

## **MINDORO BASKETBALL AND BOXING NARRATIVES**

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I believe that sports, like literature, should be both local and universal. In this context, I humbly offer boxing and basketball stories from our ordinary life and familiar sports minutiae connected to my beloved island of Mindoro here in the Philippines.

Boxing and basketball are arguably the most loved sports in the country, and with that reality, what immediately comes to mind are these: the legendary Caloy Loyzaga; the first two professional fights of Manny Pacquiao, the fighting prides of San Jose, Joe Francisco, and Ric Magramo; the San Jose Basketball League and some ruminations how we followed the Crispa-Toyota rivalry and the PBA games in the mid-70s when there was still no televisions, computers, and internet or whatsoever.

### **Birthplace of Caloy Loyzaga?**

According to many sports authorities, Carlos “Caloy” Loyzaga was born in Pandurucan (now San Jose, Occidental Mindoro) on August 29, 1930, but some sources say it was in Manila.

Nonetheless, Loyzaga was the most significant Filipino cager the world has ever known. His moniker “The Great Difference” was coined by sportscaster Willy Hernandez in the 50s. He played for the San Beda Red Lions in the National College Athletic Association (NCAA), where he bagged the most coveted Most Valuable Player (MVP) honors in 1951 and 1952. Loyzaga played in four Asian Games and led his team to gain gold medals not to be counted out the two FIBA Asia Championships in 1960 at 1963 and played in the Olympics in 1952 and 1956.

The former Red Lion landed as a member of the All-Tournament Team in the 1954 FIBA World Championships and was hailed as part of the World’s Mythical Five. In the inaugural staging of the Asian Basketball Confederation (ABC) Championship held in Manila in 1960 and his namesake Carlos “Charlie” Badion, the first MVP of the still existing regional league now known as FIBA Asia Championship. Badion, according to my father, is the inventor of the so-called bicycle drive, the precursor of the now-famous euro step.

When Caloy retired from playing amateur basketball in 1964, he coached the YCO Painters and the Manila Bank Golden Bankers in the Manila Industrial and Commercial Athletic Association (MICA) including the University of Santo Tomas Glowing Goldies in the University Athletic Association of the Philippines (UAAP), the collegiate league established in 1938.

In the Philippine Basketball Association (PBA), Loyzaga coached the U/Textile Wranglers from 1975 to 1976 and the Tanduay Rhum Makers from 1977 to 1979. Loyzaga, the father of PBA stars Chito and Joey, gained extra recognition when he coached the Philippine Team called Dirty Dozen to regain the ABC title in 1967 from South Korea. As we all know, the Philippine-South Korea rivalry existed even before Gilas Pilipinas’ fame and flame.

In his column in Philippine Daily Inquirer on August 28, 2007, the late sports journalist Manolo R. Iñigo wrote that Loyzaga was born in San Jose, Mindoro, to a sports family. “There, the Loyzaga boys organized a basketball team, with the tall and gangling Caloy at the helm,” the scribe further stressed. From Mindoro, he ventured to the country’s capital. “Already showing signs of greatness and towering at 6-foot-3 (a rarity among local players at that time), the young Loyzaga moved from sandlot basketball in Mindoro to the big time in Manila by joining the star-studded Sta. Mesa Aces in 1942,” Iñigo added.

Joaquin M. Henson, in his Philippine Star Global column Sporting Chance on February 3, 2016, interviewed Loyzaga where the Big Difference stressed, “When you wear the colors of your country on your uniform, your country comes first before yourself. You look at what’s in front, not your name at the back of your jersey. If you have to break a bone to fight for your country, you break it. It’s not about money. When we played for the national team, we got an allowance of \$3 to \$5 a day during the Asian Games and \$10 a day for the Olympics. We weren’t promised any bonuses for winning. We went out there to play for our country – we played for honor, nothing else. We were proud to represent the Philippines as Filipinos.” A former Manila councilor, Loyzaga, died on January 27, 2016, due to lingering illness in San Juan City.

I will not be surprised if the Rizal Memorial Coliseum is named after Loyzaga as proposed by Congressman Eric Martinez recently.

