

Sam Felt Fine



A Sam Calder Story

KOROLEVU
LODGE

NO ENTRY
AFTER DARK

PRIVATE
PROPERTY

VILLAGE
VOLLEYBALL

BRIAN MINIKIN

Sam Felt Fine

By Brian Minikin

This short story is the fourth one in the Sam Calder series.

A lesson in humility through Gravity

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.

No part of this book may be sold, altered, or republished without written permission from the author.

Sam Calder had never been drunk.

This was not the same thing as being sensible. It simply meant that alcohol had never quite caught him at the right angle.

He was not much of a drinking man. He did not dislike beer exactly, but he had never understood why some men treated it as both a hobby and a necessity. At university and in his early coaching life, he had been more interested in volleyball, training, dancing badly or well depending on the company, and trying not to make a fool of himself around women, a project at which he enjoyed only mixed success.

At his twenty-first birthday, he had drunk more than he should have. People told him this afterwards, as if he might not know. But he remembered everything clearly. He had become louder, more cheerful, and more willing to discuss subjects he knew nothing about, which was unfortunate but not unusual for men turning twenty-one. He had not suffered the usual symptoms like falling over or vomiting into a garden. He had not woken in possession of a traffic cone or a goat. By the standards of young Australian manhood, he had barely participated.

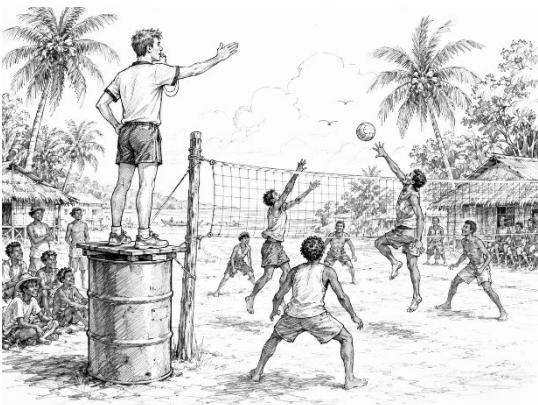
This led him to a dangerous conclusion. He assumed that he either had a good liver or a mysterious superpower that enabled him to clear alcohol quickly.

It was the sort of conclusion young men enjoy because it sounds like biology but is really vanity in a lab coat. Sam decided that, on the rare occasions when he drank too much, his body processed alcohol with unusual efficiency. Other men collapsed, sang, wept, fought, forgot their names, or attempted philosophy. Sam remained aware of his surroundings.

Sam, he believed, could handle himself.

The Pacific, as usual, had other plans.

He was twenty-six when he found himself in the northern islands of Solomona, refereeing a local outdoor volleyball tournament in a town called Galoa. The town sat between sea, jungle, and heat, which is to say it sat exactly where heat preferred to organise itself. An imposing volcano dominated the skyline and thankfully it imposed itself quietly.



The tournament court had been marked out on hard ground in the open air. The referee stand was a forty-four-gallon metal drum with a board across the top, an arrangement that had the advantage of height and the disadvantage of turning slowly into cookware under the sun.

Sam climbed onto it early in the morning.

By midday, he suspected he was being roasted.

By mid-afternoon, he believed that he had become part of the drum.

Still, duty was duty. Sam was very good at duty, especially when duty allowed him to ignore common sense. He refereed match after match, whistle in mouth, cap pulled low, shirt sticking to him, skin salted with sweat, legs heating through the metal beneath him.

He drank water when he remembered. He covered up when he could. He told himself he was managing the conditions.

He was not managing the conditions. He was being slowly dried like fish stranded on a beach from

which, the tide had receded too quickly.

The tournament was lively, competitive, and only occasionally obedient to the rules. Many of the teams came from an atoll community whose families had been relocated to the area during colonial times. They played with fierce pride, quick humour, and a splendid willingness to argue close line calls from distances at which no human being could possibly have seen them.

Sam enjoyed them enormously.

They enjoyed testing him.

“Referee!” one player shouted after a disputed touch.

“Yes?”

“You sure?”

“No,” Sam said. “But my whistle is louder than you.”

This was accepted as a fair principle of tournament administration.

The president of the national volleyball federation was also there. Dr Tavo was one of those Pacific men who could be brilliant without needing to look important. In his professional life he was a respected doctor with a deep knowledge of tropical diseases. Around volleyball, however, he wore old shorts, older T-shirts, and the expression of a man who had arranged chaos so many times that he now considered it a recreational activity. Something that he clearly enjoyed doing.

He was intelligent, warm, playful, and almost impossible not to like.

After the final match of the day, Dr Tavo clapped Sam on the shoulder.

“You come tonight,” he said.

“Where?”

“Feast.”

Sam had learned by then that the word “feast” in the Pacific was not a metaphor. It did not mean a plate of food. It meant an event, an obligation, a community statement, a logistical achievement, and possibly a test of character.

“Who’s going?”

“Officials. Referees. Team people. Village is preparing.”

“Players too?”

Dr Tavo shook his head with the solemnity of a man imposing civilisation on a dangerous species.

“No alcohol for players tonight.”

