

THE LINE-UP SHEET

— A SAM CALDER STORY —

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BRIAN MINIKIN

The Line-Up Sheet

By Brian Minikin

A Sam Calder Story

A lesson in humility through Responsibility

This short story is part of the Sam Calder series. These are fictional stories based on the life and times of Sam Calder, a rather goofy and naive 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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Delegating responsibility was important to Sam Calder. This was something he really believed in, especially when coaching in a country other than his own. It was also, as life kept trying to tell him, one of those strengths that could become a trap if he chose the wrong moment to interfere with it.

By the time the Regional Games arrived, Sam, working as a volunteer coaching advisor, had spent months preparing the Navatu men's and women's volleyball teams. The men were ambitious, noisy, athletic, and occasionally convinced that a good vertical jump could solve all known human problems. The women were younger, quieter, and in many ways the more interesting challenge.

For the women, this was their first appearance in international competition.

Most of them were teenagers. The average age was about seventeen, which in volleyball terms meant they were young enough to recover quickly, young enough to learn quickly, and young enough to look at thirty-year-old opponents as if they belonged to another geological period. They had talent, spring, courage, and the wonderful ignorance of a team that had not yet learned all the reasons it was supposed to lose.

Sam liked that about them.

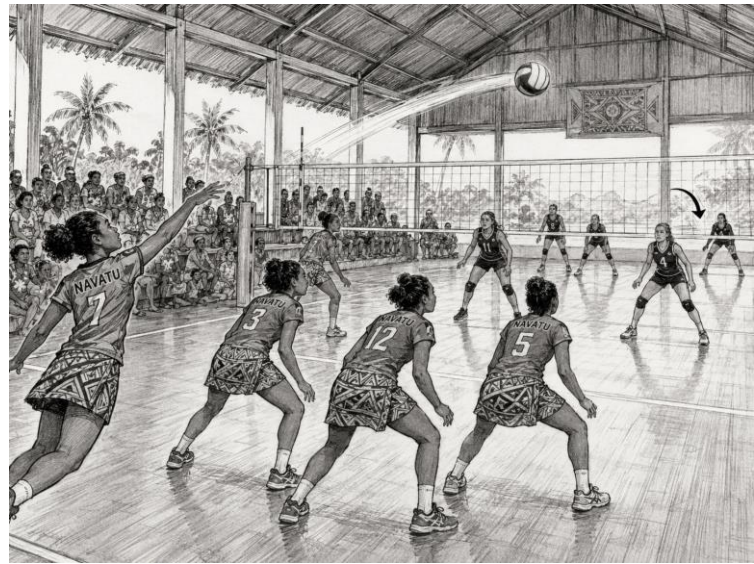
They were coached by Rogo, a local man with a gentle face, a large laugh, and a love of volleyball that was not always matched by an immediate grasp of its finer tactical cruelties. Rogo was not quick with statistics. He did not naturally see rotations in his sleep. He could take a little longer than Sam preferred to understand why one passing pattern should become another. But the girls trusted him and that mattered more.

In fact, Sam had insisted from the beginning that local coaches take the teams. He believed national teams should be coached by nationals wherever possible. To him, a national team belonged to the country, not to a visiting expert with a stopwatch and a return ticket. He said this often, sometimes with more force than was necessary.

"Generals should come from the country whose army they lead," he would say.

This sounded wise. It also sounded slightly ridiculous when applied to teenage girls in knee pads, but Sam was young enough to enjoy a strong metaphor even when it arrived overdressed.

His job was to support and to develop capabilities. Rogo would speak to the players in their own language. Sam would provide statistics, suggest adjustments, handle some technical chores, and whisper advice when useful. Between sets, Rogo would carry the emotion of the group. Sam would carry the clipboard.



That was the system and it worked because everyone knew their role.

Which is why, naturally, Sam chose the worst possible moment to change it.

The women had started the tournament better than anyone expected. They had lost once, won once, and discovered that international volleyball was both faster and less mysterious than it had seemed from a distance. They still made young mistakes. They celebrated too early, panicked too late, and occasionally forgot that the ball was allowed to cross the net more than once. But they fought. They learned. They smiled less as the tournament went on, which Sam took as a good sign.

