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[Ros Satar](#) | 3rd November 2020

Coastal rowing – Rio Rii ready to put Vanuatu on the map

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Rio Rii won Vanuatu’s first ever Commonwealth gold medal at the 2018 Commonwealth Beach Rowing Sprint Championships – Ros Satar finds out more

If you are unfamiliar with coastal rowing, just watching the spectacle of boats trying to battle with each other to get around a buoy marker is a bit like watching a bedlam of snowboarders in that gloriously bonkers sport of snowboard cross.

Yet the water version of this could well be in the Olympics if the IOC agree to World Rowing’s recent recommendation later this year.

And if the success of the inaugural Commonwealth Beach Sprints Championships is anything to go by, coastal rowing could well be a hit. Fast and furious, this coastal version is also spectator friendly and showcases the sport in a completely different light.

Rewind to two years ago and the Beach Sprints Championships in Sandbanks, where Vanuatu’s Rillio ‘Rio’ Rii had to sprint down a beach, leap into a boat and launch himself into the sea, row around markers before landing, sprint back down the beach and quite literally hurl himself over the line to earn the first ever Commonwealth Beach Sprint Championships title, and so become Vanuatu’s first ever gold medallist at a commonwealth level for any sport.

Despite growing up so near the water - Vanuatu comprises around 80 islands in the South Pacific - Rii's beginnings were very much on terra firma. He was on the junior national team as a cricketer before some friends took him down to the 'rowing shed' to try out the new sport that had landed on Vanuatu's shores around 2008.

"We went down and then I did rowing, and it was like 'Oh my god' – it's more physical and harder than standing in the sun running [after] balls everywhere," he recalls.

Rii found that the rigorous nature of rowing gave him the motivation to be more disciplined, contrasting with the more social and relaxed nature of cricket.

"Cricket was like you can sit there, drink beer and watch everyone play and then it's your turn to go in," he says.

So, abandoning the crease and taking to the water, Rii went down the traditional route of flat-water rowing, and the arrival of Australian coach Andrew Mackenzie has meant a core of elite standard rowers have helped put Vanuatu on the rowing map.

Rii explains: "I think he's behind every stage of my rowing, starting from when he came coaching me and the others in the rowing shed. He's the main coach here in Vanuatu - doing everything - he really push[es] us hard.

"He gives good advice and the training tips. I think he really puts everything in my rowing as a coach."

It was Mackenzie who introduced Rii to coastal rowing when they visited the UK two years ago, on route to Bulgaria, and who suggested he enter the Commonwealth Beach Sprints.

Rii says: "I just do it for fun because the wave and undercurrent takes me to shore, helping me - it was fun with all the waves splashing everywhere.

"I've never done that before, starting on the beach, running down [to] the boat. That's the most important time to jump in the boat safely, grip the oars and take off. If you mess up, you miss out this one.

"That's the fun part. Then you have to go out and zig-zag those markers and come back. It was a whole new thing. And then coming back on shore you have to run again. The last run is like running zig-zag, like you're drunk and running," he laughs.

But he has been bitten by the bug, and with the World Coastal Rowing Championships planned for 2022 in the UK, be prepared for Vanuatu to stake their claim as the kings of coastal rowing.

Specialist boats have been commissioned for training, and there is certainly the enthusiasm amongst the rest of the country's elite rowing team, and with good reason with great beaches at their disposal.

“We’re going to be ready in 2022!” he laughs.

Coastal rowing could be the key to increasing diversity in the sport, and Rii firmly believes that it could make it easier for smaller developing ocean nations to take this discipline and run with it.

“Coastal rowing is for little developing countries,” he says.

Back in Vanuatu, his success has helped raise the profile of rowing on the islands, and Rii’s personal achievement has been featured in a children’s book depicting tough heroes and their inspiring stories.

“I’ve decided to give [back] what rowing has done for me, so I will teach any young rowers that come down. I have to be a role model for them.

“I’ve been coaching through the afternoons. I just go out with the speedboat, tell them some drills and stuff - not too long, not too short, sharp and simple – that’s it.”

More importantly, these youngsters enjoy it and are coming back for more, and Rii is keen to continue helping to develop the sport.

He adds: “It is a sport that is so disciplined. It will change the lives of any young people [and keep them away from] any of the bad stuff.

For a shy former cricketer, his impact on the international stage has meant the world for this collection of islands and especially the island of Efate, where Rii lives. He was awarded the Male athlete of the year at the national sports awards in 2019 and in 2020, he was awarded the President’s Medal during the 40th-anniversary celebrations for services to sport.

“I raised up the flag everywhere, so representing my country is very big for me, for Vanuatu and my family.

“Through family and friends, I am where I am now with my sport. They encouraged me and pushed me a lot and it is up to me to be disciplined and strong-minded in what I do.”



Ros Satar

Ros Satar is a sports journalist. A former 400m hurdler, she did briefly consider rowing as her next sport before deciding that trudging around chasing golf balls might be a better idea. She maintains that her handicap is her bag of clubs. In her spare time, she is still undecided as to the best way to watch the entire Stars Wars saga - in chronological order or by production release?