

OUR DOTA 2 OLYMPIANS

Ramil Adrian Fariñas

For Zeke & Ben

The days are nearing—another big sports competition will be held, with five Filipino players going. This is no larger than the Olympics, though the hype is near to deafen like the World Cup. This is also more of a region-representation than a contest to represent one's nation, it is nevertheless—a \$40 million-prize pool competition, one of the most record-breaking in all of esports. It is *The International*.

The International, or 'TI', is DotA 2's annual main event, the culminating battle of teams which garnered most DotA 2 Pro Circuit (DPC) points, entering as the invited 12. Meanwhile, a set of qualifiers per region (China, North America, South America, Southeast Asia, Europe, and CIS region) takes place for other teams to join the invited 12 teams, forming an 18 team-strong constellation from all over the world.

The historic status of TI has already been assured due to its yearly record-shattering increase of prize pool, not forgetting the heartrending stories that had sprung from it. Who can forget our very own TNC's win against OG in TI6? The greatest underdog win in esports? Of course, that 'anime betrayal' settled in an intense match between Fly and NoTail—Evil Geniuses against OG in TI8; then the latter's comeback against PSG.LGD in the grand finals? The East-versus-West tradition is also lived here, with some Chinese teams winning the Aegis—TI's symbolic trophy. After postponing TI last year due to the pandemic, Valve is going full gear to celebrate TI10, the first decade-installment at Arena Națională in Bucharest, Romania on October 12-17, 2021.

Even though TNC, our pure Filipino line-up, had fallen short in the qualifiers, it is still amusing to know that five of our players will play for three different teams in two different regions this TI10. For South Korea's T1, we have Karl Baldovino (using his name as his in-game ID) and Carlo 'Kuku' Palad. While for Fnatic, the most popular esports organization in Europe which relocated its DotA 2 team to Malaysia, we have Marc Polo Luis 'Raven' Fausto and Djardel 'Dj' Mampusti. For the all-time supported Evil Geniuses of North America, we have Abed Yusop, who, like Karl, has his name for his ID.

These players' biographies are too broad to speak of. But their skills have relegated them into roles which signified their truest talents. After all, DotA 2 is divided into five roles: the carry, the midlaner, the offlaner, the roaming support, and the hard support. Respectively, they are also called Position 1, Position 2, and so forth. An individual can only play a role in a certain time. At that time, he is a master. Think of Abed, who plays a core role—the midlaner. Abed in TI7, who fought under Philippines' Execration, was new in the international scene to go up against established names. With his formidable use of Meepo, the game's hardest hero to play, he scored an unforgettable rampage on Team Complexity. During that stint, he was still below 18 years of age, but already a pianist in esports—lucid in intervening powerful play of heroes. Dj, on the side of support, had already rendered a legacy of being one of the best supports in DotA 2 history. From being a carry before in Rave, Dj moved further to become Southeast Asia's most beloved Position 4. His patient and calculated dives when using Earthshaker and Enigma are only some of the many highlights. With the continuous updates in the Dota 2 gameplay, or 'meta' as it is simply called,

Dj had shifted to playing hard support for Fnatic this TI10. And of course, Kuku, who made his name from playing for TNC before, has been known for his ‘raidboss’ Huskar-gameplay, as best demonstrated in the TNC-versus-OG elimination series in TI6. That was no easy feat, especially back in the day only European and Chinese teams dominated the scene (Evil Geniuses was, for most part, the only North American in the top tier). Even prior to winning TI8 and TI9, OG has already been a European DotA 2 powerhouse. But with the resiliency we have in our Filipino veins—without any pursuit of romanticizing it, rather only mentioned here for the motivation in sports competition—TNC, with Kuku and his dangerous Huskar, gave us not only one of the best comebacks in esports, but also hope. Hope, that in playing DotA 2, or any ‘video game,’ there is something celestial to celebrate. Shakespeare was right—it is not in the stars that hold our destiny; it will always be about getting back to our feet, unscathed by the thoughts of defeat and despair; hope unbecoming as a mere word, turning rather into an action for the win. Kuku, with all these experiences, is now the captain (or the drafter) and offlaner for T1.

Aside from all the technical mastery and swift reflexes of the game, it is, without a doubt, they are Filipinos at heart, who were only persuaded by the shores abroad to find their destiny—their love of the game. We can’t sentimentalize this, the way we did with Wesley So, who left the Philippine chess delegation and moved to play for the US instead. But we felt his pain the same way in the time before Hidilyn Diaz’s win in the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Diaz was downplayed for financial support, and even put in danger for the government’s absurd red-tagging. When Diaz shattered a century-long drought of Olympic gold medal, the Duterte administration somehow, began claiming *her* victory. Worse, even gaslighted what she had endured. Though the administration fulfilled the constitution-mandated rewards to our Olympians, the public sentiment is singular: Why do we always reward excellence, rather invest for it? Why do we neglect our players, until they become who they aim to be?

I’ve been cheering for our DotA 2 teams and players since the gods know when. Albert Camus said he’d be a football player if he didn’t become a writer. I’d be a DotA 2 player if I had to let go of these words. These sports exist for us to give meaning to our lives, rather than be purely drenched by cerebral conceptions from the academic life, or an EDSA-tormented commute for an 8-5 shift. The game is here, because we know we can prove ourselves from our limits. If only the government can see it. If only they can see that excellence can come before existence, if only they can hear the roar of the crowd, then glance long at those tears falling from our Olympians’ and Grandmasters’ eyes as they hold their respective Aegis up high.