

For the Love of Basketball: American Imperialism through Basketball in the Philippines

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Introduction

It was the hottest day of summer. It was well over 100°, and the humidity felt like it was at 200%. Despite this, the local park was bustling with activity. Kids played on the slides and monkey bars, parents gossiped about the local rumors, and basketball players put on their best sneakers for a game on the blacktop.

These weren't your average basketball players; these were bona fide streetballers who took the game more seriously than a heart attack. They dribbled up and down the court at breakneck speeds, attacking the basket with every ounce of their might. They showed off their dribble moves that they've been practicing for weeks on end, much to the delight of spectators and defenders alike. However, there weren't any dunks or points in the paint. The players put up most of their shots from behind the three-point line, reminiscent of Stephen Curry and Damian Lillard. Like these players, they were comparatively undersized and didn't have great dunking ability. None of them could even touch the rim.

You probably thought that these streetballers were in America; however, they're actually 8000 miles away in the archipelagic nation of the Philippines. Basketball is the most popular sport in the Philippines and has a rich history stretching back to the late 1800s. How has this American sport—in which height is a crucial advantage—become so ingrained into Philippine culture? Surprisingly, the answer lies in American colonialism and imperialism during the first half of the 20th century.

The History and Popularization of Basketball in the Philippines

Basketball has been the most popular sport in the Philippines since the 1930s (Antolihao *Playing* 76); however, it was not immediately popular in the Philippines. Basketball was invented in the late 19th century by Canadian-American professor James Naismith. The sport became popular in the United States through the YMCA during the 1890s, and the first professional basketball teams were formed in the 1920s. Basketball solidified itself as an American sport during the 1950s when the modern-day National Basketball Association was formed and popularized. Electrifying players of the sport, such as George Mikan, Bill Russell, and Wilt Chamberlain, helped the sport gain national recognition throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

As Antolihao explains in *Playing with the Big Boys*, Basketball found its way to the Philippines from the United States in the wake of the Spanish-American War and the subsequent Philippine-American War (Antolihao *Playing* 64). This American control began in 1899 and lasted until 1946 when the Philippines was finally granted its independence. During this time, the United States put many Western customs and ideas into practice in the Philippines, including Western sports; two of these sports were baseball and basketball (Antolihao *Playing* 65). These sports were made popular by American citizens who moved to the Philippines following the Islands' initial occupation to fully assimilate the Philippines under the American colonial sphere.

Being "America's pastime," baseball was heavily favored by the American colonists in the Philippines. The United States promoted baseball in the Philippines as a way of de-Spanishization and Americanization. The main reason why the United States was so adamant about promoting baseball in its colonies, especially in Cuba and the Philippines, was to eliminate the sport of cockfighting that the Spaniards introduced. During the same period when they occupied Cuba, the Americans used this promotion, with the sport successfully ending cockfighting's popularity and baseball being popular in Cuba to this day (Antolihao *Playing* 66-68).

Despite baseball's booming popularity in Cuba, the sport did not reach the same level of popularity in the Philippines. Baseball did not become popular in the Philippines because while the United States popularized the sport to deter cockfighting's popularity in the Philippines and, in turn, eliminate a facet of Spanish culture there, cockfighting in the Philippines was popular before Spain even set foot on the Islands. Thus, the United States' promotion of baseball failed because they tried to eliminate a native practice that they thought originated during the Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines (Antolihao *Playing* 66).

In 1905, the American YMCA planted the seeds of basketball's popularity in the Philippines (Antolihao *Playing* 73). Unlike baseball, which was popularized in the Philippines by Americans living in rural provinces, basketball became popular through the YMCA's urban branches on the Islands. YMCAs opened up in the Philippines en masse during the early 1900s as a way for the United States to culturally assimilate Filipinos through sports (Antolihao *Playing* 73). Through local YMCA teams and leagues, basketball quickly became favored by Filipinos in bustling towns and cities.

