



Bolado de Makiling, 2003

FEATURES

THE BIG MAN

The legend of the greatest Philippine basketball player

When the Philippine Basketball Association elevated its newest Hall of Fame class in 2007, what seemed the entire host of local basketball faithful gathered at the Araneta Coliseum; from the full-force Barangay Ginebra population, to familiar Premium Box patrons such as Manny V. Pangilinan and Fred Uytengsu, right up to basketball institution brass the likes of Sonny Barrios, Chito Salud, and Quinito Henson. Before them stood legends such as Olympian Manny Paner, the original skywalker Danny "Daredevil" Florencio, and the singular Abet Guidaben, who, after more than a decade of epic battles with Mon Fernandez, ended his career as the second-leading scorer and rebounder in league history. Yet all eyes—including theirs—were fixed on the immense figure literally casting a long shadow on all of them: the 7'6" Bolado de Makiling.

He is by far the earliest to ascend the pantheon, unanimously voted in just three years after his final PBA game. Hardly surprising, after submitting a career built on Herculean feats. Rookie of the Year. Defensive Player of the Year. MVP. All in the same season. The most points ever scored in a game with 108, together with the highest season average at 64.3. The most rebounds in a game with 57, to go with the top season average at 35.2. The most blocks with 18, on top of his 10.1 season average record. And then there is his most mythical achievement: becoming the first ever full-blooded Filipino to play in the NBA.

Yet it was when his tribute audio video presentation ended and then-commissioner Noli Eala stepped onstage to present his hall-of-fame medal that the world got a glimpse of what

exactly Bolado had accomplished. In an ill-fitting barong, a buzzcut, and an apologetic, even goofy, grin on his clean-shaven face as he bowed, then crouched, then finally knelt, just so the three usherettes could drape it around his neck, there was little to suggest that he was the single greatest basketball player in Philippine history. And even less that he was what's known in local folklore as a *kapre*.

The seeming obliviousness to his past figures in the hundreds of features and documentaries on his career. Whatever the take on his 'origin story' (if at all), it will almost always open with his descent from Mt. Makiling with Norman Black—as if he'd been born fully-grown, entering our world already the fabled frontcourt force he would become. This is due not only to the more interesting—and ultimately more significant—fact of his career, but also to his well-documented reluctance to speak about his family and their community. To this day the normally candid and genial Bolado has politely declined to answer any questions as to where and how exactly they may be found, giving reasons that seem reasonable enough: first, he does not know if they would be as open to being revealed to the world; and second, the last thing he wants are swarms of scouts scouring the forest for draft picks. Out of respect and perhaps a little protectiveness of the national hero, the public—and surprisingly even the government—have not prodded further.

Fortunately for sports historians (as well as folklorists), what little he has said already reveals much, both of his origins and their lore. He was born to Bunlaweg and Yagra in the early '70s (a ballpark date deduced when he'd mentioned being nine or ten when construction began on the Philippine High School for the Arts). While their home, a patch of forest in the heart of Mt. Makiling, conforms to myth, their love story does not. His father was not the specter crouching in the trees waiting to snare a wife, and his mother was certainly no innocent virgin wandering in the woods. They were both simple (if that word still applies) *kapres* living simple *kapre* lives, and in a charming turn, they'd actually met through a common friend. More

superstitions are debunked with every slice of their daily life he has consented to share. They do not smoke tobacco but herbal “cigars” rolled with a special assortment of cut-up plants and roots, and do so strictly for health reasons. He has never heard of any enchanted invisibility-granting belts, and they have no preternatural strength or speed other than what any tree-climbing seven-to-eight-footer would have. He does not recall them ever misleading travelers or stealing their belongings. As for the mysterious rustling leaves, it’s simply some catnapper almost lolling off a branch.

In fact, it is only upon his introduction to basketball that one bit of lore is finally proven true—that once a *kapre* finds his true love, he devotes the rest of life to it and never looks back.

For sports historians and critics, Norman Black’s fateful trip to Laguna reads something between cliché and archetype; made art by classics such as H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* and of course *King Kong*, cheapened by Hollywood sports flicks such as Kevin Bacon’s *The Air Up There*. Yet in the very real world of basketball, it is, if anything, nothing new. There was Hakeem Olajuwon from Nigeria, recruited on a tip by Guy Lewis for his Houston Cougars in 1980. Then Dikembe Mutombo, snapped up from Congo by John Thompson’s Georgetown squad in 1987. Even Philippine basketball itself has its own microcosmic take, with Joe Lipa and Joel Banal digging Ateneo’s college program from decline in the early 2000s by recruiting from provinces as far-flung as Zamboanga and Negros—a practice which has now become the norm.