Some of Caloy’s close relatives still reside in San Jose. His nephew Agustin or Toting, owns the Loyzaga Lumber Mill in Occidental Mindoro, a prominent establishment in town way back in the late 50s to early 80s. Caloy’s niece, Estella Loyzaga Yap, 83, a retired college professor, still lives in San Jose.

Many of them didn’t know when I asked the old folks of San Jose if indeed Caloy Loyzaga was born here. They cannot even recall if the basketball legend came to visit the place for whatever purpose, even his closest relatives. Only a tiny fraction of the municipality’s population knows him. Aside from Toting, the only Loyzaga they could easily recall is Norma, his wife, team owner of the multi-awarded basketball team joining each year in the annual San Jose Summer Basketball League or SJSBL.

Whether Pandurucan is truly his place of birth or his family just migrated here years before the war, the truth remains that we forget him as he also seemingly forgets this place I call home.

### **Crispa-Toyota over the radio**

We did not have Cable television when I was a kid, so we just followed the PBA games over the radio. If I were not mistaken, it was covered by Kanlaon Broadcasting Network and in Tagalog. Like social media, the internet and computers are still future things, and we have no other choice but to listen to the radio. The San Jose of the 70s still have no electricity. I was told by my friend Dabid Ighay, a Hanunuo Mangyan chieftain from Banaynayan, Mansalay that since it was in the vernacular, they used to listen to radio coverage from the boondocks.

While my playmates and classmates root for Crispa, I am a die-hard Toyota fan. I admire most of their players because, for me, they are tough, on and off-court. They are determined and strong. Aided by a kerosene-fueled lamp, we glued our ears to the speaker not to miss the blow-by-blow account of the game. I go for the underdog, even now and way back then.

I was just nine years old in 1971 when Robert Jaworski and Alberto “Big Boy” Reynoso, during their Meralco days in the Manila Industrial and Commercial Athletic Association (MICA) were banned for life by the BAP for assaulting two basketball officials Eriberto Cruz and Jose Obias. That was for allegedly making a series of bad calls favoring Crispa. There was still no PBA then, the first-ever pay-for-play league in Asia.

This incident made Jaworski and Reynoso miss the 1972 Olympics, including the opportunity to play for the national team for the first time in their lives. But the two cagers were reinstated in 1973, and in that same year, they again teamed up for the Philippine team for the Asian Basketball Conference or ABC. Other players include Francis Arnaiz, Ramon Fernandez, William "Bogs" Adornado, Rogelio "Tembong" Melencio, David Regullano, Rosalio "Yoyong" Martinez, Manuel Paner, Alberto Guidaben, Jimmy Mariano and Ricardo "Joy" Cleofas.

I also remember having a notebook with the squad’s picture on its cover that caused envy from my boy classmates at Bubog Elementary School. I was in Grade VI then under Miss Lilia T. Bercasio, my adviser and English teacher who first taught me to write from my mind. Listening to the radio drama and PBA coverage helped me harness my imagination.

To prove to you that I am a Toyota and a Jaworski fan before his pre-Ginebra days, I am going to answer this question: “Where did the “Big J” nickname of Jaworski come from?” Answer: Many people said that Jaworski plays like Milwaukee Bucks' Oscar Robertson, nicknamed “Big O” (Lil' bit naughty, isn't it?). And from then on, Bobby Jaworski became the "Big J" (And it's even more playful if he was called "Big BJ" or plainly "BJ" as in Bobby Jaworski!). See? I am a genuine Toyota fan.

Seriously, when Jaworski-led Ginebra came into being, I suddenly turned my loyalty away from the living legend of Philippine basketball. I completely lost my penchant for the Big J when The Bull emerged in the league. Nelson Asaytono, a former University of Manila (UM) stalwart, and a member RP Youth team played in Manila's 9th ABC Youth Championships.

My change of heart is due to the silly reason that Asaytono hails from the island of Mindoro. He was born in San Teodoro on January 25, 1967, but raised in Mamburao. There are only two PBA players who came from Mindoro. The other one is Robinson “Ben” Obrique of the CDCP-Galleon Shippers, who is from Roxas.

