The Little Red Bus

Everyday Voices | People

The Little Red Bus People

Early mornings, he'd be on the move again. That red bus, loaded with heavy synthetic cricket mats, driving from one ground to another so matches could start on time.

Every Friday, I would grab the **Friday Post-Courier** and turn straight to the back sports page. That's where the cricket stories lived, and I devoured them. Back then, **Numa Alu** was the most prolific sportswriter around. You could tell he loved the game just as much as he loved writing about it.

I don't buy Friday papers anymore. Everything has shifted online now: streaming, highlights, commentary at the click of a button. Watching the recent Ashes series reminded me just how

much I still love the game. And as it unfolded, a thought crept in quietly:

What if Papua New Guinea ever made it to Test cricket?
And if it did, who would lead it - on or off the field?

One name came to mind immediately.

Tony Elly.

I've never known anyone more passionate or more determined to lift cricket in this country. Tony had lived every layer of the game. He had played it, coached it, managed it, selected teams, and served at board level. If PNG ever needed a true "Mr Cricket," Tony Elly would have been it, without question.

As a young supporter of the game, still dreaming of making the Under-19 side, Tony was already a familiar figure in cricket. He was, as Telikom promises *"Always There."*

He drove around in a red mini-bus, which to us was something between a mobile cricket warehouse and a travelling cricket shop. Players would literally chase him down to buy cricket balls. And these weren't just any balls. Tony sold **Kookaburra Special Test** balls - premium quality. A new ball every weekend, sold at prices players could actually afford.

I found out that most of his stock came from **Kingsgrove Sports Centre** in Sydney, shipped regularly into Port Moresby. Maybe it helped that his wife worked for Air Niugini, I never knew for sure. What I did know was this: Tony always sourced the best. He wanted PNG cricketers playing with the same equipment used at the highest levels.

Years later, when I finally travelled to Sydney myself, I made it a point to visit Kingsgrove Sports Centre. It wasn't just a cricket shop - it was enormous. There was even a cricket academy on site. During summer, Test cricketers would drop in to sign bats and merchandise. Standing there, I couldn't help but think back and realise just how passionate Tony must have been to go straight to the source, to bring that standard back home.

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I saw him play too, not in his prime, but enough to understand him as a cricketer. What stood out wasn't power or flair, but temperament. Patient. Focused. The kind of temperament Test cricket demands - if my Ashes observations are anything to go by.

As a coach, he led what I still believe was one of PNG's strongest junior eras. The **Junior Steamies of the 90s** were formidable. Disciplined. Technically sound. Built, in my view, for the long game.

Their openers or first drop would bat through the overs, and they did it convincingly. Watching them then, I couldn't help but imagine what they might have become on a Test stage.

One player in particular comes to mind: **Arua Uda**.

Quiet. Upright stance. Effortless. He made batting look easy. He wasn't overly aggressive, yet the scoreboard kept moving. Like Tony, he had that calm temperament, the kind that accumulates runs without drama. Arua was ably supported by players like Peter Moide and I think Gavera Rima too.

I hope PNG finally gets its shot one day. I know we're not quite ready yet, but it's a dream that stretches back to those years when Tony was driving around in that red bus — quietly believing that one day, it might roll its way toward Papua New Guinea's first-ever Test match.

It's funny to think that as age caught up with him and the body inevitably slowed, he could have swapped that bus for something more family-friendly. But he didn't. He chose something far more cricket-friendly instead — and that choice says everything about the man.

The last time I travelled through Hohola and saw the red bus, now retired, with children playing alongside it, I couldn't help but smile. Those kids didn't know it, but they were playing beside a piece of cricket memoribilia.

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