never had another quite like it. Later, when he saw the King, the encounters were shorter, shaped by protocol and circumstance. A greeting. A few words. A question about training. A nod of recognition. But something had been established on the floor beside that machine.

It wasn't friendship, that would be too presumptuous.

Permission, perhaps.

The practical value of that permission appeared at the national track.

Several evenings a week, His Majesty came to exercise. He would ride his bicycle around the track at a steady, deliberate pace, accompanied by soldiers who ran or moved beside him with the solemn endurance of men assigned to guard both a person and an institution.

Before Sam's unfortunate introduction, the rule had been clear.

When the King used the track, everyone else stopped.

Athletes moved aside. Training paused. Coaches waited. The track became royal space.

To an outsider, this might have looked inefficient. To Lotoans, it was respect. The King was not merely another person using public facilities. His presence changed the meaning of the place. Space bent around him, because the culture required it.

Sam understood the respect behind it.

He also understood what it cost.

The middle-distance runners lost rhythm. The sprinters cooled down. The young athletes stood at the edge watching the King circle the track, close to power but excluded from movement.

One evening, after the King had begun his laps, Sam stood with the athletics squad near the infield. They were restless, sweating, eager, and disappointed. The session had been going well. Stopping

felt like a small defeat.

The King rode past once.

Then again.

On the next lap, he looked toward Sam.

It was not much of a look. But Sam had spent enough time around athletes, coaches, chiefs, presidents, pastors, and quiet island officials to recognise invitation when it came without words.

He stepped closer as the King approached.

“Your Majesty,” he said carefully, “would it disturb you if the distance runners continued behind you?”

The guards watched him.

The athletes watched him.

The King slowed slightly.

“Behind me?” he asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Respectfully. They would keep distance.”

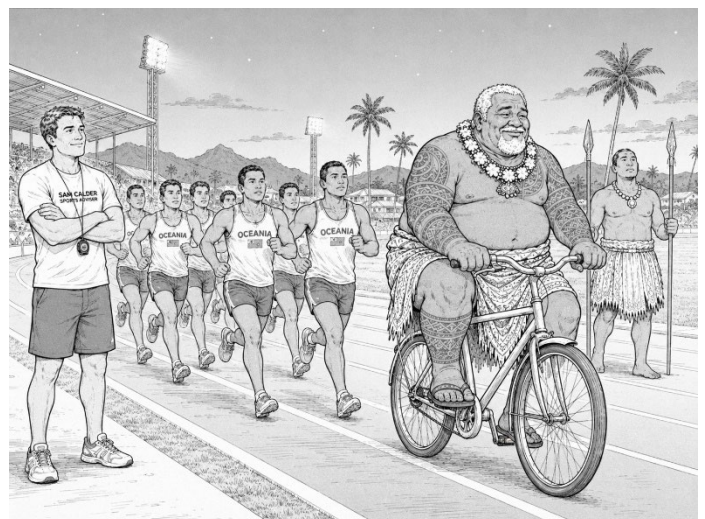
The King looked at the runners. Young men and women stood straighter under his gaze.

“They will run?” he asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good,” said the King. “Let them run.”

Run they did. At first timidly, uncertain of the invisible line between honour and offence. Then more freely. They formed behind the King’s



bicycle, not too close, not too wide, matching the rhythm of the royal circuit. The guards adjusted. The coaches watched. The track, which had been divided by status, began to move as one.

The athletes loved it.

They did not say much at first. Lotoans often carried pride quietly. But Sam saw it in their faces. They were not merely sharing a track. They were running with their King. Not beside him, not ahead of him, not as equals in any formal sense, but included in his discipline, allowed to belong to the same act of effort.

The King seemed to enjoy it too.

He rode steadily, lap after lap, holding his pace while the runners followed behind him. The soldiers kept their positions. The athletes found their rhythm. The evening light lowered over the track, and for a while the whole country seemed to fit inside that simple procession: King, guards, athletes, coach, effort, respect, breath.

In the weeks that followed, it became normal. When His Majesty rode, the runners could continue behind him. The athletes trained harder on those evenings. They joked less. Their posture changed. A national team session became, for a while, something larger than training.

Sam did not exaggerate his role in this. He had asked one question. The King had made one generous decision. The athletes had done the rest.

Still, he understood that the question would have been harder to ask if he had not first sat on the floor with a damaged thumb discussing weight training for seniors.

That was how things often worked in the Pacific. Access did not always come through systems. Sometimes it came through embarrassment, accident, patience, respect, and the strange mercy of being seen at your least impressive moment.

Years later, Sam would remember many things about Lotoa: the heat rising from the track, the

strength of the athletes, the sound of church singing across the town, the size of meals placed before him, the formality of public events, the laughter behind them, and the way protocol could both protect and imprison people.

But he remembered the knee most clearly.

The King's knee had been his first lesson in Lotoan power. Not because it was royal, though it certainly was. Not because it was large, though it was enormous. But because it had brought Sam down to the only position from which he could learn anything useful.

Low.

Embarrassed.

Honest.

Human.

He had arrived in Lotoa with theories and experience about fitness, health, national teams, and the need for people to change. Some of those theories were sound. Many were useful. But theories alone could not understand the culture of a kingdom.

A kingdom was not a programme.

A king was not only a symbol.

A track was not just a place to run.

A body was not just a machine.

Most of all a young adviser with a spanner in his hand was not nearly as clever as he believed, especially when the bolt refused, the thumb protested, and history sat quietly behind him waiting to see what word he would use.

Sam never again trusted a machine assembled from a manual.

He never again assumed that protocol revealed the whole person.

And he never forgot that the first kindness he received from a king came after the worst first impression he could possibly have made.

“Well,” His Majesty had said, “that must have hurt.”

It had, but through that pain he had learned so much more.

About the Author



Brian Minikin graduated with Honours in Physical Education from the University of Western Australia at a time when there was little work in the field of sport or sports science outside of the school system or Universities. Consequently he chased a career that saw him at the University of Adelaide, The Federal Department of Finance in Canberra, the Department of Sport and Recreation, The Australian Institute of Sport, The Tasmanian Institute of Sport, The Australian Sports Commission, the Tonga National Olympic Committee, the Oceania National Olympic Committees before moving onto to academic positions at the University of Kent, the University of Stirling and Chengdu University.

He spent many years coaching and training athletes across a number of different sports including a period spanning 30 years working or volunteering in sport across all of its aspects throughout the Pacific Region.