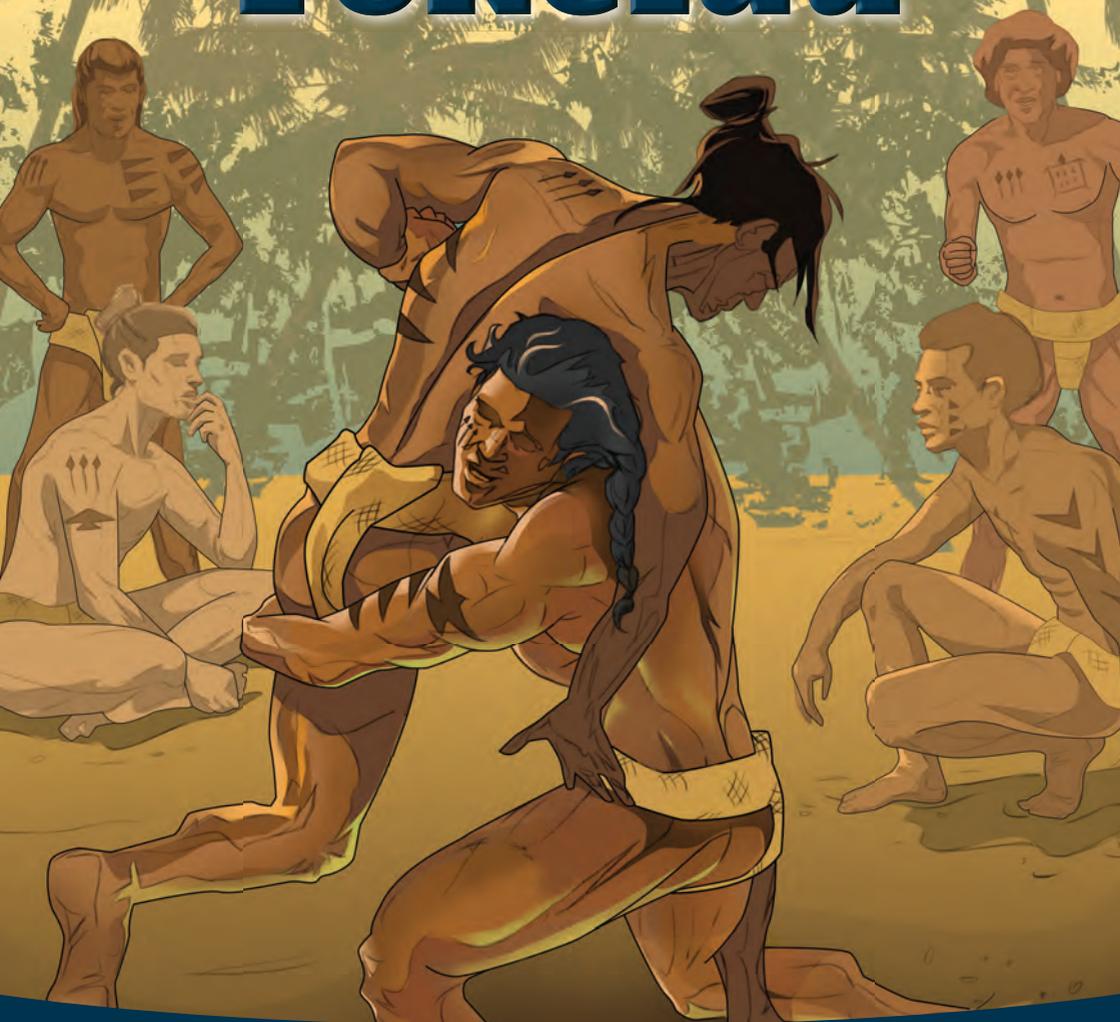


# Fagatua Tokelau



**Ilai Isopo Elekana Manū**

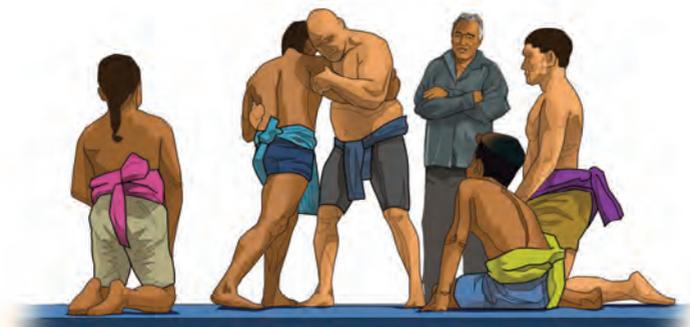
Respect to my ancestors, who have gone before me, and acknowledgment to those who laid the foundation of the culture I hold fast to. I dedicate this work to my tupuna. Let the north wind guide my sail. Tulou, tulou, tulou. Tagi te pokotau, tagi te pokotau. I feel the pain of my tupuna. The weight is heavy on my shoulders. Remember me, remember me, fagatua.