Then came Guara.

Guara were one of the serious teams. They usually finished near the medals and carried themselves accordingly. Their players were older, stronger, and more polished. Several had played college volleyball in the USA. They had proper shoes, proper bags, proper warm-up jackets, proper ponytails, and the calm superiority of athletes who expected the little island teams to provide atmosphere rather than resistance.

No one expected Navatu to trouble them.

Sam did, a little.

Navatu was obviously not better, but Guara had one weakness. They did not like being served deep into the corners. Their passing shape became untidy. Their big hitters became less dangerous when forced to attack from three metres off the net. He also felt that if Navatu could keep the ball alive long enough, Guara sometimes grew impatient and tried to end rallies with

violence rather than judgement. The Navatu team was very quick with amazing reflexes, and he expected them to use these gifts to keep the ball alive at all costs.

So, the plan was simple.

Serve deep.

Make them move.

Keep the ball in play.

Refuse to die quickly.

The first set was exactly what most people expected. Guara won comfortably. Navatu chased, scrambled, blocked air, served bravely, and looked for large parts of the set like young women attempting to stop a truck by waving at it.

Rogo spoke calmly between sets.

Sam handed him the numbers and said very little.

This was difficult for Sam, but useful. He was a young man with a lot to say but smart enough to know when to say it, under normal circumstances.



The second set changed everything.

Navatu started serving deep. It was deep enough to be annoying, and deep enough to make Guara's passers step backwards with irritation. One serve died on the baseline. Another bent into the corner. A third struck a passer high on the forearms and disappeared toward the scoreboard, where it frightened a man enjoying a moment while eating some Taro.

The Navatu bench came alive.

Guara frowned.

Rogo shouted encouragement in the local language, and the players seemed to grow taller with each point. They covered tips. They chased shanked balls. They laughed when they fell. They put free balls in awkward places. They did whatever they had to do to win the side-out, because Sam had drilled that into them until it became almost religious.

Win the side-out. Get the serve back. Prevent them from winning points. Make them play one more ball than they wanted to. These were the good old days when volleyball teams had to win

the serve in order to score points. Keep winning the serve and the other team cannot score, regardless of how good they are. It was the essence of the game that he loved and unlike the modern rally point scoring system, it meant that teams lacking height and power could still win matches with skill and guile.

To everyone's surprise, and Guara's visible irritation, Navatu won the second set.

Then they won the third, even more convincingly.

By now the gymnasium had noticed and people started to crowd inside to witness an upset.

People who had come to watch a routine match began leaning forward. Officials drifted closer. Other teams gathered behind the court. The Guara coach removed his jacket, which Sam interpreted as a meaningful tactical development.

The fourth set was fierce.

Guara stopped looking annoyed and started looking determined. They adjusted their reception shape, protected the deep corners better, and began serving harder at Navatu's youngest passer, a girl who looked as though she might still be required to ask permission to cross a road. She held for a while. Then she cracked. Then, to her credit, she put herself back together and held again.

But Guara had too much experience. They won the fourth set and forced a fifth.

The fifth set in volleyball is a defining moment. After all the hard work, it came down to a single set match, winner take all. It was usually played with tired bodies and it exposed fear and self-doubt. It was cruel enough to make adults shout advice at teenagers as if volume alone can improve ball control.

Sam felt the moment and that was his first mistake. As a player, this was when he was at his best and his instincts kicked in as the competitive player in him bubbled to the surface. He loved the attritional nature of the fifth set and he was sure that this team could thrive in it.

He had spent months telling himself that this team belonged to Rogo. He had spent the whole tournament respecting the routine. Rogo briefed the players. Sam prepared the line-up sheet, checked rotations, gave two or three technical points, and stayed in his lane.

But now Navatu were one set away from a famous win.

One set away from beating a team that should have beaten them in three sets.

One set away from changing what they believed about themselves.

Sam's emotions got ahead of his judgement.

"Rogo," he said, "can you fill in the line-up? I'll just speak to them quickly."

Rogo looked at him.

“The line-up?”

“Yes please, same as before. I just want to settle them.”