My province currently takes pride in two youthful and promising basketeer hoping that they will reach the El Dorado of professional basketball in the country, the PBA. The high-flying Chris Lalata of Bicol Volcanoes in the Maharlika Pilipinas Basketball League (MPBL), who was born

in San Jose, and Jade C. Talampas, the 6'2" shooting guard of the Arellano University Chiefs in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) who hails from Mamburao. Asaytono was drafted as the 2nd overall pick by the Purefoods Hotdogs in 1989. During the time of Asaytono in the PBA, we already had electricity, and we got rid of listening to a PBA game on the transistor radio but watched them already on cable television. Having mentioned Asaytono, my heart bleeds for Nelson, for being omitted in the PBA's 40 Greatest Players' List despite his 17 seasons, 820 games, 7 championships, 2 BPCs, 12,268 points (5th all-time), 4,469 rebounds, 1,336 assists record, and for being almost unstoppable for those years. One of the deadliest in PBA history, The Bull deserves to be on the list.

His name was twice excluded in the roll, and when asked his reaction about this by Spin.Ph's Snow Badua in 2014, he said, "That's a lot of bull." To this I say, "Very well said."

Well, aside from gluing our ears to the radio, we also watched in the flesh or live basketball games at the roofless San Jose Municipal Gymnasium when I was young.

### **SJBL: A league of our own**

The heydays of local basketball in this lowly town are in the middle part of the 70s to the early part of the 80s. We all watch live games at San Jose Summer Basketball League (SJBL) at the old roofless San Jose Municipal Gymnasium, reconstructed and renamed Juan G. Santos Gymnasium in honor of our former town mayor. Our fiesta then is not complete without summer basketball. Fiesta time is always basketball time.

This tradition started in 1964 when Tirso Abeleda was the alcalde. Before the construction of the old gym, the tournaments were held at the San Jose Town Plaza. Upon entering the gymnasium, eateries, snack parlors are all over. They serve beer, too. This part of San Jose glitters by night. The most famous diners and bars instantly extend branches surrounding the arena. At its gates stood its keepers, two older women named Flaviana Rayton and Pacencia Zubiri, and we children call them Lola Bianang and Lola Pacing, respectively.

The use of the English language in sportscasting, ala-Joe Cantada, and Penggoy Pengson, was pioneered by Lolito Malubag. When he is not serving as umpire or referee), the Divine Word College of San Jose (DWCSJ) Physical Education teacher is behind the microphone sans his whistle. His students, Reynaldo Morales, Robert Asignacion, Rommel San Diego, and Carlos Bagatsolon, came later. This batch brought the blow-by-blow account of the games using the foreign tongue, while the other "announcers" or barkers used Tagalog for their sportscasting.

Loyzaga Lumber Mill was a team owned by Norma Loyzaga, wife of Agustin Loyzaga, the great Caloy's nephew. The Lumberjacks' top local cagers are Emy Mariano, Arthur De Jesus, Boyet Loyzaga, Arthur Cariño, Francing Callanga, Nante Dela Cruz, Uly Javier, Boy Masangkay, Tony Quirante and Lorenzo Malibiran. The Loyzaga Lumber Mill is the winningest team in town in the senior's division. Loyzaga Lumber Mill also has a junior team in 1978 where future PBA player Joey Loyzaga also did play.

But later, the National Grains Authority (NGA) became the Lumberjacks' closest rival. The Grainers, later renamed NFA, paraded great players from all over the province. Nanding Cordova, Elvis Leyto, Boy Liboro, Toto Agustin, Boy Balleza and Rudy Alindato, Ding Balleza, Eyo Delos Reyes, among others.

The Loyzaga Lumber Mill against National Food Authority Grainers is our version of Crispa-Toyota's classic rivalry. The Capitol Tamaraws, led by Nelson Asaytono whose name is still unknown to Coach Joe Lipa, was also in contention.

The most unforgotten "imports" are Fred Demetrio of the Loyzaga Lumberjacks, who played for ER Squibb in the PBA before with the original Crispa Redmanizer Billy Abarrientos. Agpacón's (or the Aguilos Pablo Construction) Chito Plaza, former forward of the Cosmos Bottlers in MICAA played in the Junior A Division. The MBM Mendenilla Fish Dealers fielded Robinson "Ben" Obrique of the CDCP-Galleon Shippers from the PBA. The future Ginebra star Pido Jarencio played for the PC-INP at that time. PBA star Lawrence Mumar was in the line-up of Nicolas Dimaano Warehouse Basketball Team. The Department of Agriculture hired ace guard Jerome Cueto. Cueto also played Masagana-99 in the old Philippine Amateur Basketball League (PABL) but has never been played in the professional league.