Fakafetai lahi lele to everyone who contributed to this book, especially the toeaina who shared their stories and experiences. Thank you to everyone who has supported my journey representing Tokelau over the years. Thank you to my family and a special fakaauue lahi to my wife. Tokelau ke ola!

# Fagatua Tokelau

*written by* Ilai Isopo Elekana Manū

*illustrated by* Vaitoa Baker



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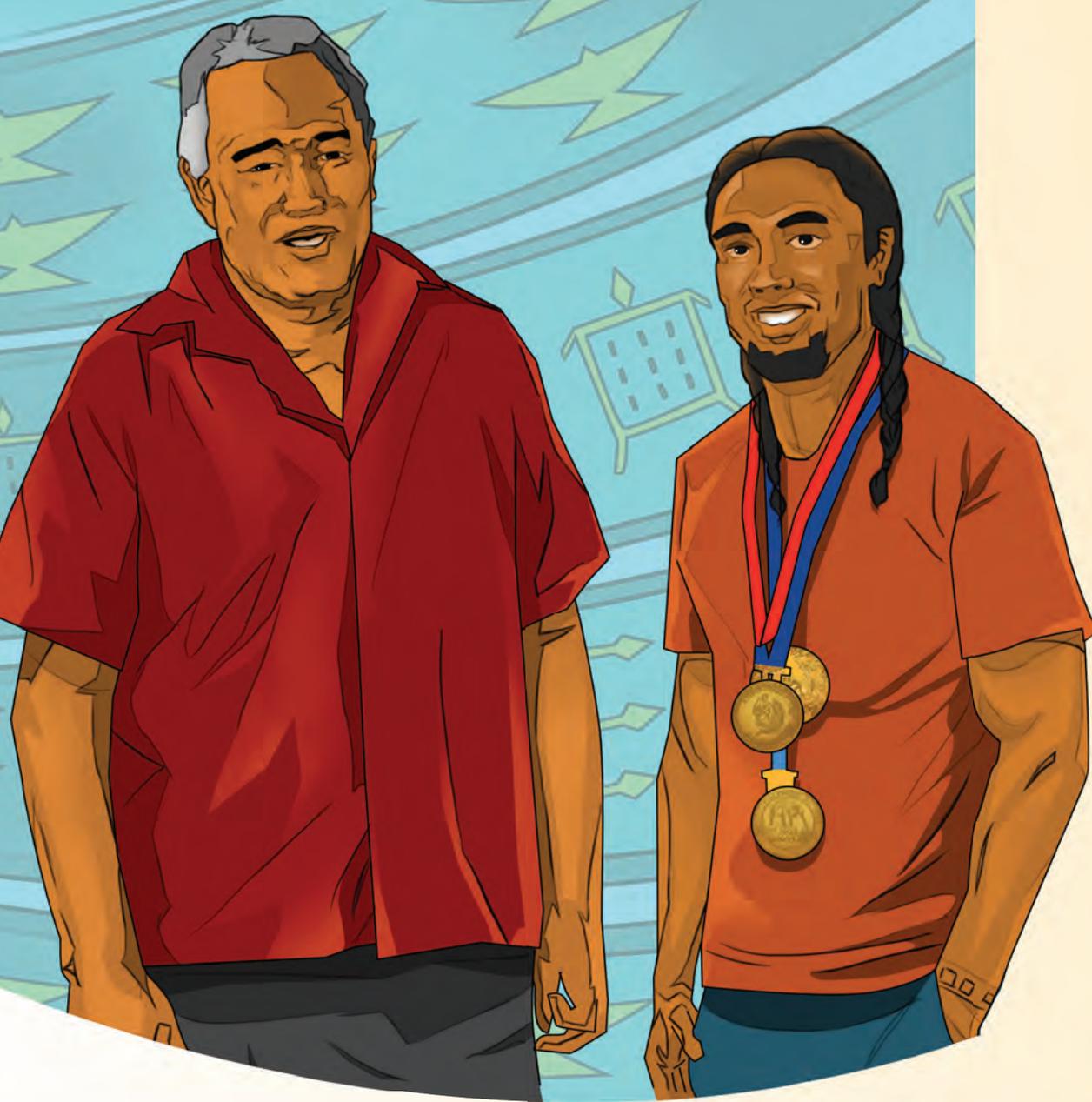
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I'm a wrestler. It was the late Foua Toloa, a former Ulu o Tokelau, who told me that fagatua is our national sport. Wrestling is mentioned in the Bible. Our form of wrestling, fagatua, features in our kakai.