There are small moments in life when the future clears its throat. Sam did not hear it. He knew what they needed to do and he just had to make his thoughts known.

He gathered the girls. They were flushed, tired, frightened, excited, and trying very hard to pretend they were none of those things. Sam spoke well. He reminded them to serve deep, to make Guara play, to use the middle when the pass was good, and to trust the work they had done.

“You do not need to be heroes,” he said. “You need to be boring in exactly the right way.”

They laughed. That impressed Sam. The tension softened and they were ready.

Rogo added his final words in their language. The players nodded. The whistle blew. The teams moved toward the court.

Then the scorer's table became very still. This was never good. The second referee, looking confused, consulted the first referee looking at the team line up sheet and again at the Navatu team. The second referee looked down at Navatu's line-up sheet. Then he looked at the court. Then back at the sheet and started to move players into different positions and then suddenly asking some players to leave the court. The confusion was instant and devastating.

“What is going on?” asked Sam as he walked over to the score bench.

The referee was a visiting official, pale, severe, and carrying the air of a man who had spent his life correcting people for their own improvement. He had already shown little warmth toward Sam. Some men came to the Pacific and learned humility. Others came and established small kingdoms around whistles, clipboards, and rules nobody had asked them to invent.

Sam recognised the type too late. “What's the problem?” he asked.

The referee held up the sheet. It was then that Sam realised that Rogo had misunderstood.

Instead of writing the players' numbers in their correct service positions, he had written positions one to six as if they were player numbers. Which meant, officially, Navatu's final-set starting line-up now contained player number one in position one, player number two in position two, player number three in position three, and so on.

Unfortunately, only two of those players were actual starters and both were in the wrong places.

Sam felt the blood drain from his face.

“Right,” he said. “That's obviously a mistake. We need to correct it.”

"No," said the referee.

Sam blinked.

"No?"

"The line-up is submitted."

"Yes, but it is a clerical error."

"The line-up is submitted."

The referee said this with the satisfaction of a man who had found a small, locked door and swallowed the key.

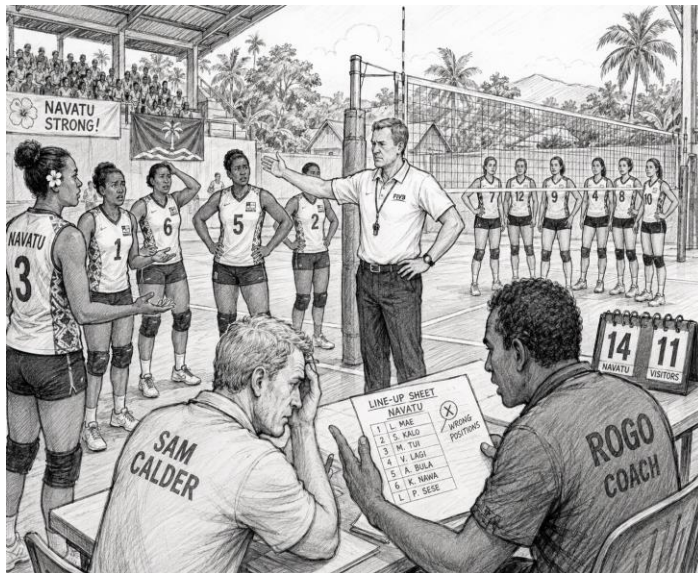
Sam lowered his voice.

"They are seventeen-year-old girls. It is the fifth set. Everyone knows who has been starting."

The referee looked at him.

"The line-up is submitted."

It was at this point that Sam began to suspect the man did not intend to be helpful.



"All right," Sam said, fighting for calm.

"Then we'll substitute."

"You may substitute according to the rules."

"Fine. We'll make multiple substitutions."

"One at a time."

Sam stared at him.

"One at a time?"

"One at a time."

This was not only unhelpful. It was nonsense dressed as authority.

The girls were now standing on court in confusion. Two were looking at Sam. One was looking at Rogo. One was almost in tears. Guara's players had noticed something was wrong and were beginning to smile.

