

BOYS OF SUMMER AND OUR ICE WATER CULTURE

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There is this wonted expectation that narratives about sports should primarily be about brawn, strategy and energy. The Filipino brand of athleticism will always be dynamic and inspiring but stories about it can also take the form of purgative, straightforward vessels that evoke sentimentality. I am not a great sports fan and I cannot be stellar in the language of sports like its true mavens. I have to rely on my bland (but with good intentions) state of mind about mainstream sports coupled with my supersized fondness for my childhood memories.

When the world was not yet inhabited by social media savants, photo documenting was virtually nonexistent, past generations were preoccupied with sports, mainly basketball (basketball *liga* stories require a separate piece of essay), boxing and bicycle racing or cycling. Back when there was not as yet much propensity for touring places, Tour of Luzon and the Marlboro Tour distracted us with glee.

My modest awareness about sports did not stop me from recalling to mind the so-called boys of summer of Philippine sports coupled with the “ice water culture” of my childhood past.

Outdoorsy, playful, grimy and blissful were all befitting adjectives for us when we were kids. I was able to collect memories about the sport of cycling in the summers of the late 1980s and early 1990s, mostly because of my uncles and *kuya*, the apodeictic sports fans in the family. In the blistering heat of the April to May sun, I was reminded of the reason why all these cyclists were called “boys of summer” -- they rule the roads with their bikes during those hot two months. Schools are on reprieve from April to May so kids like myself had ample time to heal from chicken pox, loiter the rugged and dusty roads, play all kinds of games to our hearts’ content and occasionally catch dragonflies for when we still want to do something frolicsome but low intensity.

Of the local cycling bouts, Marlboro Tour was the one I got to see.

During the Marlboro Tour, while the participating cyclists are in transit in the province of Pangasinan, they will always pass by our *barangay* in Calasiao. All the attention of my uncles and *kuya* and the rest of us neighborhood kids were easily diverted to transistor radios that closely monitor the cyclists’ location. When the location has been confirmed to be drawing near our *barangay*, oh! how it was like a mini-parade and we were all instantly transformed as feisty spectators, faster than a person could shout, “*bisikleta!*”

My *kuya*’s favorite was the cyclist Carlo Guieb who, according to him, was king of mountain climbing. Of course, everybody had soft spots for the cyclists who hailed from Pangasinan. There was Bernard “Bernie” Llantada who was the ultimate all-purpose guy, meaning, he was good at everything especially in the individual time. He will be remembered as the one who defeated Guieb because of his ingenious use of disc wheel. There was also the hulky Lionel Tualla from Anonas, Romeo Bunso and of course, Jesus “Jess” Garcia Jr. from Mangaldan, who was a cycling champ in the 1980s, and has also achieved a successful crossover to music and became known as the person behind the famous song, “*Buhay Siklista.*” Arnel Querimit was likewise one of the “most decorated” cyclists. He had the heart of a champ and he was able to compete internationally. Querimit was an archetype of the breed of local cyclists who

took things to another level when he made diet and training fundamental parts of his cycling regimen, so my *kuya* said.

The word “*eme*” is now being uttered to mean “not true” or “*wala lang*” but even before this gay-inspired term became a household verbal expression, there was already the *Tatlong Eme* in the local cycling circle. *Tatlong Eme* was one of the formidable routes that bikers had to endure in Philippine cycling history. Of course, there was also the killer Baguio to Baguio route. Imagine those sore muscles reaching a new height of soreness. And more pain for good measure. There is no point debating that cyclists are earnest athletes.

As a kid, what really stood out to me during the heydays of cycling and the boys of summer was the ingenuity of our “ice water culture.” Excited and nostalgic, I would sometimes ask friends who were not from our place about the cycling tour and the ice water culture. They remember the particular sport but frankly, they do not connect to the ice water culture. I thought, perhaps, it was something that kids who only lived close to the shoulder of national roads can relate to. Nevertheless, it was something satisfying that came with an invaluable price tag.

While the Marlboro Tour competitors ride through the Pangasinan geographic route, someone would announce with a loud and clear voice, for the entire neighborhood to be alerted, that the cyclists are nearing. As kids, we would scamper to get as many plastic bags of “ice water” at home as we can manage. These ice water bags were exactly the ones being sold for 50 cents to 1 peso apiece at that time. For all the frugal ways of our Filipino parents and guardians, getting all those bags of ice water without buying them, for the cyclists’ fleeting consumption, were surprisingly easy to hanker for.