## **The legend of Lu**

In our origin stories, the demigod Lu, the son of Tikitiki, used his physical strength to raise up the sky. Lu also went to the underworld to bring fire to the world. There he met a devil in the form of an old man named Mafuike. Mafuike and Lu wrestled, until Lu overcame Mafuike with his strength and skill. Lu then seized Mafuike by the throat and forced him to reveal the secret of fire.

## **The legend of the stars**

Two brothers, Kupega and Kakau, each had two sons of their own. The four boys would often wrestle with each other, but Kupega's sons, Filo and Mea, always won. Out of jealousy, Kakau sent Filo and Mea on difficult missions, for example, to catch the giant fish Humu, and to kill the great bird Matuku. After killing Humu and Matuku, Filo and Mea weren't able to safely cross a huge hole in the ocean when they were bringing their sister Hina back to their father. Although Hina survived, the boys didn't. Now they are two of the four-star constellations – te Tu Fa – that guide the way to Samoa from Tokelau.



## The elders remember



I have found that talking to our elders is the best way to understand our form of fagatua and how important it once was. The elders' faces light up as they recall their memories of wrestling in Tokelau, but their sadness is obvious as they describe a cultural tradition that is no longer widely practised.

Telaufue Filipo, an elder from Fakaofu, recalls that, "If you were to travel to Nukunonu, you would walk towards the shore and pokotau. Someone would be waiting for you. You would wrestle on the beach as soon as you arrived. Nowadays, we no longer do it. An old man would sit us down. A man from Nukunonu would yell out for one of us to come. The old man would

look at me and say 'You go' and we would all go and wrestle one by one."

Ateli Perez, from Nukunonu, remembers, "a time when the men from Fakaofu came. All the men in Nukunonu knew what was going on. They came to challenge. It was like a game ... some excitement ... men meeting on the land."

Soane Peato, an elder from Fakaofu, says that, "Wrestling would usually happen during inter-island meetings between Fakaofu, Nukunonu, and Atafu. I would sometimes lose to the boys from Atafu and Nukunonu but, other times, I would win. They were very strong, the men from Atafu and Nukunonu!"

Fuatai Pelesa, from Atafu, recalls that, "If someone challenged you with the pokotau gesture, you couldn't go past them. You had to accept the challenge."

Luka Panapa, from Fakaofu, says that, fagatua was originally taught as a form of self-defence, though done in a respectful way. He recalls that when he was younger, "Every afternoon, a toeaina would call all of the children over to the meeting house and teach them how to wrestle."

Opeta Faraimo, an elder from Fakaofu, agrees that fagatua is very much a part of Tokelau culture. He recalls a time when he was younger and a boat came to Atafu with a crew from Tuvalu and Kiribati. The captain of the boat challenged the locals

to a wrestling match. A man named Mahe stepped forward and beat him, to the cheers of the crowd that had gathered.

Nui loane Tumua, an elder from Nukunonu, recalls that the single men would initiate poto by chanting and marching arm in arm through the village, taunting the married men.

Although women in Tokelau did not participate directly in fagatua, there are historical accounts of women participating in a style of staged wrestling as a form of entertainment, dressed as faluma in men's clothing, as their audience cheered them on. You could almost say they were Tokelau's original "pro wrestlers"!



## Wrestling, a universal language

The elders are right. Historians consider wrestling to be one of the world's oldest sports. There are drawings of wrestlers painted on cave and tomb walls in France, Mongolia, and Egypt, for example. Some of these are 15,000 years old. Wrestling was part of both the ancient Olympic Games in 776 BC and the first modern Olympic Games in 1896.