This was because the previous evening had ended with a brawl between young men who had found too much beer, too little supervision, and several historic grievances.

“Good idea,” Sam said.

“Yes,” said Dr Tavo. “Very good idea.”

Then he grinned.

“Does not apply to us.”

The feast was held in the village under a wide night sky. There were lanterns, cooking fires, children running in and out of shadows, women carrying food, men laughing in groups, and the steady background noise of a community that had decided the day was worth ending properly.

Food appeared in quantities that suggested either great generosity or a serious misunderstanding of the number of guests. There was fish, taro, rice, coconut, greens, chicken, breadfruit, things wrapped in leaves, things cooked in the earth, things Sam could identify, and things he decided not to ask about because they were delicious so why spoil it.

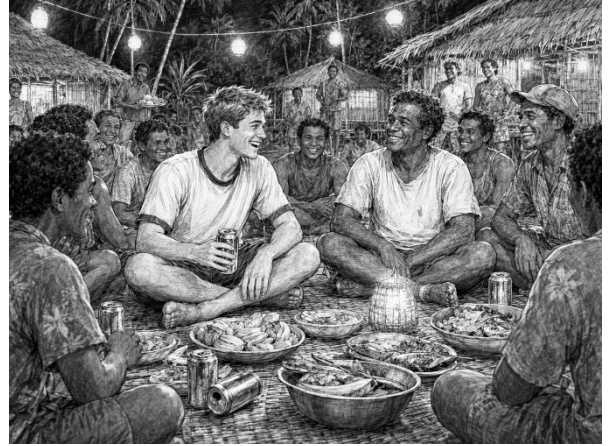
He sat with Dr Tavo, the other referees, and several tournament officials. Stories began. Jokes followed. Then stories about the jokes. Then jokes about the people who had told the stories badly. Laughter rolled through the group in waves.

Someone placed a cold beer beside Sam.

He drank it slowly.

Someone placed another beside him.

He drank that slowly too.



The evening was warm. The food was good. The company was generous. Sam had spent the whole day on a metal drum under a tropical sun and now sat in the soft dark with salt on his skin, food in his stomach, and laughter all around him.

It was, he thought, perfect.

He felt fine.

The beer kept arriving. Sam did not notice this as a process. He noticed it only as a series of small acts of hospitality. A can appeared near his hand. He drank some. Conversation moved. Someone told a story. Someone laughed. Another can appeared. It would have been rude, he thought, to refuse.

This was not true. It would have been sensible to refuse given his state of dehydration, but the alcohol certainly had the desired effect of numbing the pain of the sunburn on the back of his neck.

Sam had not yet learned that hospitality can be survived without surrendering completely to it and immersed himself in the experience before him.

As the night deepened, he became more talkative. This surprised no one except Sam, who believed he was contributing fresh insights into volleyball, life, and the nature of refereeing. He may, in fact, have explained the difference between blocking and interfering three times to the same man, who nodded each time with increasing delight.

Dr Tavo watched him with medical interest.

“You all right, Coach?”

“Perfect,” Sam said.

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

Sam was just fine.

He could hear. He could see. He could speak. He knew where he was. He knew who he was. He knew, broadly speaking, which island he was on. These seemed like solid indicators.

At last, near midnight, it was time to leave. Sam stood carefully, not because he needed to, but because some instinct, older than reason, had suggested that sudden movement might produce information he did not wish to receive.

He looked down.

At his feet lay empty beer cans.

A great many empty beer cans.

Sam counted them.

Then he counted them again, because the first number seemed politically impossible.

Twenty.

This could not be right.

He looked at the cans, then at the men around him, then back at the cans. Surely some belonged to others. Surely, they had rolled there from elsewhere. Surely the village had a localised beer-can migration pattern that science had not yet studied.

He had not paid for any of them either, which troubled him more than the number.

Very un-Australian, he thought.

He considered apologising, but the sentence seemed too complicated to begin.

Dr Tavo placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Come, Coach. We take you back.”

“I’m fine,” Sam said.

“Yes,” said Dr Tavo. “I can see that,” he offered with a huge grin and a giggle.

Four men joined them in an old jeep. The road to the hotel was a coral track filled with holes, ridges, puddles, loose stones, and the remains of several previous decisions. The headlights were weak, the night was black, and the jeep moved with the confidence of a machine that had long ago stopped expecting comfort from the world.

There was singing.

There was laughter.

There was a great deal of bouncing.

Sam sat in the back, holding onto whatever part of the jeep seemed least likely to detach, and felt the night move around him. The smell of salt, earth, smoke, leaves, beer, sweat, and tropical flowers entered him in one great intoxicating mixture.

It was not the alcohol, he decided. It was the tropics.

He felt just fine.

When they reached the hotel compound, the gate was locked.

This surprised everyone except the gate, which appeared entirely committed to its position. Inside

the compound, the buildings were dark. The staff had disappeared. The security guard did not respond to calls, whistles, horn blasts, shouted greetings, or several helpful suggestions concerning his professional responsibilities.

"He sleeping," one of the men said.

Dr Tavo sighed.

Sam examined the gate.

It was about the height of a volleyball net.