With springing steps that only wide-eyed kids like us could exhibit, we will reach the shoulder of the highway some forty to fifty meters away from our houses and in the sweltering heat of the summer sun, we would wait with forbearance for the boys of summer to pass by. Imagine a handful of kids, and even adults, jubilantly dangling plastic bags of ice water on the side of the road, for a chance at one’s offering to be snatched by one of the cyclists.

It was somehow disappointing for one’s bags of ice water to go unnoticed but the euphoric air at that time was enough to forget about the disappointment. With the intense heat, you can jab at those bags on your own and have an ice water shower fest on the way back home.

The culmination of all the excitement was the privilege for one or two or all of your bags of ice water to be taken by the cyclists to ravenously pour on their sweaty, sticky bodies. You were deemed lucky if you got to see one of the cyclists jabbed at your bag of ice water and got all his face drenched with the cold water. To see that, it was like poetry in motion. I remember, the satisfaction during that time was ten times better than getting several autographs from random local celebrities (although the autographs of local basketball players were holy grail as well). It was the age of innocence, and a glorious one at that.

At a young age, when you believe that you are able to provide even just a small relief to someone in great weariness or pain, without the element of ostentation, there is already a sense of joy in that and if you remain unassuming as you add years to your life, you get to carry that feeling into adulthood. This was what I meant somehow when I said that sports stories can also take the form of purgative, straightforward vessels that evoke sentimentality.

But all these minute details about happy summer mental images in my mind during those sublime days, even as I write this, remain impalpable in part. If all these old summer experiences about local cycling will be resurrected, will these sports-related experiences, old and new, be

even close to being the same? I wonder. While I can still ideate the youthful energy that may trigger various thoughts and motions, kids these days might prefer to watch a cycling bout on their personal smartphones. They might not be ecstatic to leap the short distance from their houses to the shoulder of the national road where the cyclists will pass through because of the burning rays of the sun. Advances in technology and climate change and other worldly things happened and time certainly did not freeze for these changes.

Most of the boys of summer during their time were hardworking farmers or *pandesal* peddlers in their towns while also being intense athletes. It is very Filipino to unite our love for sports with the dream of bettering the condition of our families. Cycling is a sport in which Filipinos can excel with certainty. Cycling will also remain as my personal souvenir of good old summers with less to no complications. At some point, many kids like myself even dreamed of doing what the boys of summer do, being cyclists, for personal and national glories both. Cycling is a sport close to every Filipino's heart, just like basketball or boxing. It can also be turned into a hobby that is not too costly. It remains a recurring dream for the cycling tour to be back--for the benefit of emerging cycling kings and queens, the sentimentals like myself and the ambitious young Filipinos. Sadly, sponsorship for cyclists is a serious national concern until now. Unlike in other countries where cyclists are treated professionally, cyclists here are treated differently. Hopefully, cycling will also flourish here with the true distinction it deserves as a sport.

In the midst of an ongoing pandemic, the timely construction of a bypass here in our *barangay* is gradually cultivating among people a promising love for wellness activities of many kinds--walking, brisk walking, jogging, running, and of course, bike riding. I do not know if it's the glorious sunrise or sunset dominating the eclectic sky perchance, or the novelty of evenly cemented and spacious roads, or the piqued interest of people, old and young, to finally have an inexpensive chance to engage their limbs and get into humanly movements after extended bouts of restrictions due to safety and health protocols of late, but I have been regularly witnessing more and more people taking out their bikes to ride with a mix of leisure and purpose.

When I see a crowd of active young people whose excitement is fueled by bicycle racing, it evokes in me anticipatory feelings how this certain, underrated sport can unfastened the doors of the world sports arena for us as potential champions. With well-meaning support from the government and private entities, we can stand out in cycling. Like boxing, all things being equal, or almost equal, cycling is also another sport that has been intended for us to conquer. As Filipinos, we are made for cycling. Grand thoughts--just what makes me think this? Because for a country with townspeople who can be so enraptured with seeing homegrown athletes being drenched by ice water in plastic bags, we also identify as a country with townspeople who have so much fighting pride. And so for as long as there are Filipinos inclined to pedal for the sheer love of the sport, self, family and country, and for as long as there are roads for these relentless individuals' bicycle tires to traverse, cycling will always be a sport that will make us the competitors to beat.

May the wheels of our generation of young bike riders carry the passion of scorching summers past and future and may these riders be driven by the proverbial ache of the pioneering boys of summer. We will be here, rooting for them, carrying fond memories about early cycling, and dousing them with relief and the unwavering belief that Filipino bike riders can treadle their way towards global recognition and honor.