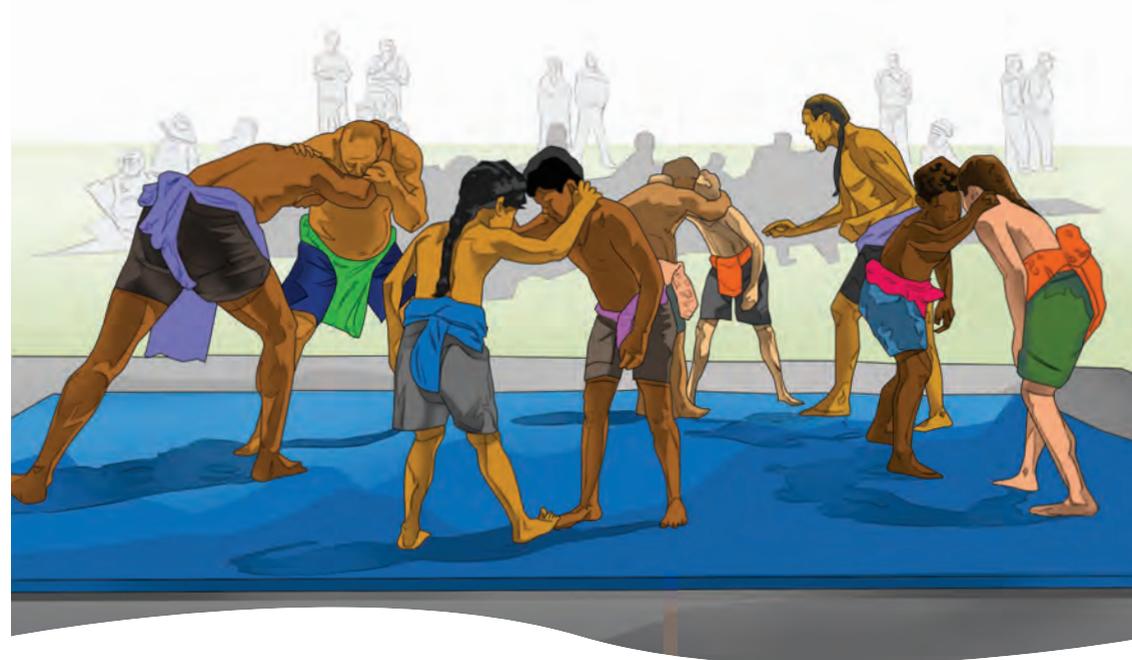
Many cultures have their own forms. Here in the Pacific, indigenous wrestling was extremely important culturally. In the past in Rēkohu (the Chatham Islands), for example, the Moriori used wrestling as a peace-making ritual to settle disputes. Tokelau, Tuvalu, Samoa, Tonga, Tahiti, Pukapuka, Aotearoa, and Hawai'i have equally ancient forms of wrestling that once formed part of combat training and now continue as a competitive sport. A wrestling technique used in the Samoan

martial art limalama is even called "fa'ato'elau" (Tokelau style).

Similarly in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea, wrestling was used to train warriors and continues as a sport. Nauru, Kiribati, Palau, and Yap have indigenous forms of wrestling, too.

In Tokelau, fagatua can be traced right back to the time of inter-island warfare. It was also a cultural practice during gatherings and was traditionally performed in front of aliki.

The men would wrestle on the beach wearing a malo (loincloth). There are many different techniques and muna (moves). Tokelau also has a form of mass wrestling, poto, where one group links arms while another group tries to separate them. If you were separated, you then had to wrestle individually.



## Fagatua re-emerges

Although some of us are now re-engaging with fagatua, the majority of us no longer live in Tokelau, and many of our stories about fagatua are being lost. Because wrestling is a highly technical activity, techniques of how to wrestle can easily be forgotten if they are not practised regularly. This may explain why so much about fagatua is now relatively unknown. If you are not a wrestler, it is difficult to decipher the details of techniques solely from the remaining stories people tell.

Using the information from the elders about the different muna, combined with my technical knowledge and skills from Olympic wrestling and judo, I've been able to recreate our muna as authentically as possible, making allowances for the best body positioning, leverage, balance,

and most effective ways of completing the moves.

In 2019, we held fagatua workshops in Samoa, Australia, and New Zealand, to raise awareness and to increase interest and participation. Because fagatua is so technical, it is difficult to pass down orally or through a book. It has to be physically passed down and taught, which is why participation in fagatua workshops and taking up other opportunities to physically engage in it is so important. Fagatua won't survive otherwise. This is why it would be great to have fagatua included as a cultural activity and competitive sport at the Tokelau National Games in Tokelau and the Tokelau Easter Tournament in New Zealand, our biggest gatherings.