Sam tried to think. Meanwhile the game commenced with a team set up completely out of formation and with a referee determined to progress the game as his patience wore thin. The

players were hesitant, the coaches were panicked and the officials seemed determined to increase the anxiety as two attempts to make substitutions were waved away for being too slow.

This should have been easy. It was numbers. Positions. Rotations. Substitutions. Sam understood these things. He had explained them to others a hundred times.

But pressure does strange things to the mind. It narrows the room. It makes familiar doors disappear. Sam looked at the court and saw six players, three rotations, two wrong starters, four necessary changes, a referee with the warmth of a filing cabinet, and a fifth set beginning to slide away before the ball had been served.

He argued. The referee produced a yellow card.

Sam stopped arguing, though not inwardly. He tried to substitute. The referee stuck to the letter of the law and appeared to make the process as difficult as possible.

One player off. One player on. Check the number. Record the change. Two more rallies, another player substituted. Another check. Another delay. Another glance from Guara. Another minute of Navatu's confidence draining through the floorboards.

The first serve came before Sam had restored anything resembling order.

Guara scored. Then again. Then again.

Navatu were lost. They were not playing volleyball now. They were trying to solve a problem they had not created, under rules they did not understand, in a language that was not theirs, while adults on the sideline turned increasingly pale.

At five-nil. A refused substitution for being too slow.

At six-nil, the regular setters were in position.

At seven-nil, another refused substitution for player not holding the number paddle correctly.

Sam finally found the rotation in his head. He made the next changes. The referee inspected each one as if national security depended on it.

It was ten – nil, two thirds of the way through the set, before Sam was able to get the starting lineup back on court.

Sam called a time out and brought them in. There was very little to say. He apologised and made it clear that this mess was not on them, but on him and him alone

He looked at their faces and felt the full weight of what he had done. This was all on him and he knew it. A very public humiliation in front of the entire volleyball community.

He had broken the routine. He had taken over a moment that belonged to the local coach. He had asked a man to perform an unfamiliar task under pressure without checking that he understood it.

Then, when the mistake occurred, he had lost his composure and fed the chaos.

That is a long list of crimes for one clipboard.

The girls stood around him, breathing hard, eyes wide.

"Listen," Sam said. "This is my fault." They stared at him. "My fault. Not yours. Not Rogo's. Mine."

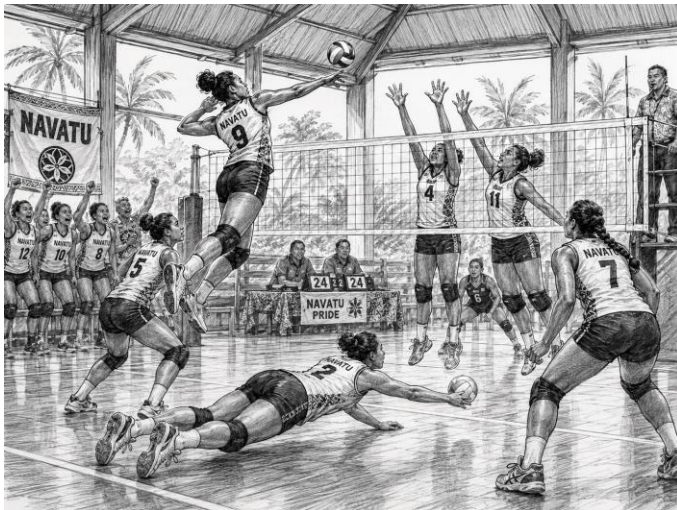
Rogo looked at the floor. Sam continued.

"You are now ten points behind. That is too bad."

One of the girls gave a tiny laugh. It was not much, but it was alive.

"Good," Sam said. "You noticed. Now we must play. One point. Then another. Serve deep. Pass high. Make them earn it. No panic. No shame. Just volleyball."

They went back out with a look of steel in their eyes.



Then, because sport is cruel but sometimes generous, they began to play.

The first point came from a Guara serving error. Navatu cheered as if they had discovered fire.

The second came from a long rally in which three Navatu players touched the floor, one nearly collided with the referee stand, and the ball crossed the net with no pace, no dignity, and perfect placement.

Ten-two.

Then ten-three.

