

Baseball and Movies With My Father

By the time I was born, my father had just turned fifty. Entering my teen years, he was already in his sixties and as a cabinet Under-secretary in the administration of President Elpidio Quirino (1950-1953) and later Secretary during the time of President Ramon Magsaysay (1954–1957) he had very little time for me or family activities. But there were two activities that he and I went to regularly – baseball games and movies. It was just the two of us; neither my mother nor other siblings had much interest. Thank goodness for that. Maybe that is why I still love going to baseball games today in spite of the dismal record of the Cincinnati Reds. And after I arrived in the United States nearly fifty years ago, I went to Pittsburgh Pirate games.

In the 1950's the Philippines was very competitive with other Asian countries in sports. Filipino teams dominated Asia in basketball, going undefeated in the 1954 Asian Games. The Philippines was second only to Japan in total medals. I saw a lot of events during those Games because one of my father's perks were free tickets to VIP seats since the stadiums were government owned. Later that year the national basketball team traveled to Brazil for the FIBA Basketball Championship. The Philippines lost only to the U.S. and Brazil, beating the likes of Canada, France and Taiwan. Its ace center Carlos Loyzaga was one of the top scorers in the tournament. In more recent Asian Games, the Philippines ranked below more than a dozen Asian countries in medals, even below tiny Singapore and Hong Kong. And the basketball team has not won even a bronze medal lately.

Another sport Filipinos did well in was baseball, winning the first Asian Baseball Championship, also in 1954. They handily beat Japan. Yes, I remember going to that and other games with my dad. But even much earlier, the Philippines was already doing well in the sport. The precursor to the Asian Games was the biennial Far Eastern Games. Between 1915 and 1925, the Philippines won five of six baseball championships, losing only the 1917 championship to a team from Waseda University.

The baseball powerhouse of the 1950's was UST, the University of Santo Tomas. UST still dominates collegiate baseball today. The rest of the national team players were drawn from the Manila Bay Baseball League (MBBL) which flourished in the fifties. One of the teams was the Manila's Finest, sponsored by the Manila Police Department. The American military bases fielded teams, one from the Navy in Cavite and the other from the Air Force in Clark Air Base. I wonder if any of those ballplayers went on to the pros. The best Filipino pitcher was Teodulo "Lefty" Viray, who later became coach at UST. Dad and I went to quite a few MBBL games.

Since the Philippines was a hotbed of baseball, the New York Yankees barnstormed the Philippines twice, once in 1934 and another in 1955. During the 1934 tour, legend has it that Filipino pitcher Armando Oncinian struck out Yankee slugger Babe Ruth. But Ruth was already 39 years old and the next year he would be gone from the Yankees. In 1955 the Yankees under Casey Stengel again toured Asia, stopping in Manila for two games. Unfortunately I can't find a record of the results. That was the year the Brooklyn Dodgers won their one and only World Series by beating the Yankees. But the Yankees had Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra and Hank Bauer, making it unlikely that the Philippine All Star Team provided more than token opposition.

Since those heady days of the MBBL, Philippine baseball has been in decline. The Japanese continued to make progress and today have at least a dozen players in major league baseball. These include Ichiro Suzuki who established a single season record for

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hits and Hideki Matsui who played the outfield for the New York Yankees. They have won the World Baseball Classic twice, beating the United States and Cuba. Even Taiwan and Korea have players in the majors. The best the Philippines can do is pitcher Tim Lincecum of the San Francisco Giants whose mother is a Filipina. Here's hoping Philippine baseball can stage a comeback. It will really bring back more memories.

Another one of my dad's perks was movie tickets to Manila's first run theatres. In those days only the theatres were air conditioned and during the summer, it was a relief to spend two hours in the movies. The two we most frequented were the Lyric and Capitol on Escolta, the premiere shopping street of pre-mall Manila. What are now suburban malls were still rice fields then. The Lyric and Capitol only showed Hollywood movies and we had our fill. Cecil DeMille was in his prime and his spectaculars like *Samson and Delilah*, *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur* played to standing room only crowds. We got the best seats in the house, the so-called loge between the orchestra and the balcony. Once in a while my elder brother Toto would join us and he was disconcerted by my dad's habit of making audible comments during the screening. He would say things like "did you see that" or "look at that fight." In Tagalog of course. Besides the DeMille classics the favorite I remember most was *Around the World in 80 Days*. Lest you think that the movie perk was worth a lot, the cost of a ticket then was one peso and twenty centavos or sixty cents U.S. at the prevailing exchange rate.

I did go to Tagalog movies, but not with my dad. The tickets came from my brother Toto who had his own perks from the Philippine National Bank where he worked. But Tagalog movies and the Filipino movie stars of the 50's is another story for another time.