## How we wrestle

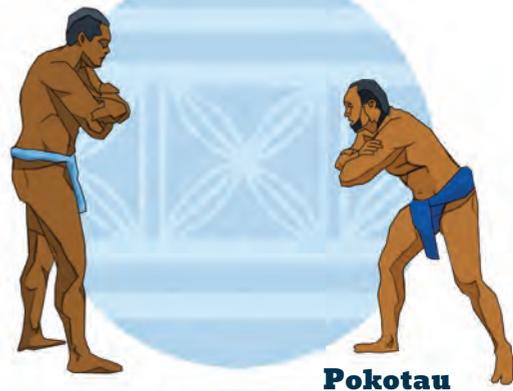
The main objective of fagatua is to win by putting your opponent on to their back. Here are some of the best-known muna.

**Pokotau** – To challenge, cross your arms and use the arm on the outside to slap the opposite arm. Every fagatua match begins with a pokotau.

**Manumanu** – Looking for an opportunity to attack or defend, use your hands out in front of you to block your opponent from advancing forward by pushing their shoulder or blocking their hands from pushing or pulling you.

**Fagatua/kola** – For a neck hold or collar tie, cup your hand and put it over your opponent's neck and cup their head. With the same arm, place your forearm against their chest. This muna can be used to control your opponent or set up a throw.

**Hulu** – For pummelling, start chest to chest by putting one arm around your opponent's body (underneath their arm). Your opponent will do the same to you. With your other arm, cup your hand and grab your opponents tricep on the opposite side. They will do the same to you. Now bring the cupped hand towards your chest and slide that same hand inside your opponent's arm to hold (underhook) your opponent's body. Your opponent will do this simultaneously and you will both end up in the same position, but on the opposite side.



**Pokotau**



**Puke**



**Manumanu**



**Tapa**



**Hulu**

**Puke te ane** – For a single leg take down, grab your opponent's leg and pull them off balance. To “puke” is to tackle. An “ane” is a bait laid out by your opponent, who wants you to grab their leg so that they can counterattack with another move called the “hele”.

**Hele** – To throw, pulling your opponent by the malo, as your opponent grabs your leg, reach over and grab their malo and pull it towards you to force them forward. Use your other arm to tilt them off balance. If not executed quickly, they can grab your leg and tackle you to the ground.

**Tapa** – For a leg trip, if you manage to put your opponent off balance, use the bottom of your foot to sweep their leg(s) out from out under them.

**Laga** – For a fireman's throw, hold on to your opponent's arm and with your other arm grab their leg while ducking your head under their arm. Lift them onto your shoulder and throw them to the ground.



**Laga**



## Representing Tokelau

Winning Tokelau's first-ever Oceania gold medal at the Oceania Wrestling Championship in Tutuila, American Samoa, in 2014, was a proud moment. Watching the raising of Tokelau's flag and hearing our national anthem being played over the loudspeaker brought tears to my eyes. I definitely felt my tupuna with me, especially my late Mama Lipoi.

I was one of three Tokelau athletes at the 2017 Pacific Mini Games at Port-Vila in Vanuatu, where I won a bronze medal in judo. I was a United Nations Climate Change Athlete while competing at the 2019 Pacific Games in Samoa. It was important for me to support the movement toward protecting our Tokelauan atolls from the effects of climate change. In total, I have won nine Oceania medals for Tokelau spread over four disciplines: freestyle wrestling, Greco-Roman wrestling, beach wrestling, and

judo. I also won a silver medal at the 2014 Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu New Zealand Nationals as well as numerous New Zealand regional and national wrestling medals.

Due to my work over the years as a wrestling educator, coach, and referee, in 2017 I was selected to be the Regional Development Officer employed by United World Wrestling to support the growth of wrestling in the Oceania Region, something I am very passionate about. In 2018, I was elected to the Commonwealth Wrestling Championship Board.

So you can see, wrestling has taken me around the world: to Europe, North America, Asia, and to various places here in the Pacific. I had the opportunity to wrestle for New Zealand, the country I was born in, but chose to represent Tokelau, the land of my ancestors.

## So you want to become a wrestler

As someone of Tokelau descent, wrestling is definitely in your blood. So here are some wrestling sports you could compete in. These are wrestling competitions for all genders categorised into age and weight classes.