Also, Benjie Paras, for a time, played here for the local Shell team courtesy of his friend, a local businessman Dennis Sy. I likewise remember seeing former pros like San Miguel's Edgardo "Dong" Postanes, Roberto Victorino of the U/Tex Wranglers, and Cris Bolado before he played for Alaska Milkmen in the PBA, to name a few.

The old San Jose Municipal Gymnasium is the go-to place or venue of people during the summertime: students who are on summer vacation; friends, relatives coming from the barrios that root for their respective teams; barangay residents of San Jose and nearby municipalities who want to see the sights and sounds of the upcoming fiesta, and anybody who wants to pass away the hot summer nights. And the main attraction is the San Jose Summer Basketball League (SJSBL). Unfortunately, the popularity of SJSBL waned due to two significant factors.

First, the old roofless gymnasium was renovated. This resulted in a summer with no basketball league prompting the people to look for other activities to fill the vacuum. Enter the second factor – Cable Television. The installation and operation of cable TVs filled the void left by the basketball-less summer. Who would want to pay five to ten pesos to watch local teams when you can watch the NBA and PBA free basketball games on TV? Not to mention the telenovelas that every housewife religiously watch.

After these events, the SJSBL was never the same. When SJSBL resumed, only a handful of patrons would watch the tournament. Ticket sales went down, and organizers of the summer league were hard-pressed to pay the salaries of the referees and staff. The traditional league went on for a couple more summers until the popularity of SJSBL waned and died. Millennials nowadays don't even remember the yearly summer basketball league anymore.

My grandfather, Pantaleon Novio, a retired government employee and a boxing fan, fanned the fire inside me to like the sport at a very tender age.

### **Not finishing well: Joe Francisco**

I suddenly felt upset when I saw the legendary Pedro Adigue, Jr. at the opponent's corner that night. The former World Boxing Council (WBC) Light Welterweight Champion perhaps took a break from the movies and came to San Jose. The older Adigue, who defeated Adolph Pruitt in 1968, was here that time to support his nephew and protégée Chito Adigue. The old Pedro presumably taught this young relative everything from the books on punching and footwork. But the Joe Francisco-Chito Adigue match at San Jose Municipal Gymnasium that night of May 16, 1981, was a non-title fight. Diomedes "Joe" Francisco from Brgy. Batasan, San Jose, was then a ring sensation in the Philippine Boxing scene. He was our local hero. Joe went to San Jose National High School and it was there where he was discovered by local boxing promoters when he was still in the amateurs. I and my classmates had to skip classes to watch him skip the rope in training.

The younger Adigue's killer left hook, which was a lucky punch, landed on his jaw on the 6th round of the bout. The game ended, and the career of Francisco and our high hopes to see our very own fighter climb up the ring for a world championship fight. The Adigue's uncle-and-nephew tandem shattered all our dreams. Our hero was mauled in front of his province mates. His home-court advantage suddenly turned into misfortune.

We have cursed his manager, the referee, the promoters, and practically everyone behind that bitter non-title fight. That fight, for many of us, was just a "money-making" thing. Seeing our hero fall on the while gnawing in pain and aches were written all over his face made us cry, almost. A tragic event that is not easy to forget until now. When Joe knelt on the canvass the night he lost, the people of Occidental Mindoro wept for him, and with him.

In his early years in boxing, Diomedes "Joe" Francisco was molded and turned into a human wrecking ball by the former world champion Erbito Salavarria after the great but once-controversial Filipino puncher saw Joe's potential when Joe was still an amateur. After only two impressive amateur wins, Salavarria decided to level up his protégée to the professional level for the featherweight division. That was 1977 when he's the Philippines' newest ring sensation. In Joe's golden years, Boxing analysts considered him a thinking boxer because of how he analyzes his opponent before delivering his killer punches. Until that heartbreaking loss from the hands, err, fists of Adigue. His second loss was in a match held at Araneta Coliseum via split decision to Gener Cruz on October 5, 1980, but in their rematch held on March 1, 1981, Francisco won by points over Cruz. There was still no pay-per-view then.