Sam did not sit. He could not. He stood near the bench gripping the clipboard with both hands, as if it might try to escape and cause further harm.

Guara tightened.

That was the surprising part.

At ten-nil, they looked untouchable. At eleven-four, they looked annoyed. At twelve-six, they looked uncertain. Navatu had nothing left to lose, which made them more dangerous than they had any right to be.

Rogo found his voice again. He shouted encouragement. The bench came alive. A middle blocker who had been close to tears two minutes earlier stuffed a Guara attack and screamed at the floor.

Twelve-seven.

The gymnasium woke up.

Guara called time-out. Sam said nothing during it. This was difficult for him, but he knew he had already said too much today.

Rogo spoke. The girls listened.

Sam shook his head slowly and thought. That is how it should have been.

The final stretch was wild. Navatu chased everything. Guara survived on experience. A serve clipped the tape and fell the wrong way. A pass drifted too tight. A block touched fingertips and landed just out. The gap that had been ten points became five, then four, then three.

For one brief, impossible moment, Sam believed they might actually come back.

They did not. Guara won the fifth set by two points, seventeen to fifteen.

Their players celebrated with relief disguised as triumph.

Navatu stood still.

Then one by one, the girls began to cry, the exhausted tears of young athletes who had reached for something enormous and felt it brush their fingertips before disappearing.

After three and a half hours on court they had played themselves to a standstill. They were disappointed for sure but not because they had played badly.

Sam wanted to blame the referee. He wanted to blame the line-up sheet. He wanted to blame the system, the rules, the table officials, the fifth set, the planets, and whichever ancient committee had first decided that volleyball rotations should be arranged by people who enjoy making life difficult.

Instead, he walked to Rogo first and put his arm around his broad shoulders. "Completely my fault," he said.

Rogo shook his head. "No, Coach," he sobbed.

"Yes," Sam said. "My fault."



Then he told the players the same thing, not because it fixed anything. It did not. The match was gone. The result would stand. No one would remember the moral complexity of the fifth set when they saw the scores. They would see that Guara won and Navatu lost.

But as far as Sam was concerned, the girls needed to know that the mistake did not belong to them. They played bravely. They had followed the plan. They had rattled one

of the tournament favourites. They were ten points down in the fifth set and still lost by only two.

That was not failure, it merely felt like one.

Years later, Sam would learn more about his own mind. He would learn why pressure sometimes made him jump tracks, why one urgent idea could knock a working routine sideways, why he could be brilliant in chaos and still create chaos by trying to be brilliant at the wrong time. There were names for some of it, explanations that would have helped him if he had found them earlier.

But names did not change the lesson. The irony was that they were lessons that he did not need to learn. These were the basics of coaching.

Do not alter a routine under pressure unless everyone has practiced the new one.

Do not ask a colleague to carry responsibility you have not trained him to carry.

Do not trust your own emotion simply because it feels like urgency.

Above all, if you believe in local leadership, do not snatch the wheel when the road becomes narrow.

Navatu recovered and that was what mattered the most. The young women did not collapse after Guara. They won again. They finished fifth overall, winning a thrilling 5 set encounter in the playoff for fifth and sixth, far higher than anyone had expected. They returned home with the country's first international volleyball wins. By the end of the tournament, they were no longer children who had come to participate. Now, they were a team that other countries had learned to take seriously.

Sam took pride in that, but not too much.

The fifth set stayed with him, not as a wound exactly, more as a permanent bruise on his coaching soul. Every time he prepared a team after that, he checked the line-up protocol. Then

he checked who knew it. Then he checked who had practiced it. Then, because memory is a fine teacher if pain keeps it awake, he checked again.

He still believed in delegating responsibility. More than ever in fact. But he learned that delegation was not the same as hope. It had to be taught, rehearsed, trusted, and protected from the coach's own sudden panic.

Sam Calder had wanted to settle the team, instead, he unsettled everything.

The girls, to their credit, nearly saved him anyway. Rogo forgave him and also learned that there were times when he had to be more assertive and more aware of the technicalities of the sport.

As with all disasters that you can walk away from, Sam had learned something very important and would be all the better for it.

Humility through Responsibility

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 on 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.

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