### Beach wrestling

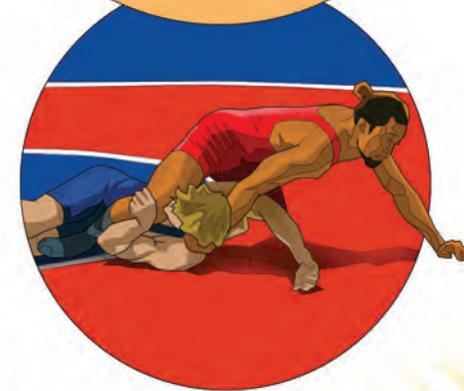
This form of wrestling is done on sand in a 7-metre circle in a 3-minute match. The first wrestler to gain 3 points wins.

### Olympic wrestling (freestyle and Greco-Roman)

These styles of wrestling take place on a standard wrestling mat. There are two rounds each 3 minutes long. You can win by pinning your opponent to the mat or by points. Wrestlers wear a one-piece wrestling outfit and wrestling shoes. The main difference in the two styles is that freestyle allows wrestlers to grab any part of the body, but Greco-Roman wrestling only allows contact from the waist up.

### Judo

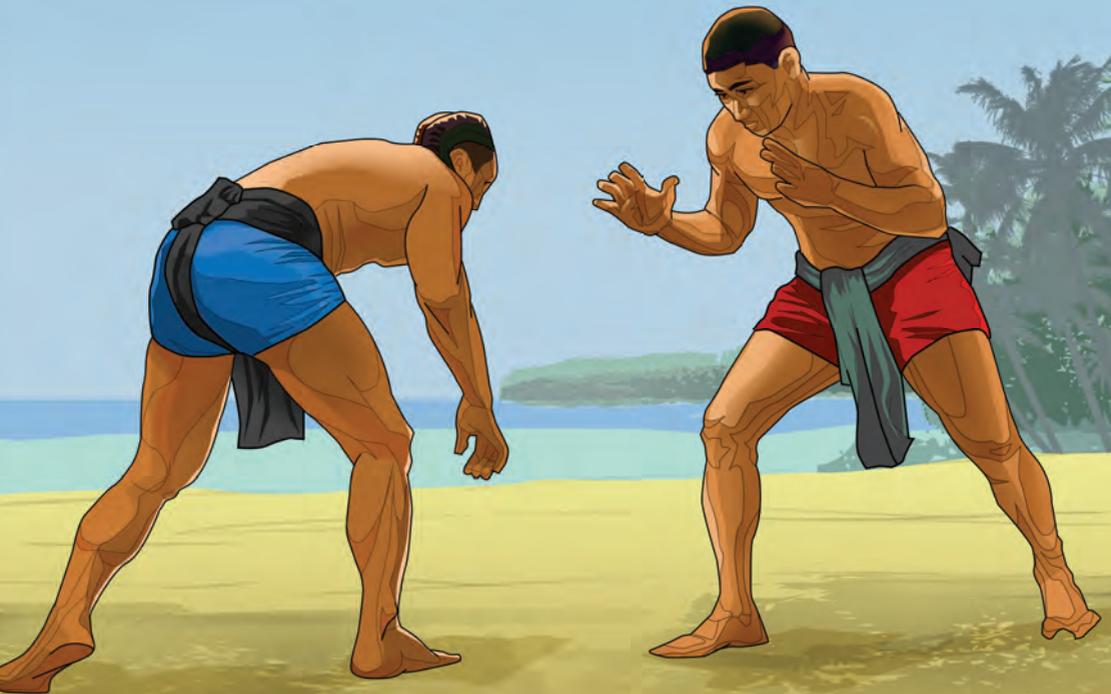
Judo is similar to fagatua, in that you can win a match by throwing your opponent directly on to their back, which is called an "ippon". You can also accumulate points during the match and can also win by submission when your opponent taps out, indicating that they give up.



## Fagatua

The wrestlers wear a malo and, as soon as your back hits the sand, you lose. For any young Tokelau person, getting involved in a traditional sport such as fagatua is all about being involved in the revival and

maintenance of our culture, both at home in Tokelau and if you live overseas. Fagatua is a great way to connect to your identity as someone of Tokelau descent.



*You too could become a wrestler.  
You might represent Tokelau some day.  
So what are you waiting for?*

## More wrestling terms

**competition** – tauvāga, tafaoga

**one more time** – toe tahi

*(which is what you say in fagatua  
when you want another match)*

**opponent, contest** – pāga, tauvāga

**strength, ability** – mālohi

**team, side** – kau

**to be defeated, to lose** – to ki lalo, fāiaina

**to tie, to draw** – tutuha

**to win, to succeed in a competition** – mālō



For more information about fagatua, go to:

<https://www.facebook.com/Tokelau-Wrestling-Fagatua-384412115060470/>

