

“NCAA” Basketball

I'm not talking about the U.S. NCAA which produced the likes of Larry Bird, “Magic” Johnson and Michael Jordan. If you wish to go back a little further, there's the University of Cincinnati's Oscar “Big O” Robertson, who led the winning U.S. squad at the Rome Olympics. I mean the Manila version of the NCAA. Vertically challenged (at 5' 8”, I am taller than most Filipinos men), Filipinos have always loved, still love and will probably continue to love basketball. I did too while going to school at San Beda College in Manila. Why basketball? No one knows. The best, most insightful and humorous explanation was given by a young American named Rafe Bartholomew who wrote “*Pacific Rims.*” The subtitle is more interesting “*Beermen Ballin' in FlipFlops and the Philippines' Unlikely Love Affair with Basketball.*” Believe it or not, he was granted a Fulbright scholarship to study basketball in the Philippines.

The biggest sports event in 1950's Manila was college basketball. There were two collegiate leagues, the NCAA and the UAAP. NCAA was a direct knockoff of the American National Collegiate Athletic Association. The knockoff even went further than just the name, acronym and original logo (it was changed in 2004). The colleges blatantly borrowed the music of American universities or institutions and inserted their lyrics. San Beda used the hymn of the United States Marines. Instead of “*from the halls of Montezuma,*” we sang “*from Mendiola to the battlefield.*” Ateneo used Notre Dame University's fight song or “*Victory March.*” Mapua took the music from “*On Wisconsin.*” De La Salle was given to singing “*Anchors Aweigh*” since they had a naval ROTC program. Letran liked to play the 1812 Overture on special occasions, complete with firing rifle blanks for the canon fire. I didn't know that most of this music was borrowed until I came to the United States and heard the college songs. I thought our NCAA songs were all original music composed by Filipinos, with the exception of the Marine hymn and the 1812 Overture. That goes to show what a 13 year old knows. I wonder if the music was copyrighted at the time. The UAAP is the University Athletic Association of the Philippines but they didn't generate the enthusiasm of the NCAA. The country's best players, those who were sent to the Olympics, Asian Games or other international tournaments mostly came from the NCAA. Three key players who were in the Asian Games gold medal team and bronze medal team at the World Championship all played in the NCAA. They were Carlos Loyzaga (San Beda), Mariano Tolentino (Jose Rizal) and Lauro Mumar (Letran). There was an industrial league where the college players gravitated to after graduation but enthusiasm wise they were no match for the NCAA either.

There were six schools in the NCAA; Ateneo (Blue Eagles), De La Salle (Green Archers), Jose Rizal (Bombers), Letran (Knights), Mapua (Cardinals) and San Beda (Red Lions). They played a round robin, meeting each team twice. Each team played 10 games, 11 if they were in the championship. At that time no school had a large enough gym, so games were played at the 1930's built Jose Rizal Memorial Stadium. Every game was usually a sellout, packing 10,000 basketball crazy students and fans. The stadium had a metal roof and there wasn't any air-conditioning at the time. You left the stadium drenched in sweat with your ears ringing. After the game, I either left euphoric (we won) or depressed (we lost) and always hoarse.

Each school had cheers or songs, some short but others going to several stanzas. After scoring, we would cheer the player, “Cruz, rah rah rah Cruz!” The loudest and most enthusiastic cheering section was that belonging to Ateneo. They never let up. The school, now Ateneo University, was run then by American born priests. Their students had a reputation for haughtiness. San Bedistas like me hated their guts. Four of the

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schools were Catholic; San Beda (Order of St. Benedict, named after St. Bede), De La Salle (Christian Brothers), Letran (Order of Preachers or Dominican) and Ateneo (Society of Jesus or Jesuits). Most of the priests/brothers and administrators were either American (Ateneo and De La Salle) or in our case at San Beda, Spanish. Today, all are run by Filipino clergy. Let me say at this point that we owe these priests and brothers a huge debt for our education. An American born Jesuit named Fr. James Reuter, now 96, is a beloved figure in the country. He taught for many years at the Ateneo and has spent 70 years in the Philippines.

Catholic or not, there was intense rivalry and games could get heated. There were occasional brawls in and out of the stadium. When exiting the stadium, you always traveled together and hope you don't meet a larger group from a rival school. Some years after I left San Beda, there was a huge fracas during a game, resulting in a near riot. A new term was coined and frequently used – “basketbrawl.” Disgusted by the recurring fights, Ateneo left the league in 1978 and joined the UAAP where it has dominated. San Beda left the league for a few years then returned.

The NCAA has expanded and changed dramatically. Since the schools are now co-ed, there are female cheerleaders. That's progress! But in the quest for basketball supremacy, the colleges have resorted to recruiting imports. San Beda has won five of the last six championships with the help of a Nigerian and in the past year an African American. I personally think this is a shame, having to import talent from abroad instead of relying on home grown players. I wonder what the graduation rate is for these imports. I would make one rule – if an import doesn't graduate, the school wouldn't be allowed an import for at least a year and lose the championship they won with the import. Some schools refuse to recruit imports, like Letran. I say more power to them.

There are a lot of sports where size doesn't matter, or at least there are weight classifications as in boxing, wrestling, weightlifting, martial arts, etc. In gymnastics, it seems the smaller the competitor, the better they are. Those Chinese girls can't be more than 85 pounds even with wet uniforms. They have won a lot of gold medals in the Olympics. The Philippines has never won a gold medal in any sport in the Olympics, although Filipino Americans have. Given the Filipino's love affair with basketball (to the detriment of other sports), the Olympic medal drought might not change anytime soon. But at least we have Manny Pacquiao.

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