But before Salavarria, as a budding amateur, Joe received pointers from a former boxer, a townmate named Ric Magramo.

Here is Joe Francisco's record after his retirement in 1981: a total of 26 fights; 23 wins; 1 draw; 2 losses. Francisco was the #1 Philippine Junior Featherweight contender and #3 in the OPBF or the Orient Pacific Boxing Federation. Three years after that gruesome loss, Joe successfully won by way of unanimous decision in his two comeback fights but finally decided to hang his gloves. He focused on attending to his growing family and new career path to thread. From fistfights, Joe finally ended in firefighting known as SFO2 Diomedes L. Francisco of the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) until he retired some years back.

But my friend Joe's contribution to boxing went on. Way back on November 10, 1982, a year after he departed from boxing, his wife Loyalyn gave birth to their firstborn Drian (nicknamed Jong) in Brgy, Pag-Asa, San Jose.

Joe raised Drian in Sablayan to be a boxer like him. Drian had professionally boxed for 142 rounds with 71.43 KO percentage in his 28 professional fights. In Drian's early professional bouts held here in the Philippines, Bing Bing, his mother, took care of her son's diet while Joe gave pre-fight pointers and acted as physical conditioning coach in the training camp.

But sweet science runs deep in Joe's veins that even after he decided to quit the pugilists' world, he teaches free boxing lessons to kids, acting as a referee or promoter of boxing matches in our province until now. He is also into street basketball as his pastime. Still in excellent shape, even now in his mid-60s, Joe is on top physical form.

His son Drian subsequently made a name in the Philippine boxing scene. Nicknamed "Gintong Kamao", Drian won the WBA International super flyweight title on October 3, 2009, stopping former WBA Flyweight Champion Roberto Vasquez in 10 rounds. Before that, the San Jose-born boxer won the WBO Asia Pacific flyweight title by a 7th round TKO win over Pichitchok Singmanassak on December 30, 2006. On August 4, 2007, he defended it by stopping Wanmeechok Singwantha in one round. He retired in 2018 with 36 total fights with a 29-6-1 win-loss-draw record with 22 knockouts.

Drian Francisco is now based in Singapore and the only Filipino instructor at Evolve Mixed Martial Arts.

To his credit, Joe Francisco was once No. 1 Philippine Junior Featherweight contender at No. 3 in the OPBF or the Orient Pacific Boxing Federation. He has never been a world or orient pacific champion tracing this to his tragic loss to Chito Adigue right at his birthplace, right at the very eyes of his townspeople.

### **Unsung champ: Ric Magramo**

I used to loiter at the San Jose Public Market when I was still in my teens. That was 1977. I didn't know that a former national boxing champ was a skinny, aging man working as a casual municipal employee at the slaughterhouse nearby. The man moves differently. His hands and head are incessantly shaking, and limply he walks. Parkinson's disease, perhaps.

Endirikito “Ric” Magramo, was born in Roxas, and when he retired from boxing, he decided to migrate in San Jose for the rest of his life. Magramo was once the Philippine flyweight champion who commenced his career in the late 50s. During his time, the national champion boxer is given a chance to face the reigning world champion. At that time, being a boxer was not yet a lucrative profession. Magramo won two national championships beating Arturo “Baby” Lorona and Francisco’s imminent coach, Erbito Salavarria. Of their three fights, Magramo defeated twice Bernabe Villacampo and won over Al Diaz three times. Salavarria and Villacampo later became world champions while Magramo failed to make it.

Under the flag, he fought bravely in various countries, specifically in Thailand, Japan, and England, and had exchange blows with world champions like Hiroyuki Ebihara, Walter McGowan, and Bengkrekk Chartvanchai.

The golden days of national or local boxing were the 60s. When Magramo fought Lorona in 1963 at Araneta Coliseum, it was so-called “companion main event” in the square off of world-rated featherweights Johnny Jamito of the Philippines and Hiroshi Kobayashi of Japan, who later became world champion.

Ric Magramo failed to bag the Oriental title when he settled for two losses and one draw versus the long-reigning Japanese champion Tsuyoshi Nakamura. All of the fights were held in Japan. That was the time when the famed warrior hanged his gloves. If we look closely, Salavarria and Villacampa would not be world champions without their compatriot Magramo.

