

Warren 'Joe' Lomas Leo OAM

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worked for the City Council during the week, and as a concreter for two different companies at the weekend. He remained with the City Council till his retirement in 1998.

Joe receiving his OAM from HE Governor of Queensland Major General Peter Arnison

Born in 1934 in Ayr, North Queensland, Joe was a descendent of grandparents who were forcibly brought to Australia from the New Hebrides as indentured, or slave, labour sometime between 1876 and 1880. Grandfather was from Pentecost Island while Grandmother was from Oba (now Omby) Island. Every Christmas, Joe went to Joskeleigh to spend the holiday, and would sleep in his grandfather's grass hut, getting a real feel for how his ancestors lived in their 'blood country', now called Vanuatu.

To help support the family, Joe left school after Grade 4 to work. Over the years he worked as a cane-cutter like his grandparents, a plant operator, labourer and drover, which took him to many places in North Queensland and beyond. In 1960, after his wedding, he settled down in north Rockhampton, where he

Volunteering in the sporting arena began by accident a year before his marriage to Monica Malamoo. While a stockman and drover in the Northern Territory, he entered "one too many rodeos" and badly broke a leg. This left him in plaster for 11 months in 1959; during this period, some of the locals residing on the outskirts of Rockhampton formed a cricket team called "The Pirates" comprising South Sea Islanders (SSI). They were short of a player, so Joe volunteered to be wicket-keeper. This led to 13 years of social cricket with three teams leading to his selection for Rockhampton A Grade as wicket-keeper come batsman. During this time as well, Joe became the manager for an Under 8 's soccer team.

His love for sport saw Joe getting involved in a range of activities. In 1974, Joe ventured into women's soccer, becoming coach of the first All Blacks women's team. He also coached the Rockhampton representative women's soccer championship team from which two of the players were selected to play for Queensland. Joe also had the opportunity to coach Kim Ireland in soccer; she later became goalkeeper for the Australian Hockeyroos.

At the end of that year, Joe was elected president of The All Blacks Football Club. During his term as president, Joe set out to expand the Club's activities, and soon the

Club boasted two women's soccer, basketball and cricket teams, fielding Under 18 / 19, Reserve and A Grade rugby league teams. The Reserve and A Grade players were paid so Joe embarked on a career of fundraising through raffles, with the help of three hotels.

At this stage, the All Blacks Club grounds were covered with scrub, and there was no clubhouse. When it was decided in 1979 to host the All Blacks Football Carnival at Rockhampton, Joe decided to take the matter into his own hands. He had seven weeks leave owing him, so with Council machinery and the approval of legendary mayor, Rex Pilbeam, he single-handedly cleared the grounds. He toiled non-stop, starting at daybreak, sometimes going on till midnight. In the last two weeks of his leave, he and two committee members, spread by hand, 2000 yards of donated sawdust over the cleared land.

The result was two football fields in time for the Carnival, one of the biggest 'Rocky' had seen. The Carnival drew 12 teams from all over the state and was attended by over 3000 people. This became one of the most successful football carnivals ever held at Queensland at the time. It also raised \$8000 for the club which was quite broke at the time. This success was repeated in 1982, again earning a neat little profit for the club.



Captain Joe Leo and the All Blacks Cricket Team 1984 – 85

In 1983, Joe was again involved with cricket, becoming coach and captain of the All Blacks team for the next five years, leading them to a championship in the Reserve B Minor and Premiers. For his participation, support and leadership in the sporting arena, Joe was awarded the Community Recreation Award. In 1993, a Testimonial Dinner was held in Joe's honour, where tribute was paid to his accomplishments on and off the sporting field. He was presented with a signed football of the Brisbane Broncos, a cricket bat signed by the Queensland Sheffield Shield Team, and other trophies.

For a lot of this time, Joe was also working very hard to support his family which had grown to seven children and, with his sporting commitments, he was hardly at home. From 1960 to 1976, he held three jobs to support his large family. To alleviate this problem and to eliminate the stress that the family was experiencing with a father who was hardly at home, Joe encouraged Monica and the children to become involved in

Club activities. Monica served on the Women's Executive Committee, playing a major role in raising much -needed funds to keep the Club operating. Their eldest daughter Carmen thus became 'Mum' and 'Dad' to her six siblings!

Another important sector that occupied Joe's attention and effort was the campaign to gain recognition for his people as 'Australian South Sea Islanders' (ASSI). This went on for 20 years and involved attendance at hundreds of meetings all over Queensland, including Ayr, Mackay, Gladstone, Brisbane, Bundaberg, Maroochydore and Rockhampton. Joe and other ASSI leaders funded these trips out of their own pockets. Success was obtained finally with Federal Government recognition of ASSIs in August 1994; but they had to campaign for another six years before gaining State Government recognition in September 2000. Joe reckons the time, effort and financial sacrifice were well worth it, as doors are now opening to their people, albeit slowly at times.

A direct consequence of the state government recognition was the institution of the first ever ASSI Board of Advice, which raises funds for ASSI university students. Joe has been member of this board for the last three years. This necessitates trips to Brisbane for consultations with government several times a year. He is also President of the ASSI United Independent Council of Rockhampton and District Inc, a position he has held for the past 12 years.

On Thursday 7th September, Joe was honoured to receive the award of the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) from the Governor of Queensland, Major General Peter Arnison. And in 2001, he received a Centenary Medal from the Governor General of Australia, and Prime Minister John Howard. Joe is a well-known and greatly respected community leader in Rocky, and often appears in media reports which focus on his commitment and dedication to sport and community in his hometown.

Most of the SSI families in Queensland today are third generation Australians, with grandparents 'black-birded' from their islands to be used, ironically, as 'free labourers' on sugar – cane farms. Hand-cutting the cane was too hard for the local farmers; so imported labour was needed. A documentary titled "Sugar Slaves" was made based on the return of Joe and Monica to their respective villages in Vanuatu.

Joe is extremely proud of his heritage and glad that the contributions of his and other's SSI ancestors have been recognized and documented. He gains much satisfaction that in his own way, he has played a part in obtaining this recognition for his people. If this had not been done, it is probable that the enormous price paid by SSI men and women, over 125 years ago, would have disappeared from Australian history.