Basketball became much more preferred than baseball during this period because of two main reasons: 1) as stated earlier, baseball was promoted solely based on eliminating cockfighting from Filipino culture; and 2) comparatively, baseball was promoted in the Philippines on a smaller scale than in Cuba and by a few Americans who sought wanted it to become popular. The initial appeal of basketball in the Philippines was that "it had caught the interest of many students, including women who had no previous exposure to any sport" (Antolihao *Playing* 75). Basketball eventually found its popularity among school students in the Philippines, and the sport became a mainstay in the Philippine women's physical education curriculum in the 1910s. While basketball had a negative reputation among Filipino males for being a "women's sport," it gained new appeal

in the Philippines after being included as a competitive sport in the newly-established National Collegiate Athletic Association (*Antolihao Playing 75*). Its fast-paced, back-and-forth nature made it an exciting game to play and watch for Filipino college athletes, unlike baseball's slow approach.

The establishment of basketball as a popular sport on the collegiate level led to Filipino basketball's early successes on the international level. In 1936, the Philippines men's national basketball team competed at the Summer Olympics in Berlin and took fifth place (*Antolihao Playing 77*). This high-ranking performance, which came nearly 40 years before the establishment of the Philippine Basketball Association, "further boosted the position of basketball in the country's sporting hierarchy" (*Antolihao Playing 77*). It also proved to the international basketball community that, despite Filipinos being much shorter than their Western opponents, they can perform at the highest level.

Playing basketball on the international level, for Filipinos, meant that they had to compensate for their height. There is a great emphasis on height in basketball due to the game's very nature: the main objective is to score more shots on a ten-foot hoop than the opposing team. The taller you are, the better chance you have at scoring shots. Additionally, other abilities such as shot-blocking and dunking require height to be possible and successful. This is why most professional basketball players are six-foot or taller. Most Filipinos, however, are shorter than six feet and must utilize other tactics to compensate for this lack of height. One such tactic is speed. Being faster than the other team means that you can score more fastbreak points than them. Since most Filipinos are likely to be blocked on interior shots when the defense is set, getting to the basket before the defense is ready is an efficient way for shorter yet quicker players to score. Another tactic is three-point shooting. Since most defenders beyond the three-point line are shorter guards, Filipinos have used their agility to deter these defenders and create open shots on the

perimeter. Using these tactics—among others—Filipinos were able to find early success against taller teams on the international level.

Americanization, the White Man's Burden, and Subaltern Retention

The introduction of basketball to the Philippines by the United States was only one facet in the process of “Americanization.” During the American colonial age, this process utilized American customs and ideas as a means of cultural assimilation among its colonies. While some of these processes were explicit, such as the spread of Protestantism and American architecture in the Philippines, others were more subtle. Such was the case with the early popularization of baseball and the later introduction of basketball in the Philippines (Antolihao *Playing* 65).

The main goal of Americanization was to civilize what the United States believed were “savage peoples,” from the Filipinos in Asia to the Cubans in the Caribbean (Antolihao *Playing* 40). This goal inhabits what is called “the white man’s burden,” a white supremacy concept that states that white people are responsible for bringing civil and liberal ideas to what they describe as “savage peoples” (Antolihao *Playing* 40). Americanization was essentially a process of acculturation by which the United States explicitly imposed its own culture on other cultures to replace them.

Regarding the spread of basketball in the Philippines, Americans used Western sports as a physical sign of dominance and white superiority over colonized people. Due to Filipinos’ smaller height and build, Americans had natural advantages to defeat them in sports that require tall, strong players. These advantages were best displayed in basketball, with American players easily beating the smaller Filipinos just by virtue of being taller. Through the spread of Western sports that disadvantaged the United States’ colonized peoples, Americans perpetuated the white man’s burden and sought to bring their colonies under tighter control (Antolihao *Playing* 124). Colonial

powers in the early 20th century, such as the United States, placed such a significant emphasis on cultural assimilation processes to remind their colonized peoples of their racial inferiorities and the socioeconomic hierarchy inherent in colonial systems.