“Apat na ulit nagkapanagupa si Ric Magramo at si Erbito Salavarria, na dati kong trainer,” (Magramo and Salavarria, my former trainer, faced each other four times) says Diomedes “Joe” Francisco.

Magramo was the progenitor of the fighting Magramos: Renato (Ric Jr.), Melvin, Ronnie, and Arvin, all former professional boxers, and Gielmel “Pistolero” Magramo, who has a residence in San Jose and is still active in boxing to date.

Like Francisco, Magramo could not reach the orient pacific championship, so they both missed the opportunity to be world champions. While off duty at the municipal abattoir and despite his physical disability, he continued to train aspiring boxers in my hometown and the chief boxing trainer at the Loring Gamboa Stable and Promotion. The stable and promotion firm is no longer around as the last sound of the bell in the life of a barely known warrior in the ring during his halcyon years. A few decades ago, Ric Magramo silently laid to rest in his second home, San Jose, Occidental Mindoro.

### **Pacquiao’s first two professional fights**

Over bottles of Red Horse, an old drinking buddy and a Sablayan pioneering resident Tito Alfon Paz remembered the day how he carried over his shoulders his son John Paul, who was still a toddler, to watch boxing matches at the Sablayan Astrodome. Being a boxing fan, I was amazed



by that bit of sports history the first time I heard it. In this arena, he first saw the young skinny boxer he knows that someday will be hailed as one of the world's best. That boy was soon to be a legend, Manny Pacquiao.

Manny Pacquiao's first two professional fights were held here at Sablayan Astrodome. His first fight as a pro was against Edmund Ignacio held on January 22, 1995, and immediately followed by his match versus Pitoy Montejo on March 18, 1995. In these two outings, Pacquiao won via unanimous decision against his two opponents, and as we say, the rest is history.

It is in Sablayan where Joe Francisco now resides. At the same time, Ric Magramo regularly visited this town at the geographical center of Occidental Mindoro and the largest municipality, in terms of land area, in the entire Philippines, when he was still alive. Ric regularly visits his brother Estoy in Sta. Lucia, a coastal barangay in the municipality. He is the uncle of incumbent vice-mayor, Bong Marquez. Marquez's mother and the late boxer's father are first cousins. Sablayan is now debatably considered as the boxing Mecca of Occidental Mindoro.

Manny Pacquiao's boxing unifies Filipinos no doubt. Even the Mangyans coming from the boondocks go down to town proper to watch him fight. San Jose and Sablayan troop to venues whenever Pac-Man's bouts were featured for free on-screen. Though the Mangyans do not interact with the lowlanders, they stay quietly in one nook of the forum, watching the match unobtrusively.

Councilor Ruben C. Aldaba is the Indigenous People's Mandatory Representative (IPMR) to the Sangguniang Bayan (SB) of Sablayan. Like his people back in Pandalagan, their indigenous cultural community, he also troops to every location where Pacquiao's fight is showing. With a stroke of luck, on November 4, 2019, he met the people's champ in his Senate office. The Alangan leader relayed to me that he treasured much of the meeting. Alangan is one of the seven ethnolinguistic groups of Mangyans of Mindoro.

Senator Manny Pacquiao asked Aldaba about the road condition in the province, and the 12-time world title winner in 8 weight divisions was delighted when the IP lawmaker told him that the roads are now okay. Pacquiao is so proud mentioning about Sablayan, gladly narrating to all foreign visitors in the room how he started his young professional career here.

As part of Aldaba's visiting delegation, I stood as a fluky witness that day when the fighting senator's hardened knuckles and the Mangyan leader's calloused hand clasped.

### **Both Local and Universal**

Truly, sports like literature must be both local and universal. Universal in the sense that all humanity believes in the pedagogical and transforming power of both realms. Local because people, regardless of their social standing, are involved directly or indirectly in sports and literature. Their main similarity though is the purpose which is about the development and recognition of human skills and the fighting spirit, the character of the writer and the athlete.

That is why it is worthy to tell the world about Mindoro and our folk's deep and passionate attachment to the omnipresent sports of boxing and basketball.

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