This was important because Sam understood volleyball nets. Volleyball nets were not obstacles. They were invitations for athletic confidence.

"No problem," he said.

Dr Tavo looked at him.

"Maybe we find someone."

"No, no," Sam said. "Easy."

He approached the gate with the dignity of a man about to make a poor decision in public.

The others watched.

He climbed.

To his credit, the climbing went well. His hands found the bars. His feet followed. He reached the top, balanced there, and turned to wave good night.

The men waved back.

The jeep began to reverse.

Sam looked down into the compound.

He could not see the ground.

This should have caused concern.

Instead, he reasoned with the calm logic available only to the dehydrated and drunk that the ground was definitely there. It had been there earlier and it was unlikely to have moved. The darkness was merely withholding visual confirmation.

Easy peasy, he thought.

He launched himself into the unknown.

For a glorious moment, Sam Calder flew.

The night opened beneath him. The air held him. Time slowed. The old rules of body and weight seemed suspended. He felt light, free, graceful, almost spiritual. The whole Pacific night wrapped around him like warm water.

This, he thought, is magnificent.

Then the ground arrived.

It did not arrive politely. It arrived with a clunk.

The kind of clunk that suggested gravity had checked the paperwork and found everything in order.

Sam landed flat, spread-eagled, silent for half a second, then deeply surprised to discover that the earth had taken the matter personally.

He looked up at the stars. They were beautiful.

They were also moving slightly, which seemed unnecessary. That swirling around thing seemed totally out of place.

From somewhere beyond the gate came the fading sound of the jeep. He looked around the compound anxiously, but no one had seen. This was a comfort and for the next few minutes he lay there, taking in the beauty of the stars that provided him the only light available to him.



Then Sam began to giggle. He had laughed many times in his life. He had chuckled, smiled, snorted, and occasionally roared. He had never giggled. Giggling was for children, aunties, schoolgirls, and men with less command of themselves than he preferred to imagine.

Yet there he was, lying in the dark inside a hotel compound in the northern islands of Solomana, giggling into the grass like an idiot.

“Quiet,” he whispered to himself. This made it worse.

He tried to stand. Nothing happened.

He tried again with greater administrative intent. Still nothing.

His body had apparently formed a committee and voted against further vertical activity.

This created a practical difficulty. His bure was visible across the compound, or at least he believed it was his bure. One small light glowed on a veranda. It looked both close and impossibly far away.

There was only one solution.

He would crawl and crawl he did.

Across the grass, past a bush and around what might have been a garden bed. Over a patch of coral stones that objected to his knees. He crawled with the determination of a man completing a sacred pilgrimage. Every few metres he stopped to giggle silently, which is one of the least silent forms of giggling available.

“Shhh,” he told himself. This also did not help.

The stars were outrageous. The night was soft and somewhere nearby the sea moved against the shore. The compound smelled of flowers, damp earth, and whatever pride Sam had left behind at the gate.

Eventually, after what felt like several hours but may have been four minutes, he reached the steps of his bure.

Copyright © 2026 Brian Minikin. All rights reserved.

The steps presented themselves as a new engineering challenge.

Sam studied them carefully.

There were three. This seemed rather excessive.

He negotiated them one at a time, using his elbows, knees, forearms, forehead, and a method he later hoped no one had witnessed. At last he rolled onto the veranda and lay on his back, breathing heavily, looking up into the darkness under the roof.

He had made it. It was neither elegant nor was it done quietly or in a manner that would have pleased any coach, doctor, referee assessor, or future biographer. But he had made it and hopefully he had done so without being observed. The thought of that brought further giggles.

The world settled around him. The laughter had passed. The night remained, as comforting warm air moved through the palms. The sea continued its patient work and somewhere in the nearby village, a dog barked once and then thought better of it.

Sam lay there in perfect contentment.

He now understood what it meant to be drunk. Not the loud part or the foolish part. He remembered the talking too much and the counting of impossible cans. He remembered everything and he felt just fine.

Drunkenness, he decided, was the moment when a man could fall off a gate, hit the ground like a sack of wet laundry, fail to stand, crawl to his own room, and still believe, with deep sincerity, that the evening had gone rather well.

In the morning, Dr Tavo found him sitting on the veranda with a coconut, a headache, and several new relationships with muscles he had not previously noticed.

“You sleep well, Coach?”

Sam considered lying.

Then he considered the doctor’s expression and decided against it.

“I think,” he said carefully, “I may have had too much beer.”

Dr Tavo looked at the gate. Then at Sam. Then back at the gate.

“Yes,” he said. “But you climbed very well.”

Sam closed his eyes.

The doctor laughed so hard he had to sit down.

For years afterwards, whenever Sam was offered a beer in the islands, he remembered the metal drum, the feast, the twenty cans, the locked gate, the magnificent flight, the clunk, the stars, the giggling, and the long heroic crawl to the veranda.

He still drank occasionally, but never again did he fully trust the sentence: “I feel just fine.”

He now realised that he was less aware of how alcohol affected him than he thought, which was a good lesson to learn, but as his future would reveal, it was a lesson that he should have learned better.

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. 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.