While the United States implemented aspects of racism and white supremacy in the spread of basketball's popularity, the current state of basketball is much different. According to TIDES' 2020 Racial and Gender Report Card for the NBA, 83.1% of current NBA players identify as people of color (Lapchick). While this fact seems to undermine white supremacy in basketball, the demographics of NBA coaches and owners dispute this. As of 2019, 70% of NBA coaches and 89.1% of NBA team CEOs/presidents are white (Lapchick). While the NBA did indeed begin as a predominantly "white sport" and eventually had a majority demographic of people of color, the vast majority of NBA coaches and team owners are still white. This fact propagates white supremacy in that white people are the ones "calling the shots," while people of color are the ones that have to follow their white coaches and team owners. Despite this, basketball and NBA are still tremendously popular domestically and abroad.

Basketball and the NBA in the Contemporary Philippines

Basketball in the Philippines has been popular domestically ever since the 1930s. However, what cemented basketball's place in Filipino and Filipino diasporic culture was the NBA's widespread fame during the 1980s and 1990s. As in the United States, NBA players such as Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant were superstar celebrities among basketball fans in the Philippines (Antolihao *Playing* 103-106). The NBA became a vital facet of Filipino basketball culture through its international broadcasts of games.

For any aspiring professional basketball player, playing in the United States and the NBA represents the highest level at which one can compete. This is true for two reasons: 1) the NBA

has the best basketball players globally, evident in the increase in international players in the NBA; and 2) the NBA is the best-run basketball league globally in terms of domestic and international outreach. One of the reasons why the NBA is so renowned and successful abroad is its international outreach programs. During the 1980s and 1990s, the best NBA teams would host exhibition games in countries like the Philippines and Mexico to exhibit what NBA players can do against international teams. In more recent years, the NBA has had regular and pre-season games abroad to extend the league's popularity even further. For these reasons, the NBA has been the goal for Filipino basketball players who have yet to join the league.

Basketball has been the most popular sport in the Philippines domestically for decades now. The Philippine Basketball Association, or PBA, is a popular national league in the Philippines; however, the NBA is the ultimate goal in "making it" as a professional basketball player. While no pure-blooded Filipino has played in the NBA yet, half and part-Filipino figures in the NBA have invigorated Filipinos' hopes for that coveted day. Two of these figures include Erik Spoelstra, Filipino-American head coach of the Miami Heat who has won three NBA championships with them, and Jordan Clarkson, Filipino-American player considered the current frontrunner for the NBA Sixth Man of the Year Award (Cacciola). They have both been inspirations not only for Filipinos, but for Filipino-Americans as well. As there is a substantial Filipino diaspora in the United States, they have continued their love for basketball through their support of "Fil-Am" figures like Erik Spoelstra and Jordan Clarkson.

While the presence of half-Filipinos in the NBA gives hope to full-blooded Filipinos that they may one day play in the NBA, it also shows that to really "make it," you have to change yourself to "fit the mold" of a world-class NBA player. The current situation in the NBA dictates that even to have a chance of being drafted/undrafted in the league, you must have the attributes

of a professional basketball player: tall, athletic, and fast. Unfortunately, most Filipinos just do not have the height to have a chance in the league. In Jordan Clarkson's case, he was born half-Filipino, half-African-American, and is now 6'5". Success as a basketball player, in general, has much to do with natural attributes, some of which most Filipinos lack. While certain outliers to this pattern include 7'2" full-blooded Filipino basketball player Kai Sotto who is now playing in the Australian NBL, most Filipinos just do not have the height to be successful basketball players in the United States.

Conclusion

To outsiders, Filipinos' love for basketball seems illogical. Height is a crucial characteristic of basketball players as the game's objective is to score on a 10-foot hoop, and Filipinos are at a natural disadvantage due to their short stature. However, Filipinos' love for basketball outright disregards their natural disadvantages. Filipinos play the game with the confidence of 7-foot NBA players, even while being 5'6". Filipinos love basketball because it reminds them that they can succeed no matter the odds. While basketball's popularity in the Philippines has its origins in American colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy, Filipinos have overcome these negative facets to make basketball a uniting and community-building force.

Even though they are undersized, Filipinos are deservedly among the giants of basketball.

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