From Miggy Escaño’s comprehensive feature in the *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, it appears Black’s own journey started no more auspiciously. A year earlier, Black recounted, he’d been re-hired by San Miguel to replace Jong Uichico (who in turn had inherited the job from the legendary Ron Jacobs, for whom Black had been originally eased out) and curb their spotty championship record. While he’d managed just one title at his stints with Sta. Lucia and Pop Cola, a change in fortunes was expected now that he was back with the franchise he’d led to the

historic '89 grand slam. "Only thing was," Black explained, "I had nobody. No Samboy [Lim], Mon [Fernandez], Ato [Agustin], or even an Ives [Dignadice]." With half of what starters he had out for the season with injuries, they not just missed the play-offs, but finished last in the All-Filipino and Commissioner's Cup conferences and second to the last in the Reinforced Cup.

Yet in a remarkable case of kismet, it was precisely the disastrous amount of losses that ended up dealing Black the ace he needed: first pick in the 2003 draft. Certainly, it was no guarantee. Among those who'd already declared, while there were two or three genuinely talented prospects—UAAP MVP Mike Cortez chief among them—there were none of the transcendent, once-in-a-generation players Black would need to re-establish a dynasty. But perhaps that too was part of fate, given its implications on Black's next move. "I knew I'd have to go on a recruiting trip," he said. "At least since we had first pick, whomever I discovered, [it was] finders keepers."

His first stop was Zamboanga, where other scouts had time and again struck gold. But after three days, the best he could find was a 210-pound streetballer who topped out at a scant 6'5". He turned to Surigao, visiting the jerry-rigged courts by the shore where the *Muro Ami* kids played well into the night. Good lungs, but once again not nearly enough size. Davao, Cebu, Leyte, and Baguio all yielded nothing as well. "By then I was getting closer back to Manila," he related, "and starting to get a bit desperate." This desperation led him to recall a dinner he'd had with Bobby Parks and his Filipina wife Shane years back. "She told this story of eight, ten foot monsters, like Filipino bigfoots, that were being spotted at Pampanga. Bobby laughed and said if they were real, they'd make great centers." Black laughed along as well that night, but on his tour, as it became more and more apparent that he might have nothing to show for the weeks he'd logged and the thousands he'd spent—and more alarmingly, no franchise player to suit up—Black decided he had nothing more to lose anyway and took the side trip.

Leaving nothing to chance, he collected everything he'd read he would need. The shirt to be worn inside out. The purse of the finest tobacco he could find. Even the golden rope that,

when put on the neck of a *kapre* at night, would yield a pot of gold in the morning. Claiming a need for utmost secrecy (more likely embarrassment), he left his rented vehicle in town (more likely he didn't), refused the company of a local guide, and set off for the long hike up Mt. Makiling. He did admit to being a touch nervous, as well as the sole reason he persisted. "I'm thinking if they're real, I'm face to face with an eight foot monster," he said. "On the other hand, I had a center."

At this point—much to the noticeable dismay of Escaño, not to mention hundreds of historians and researchers—Black refused, and continues to refuse, to divulge more, citing respect for Bolado's wishes despite their later falling out (Some are more skeptical—Tim Cone and Chot Reyes claim Black simply does not want to share trade secrets). He closes that chapter by simply saying that his quest lasted three nights, after which he texted assistant coach Siot Tanquincen that the trip was a success. He had found their champion.

Barring the blank history page, the gem of the interview becomes the two months more he would spend up the mountain, in which he molded Bolado from *kapre* into serviceable big man. From his own pocket, he gathered a team around Bolado, binding them with a vision of something greater than all of them—and, more importantly, ironclad confidentiality contracts. He called in Gerry Buted, his acquaintance from the build-and-sell Palanca contractors, to erect a makeshift halfcourt gym fitted with a Germany-imported security system. While waiting, he asked in stylist Eric Pineda, who trimmed Bolado's scraggly, waist-length hair, shaved his 13-inch beard, and replaced his leather loincloth with custom-tailored 6XL sweats and size 20 sneakers. Also called in was Dr. Felicitas Pado, a UP professor who refined Bolado's guttural grunts into rudimentary English. Arriving on her heels was Luigi Bercades, a fitness instructor and nutritionist at UA&P, tasked to get Bolado's cardio and fine motor skills as close as possible to the demands of professional sports.

Last to arrive was Benjie Paras. Since Black could not work with Bolado directly—league rules forbid teams from personally working out with players before draft camp—he rang the

former Shell center, who, luckily, was not employed by any team at the time. Black pitched him the job, explaining the circumstances and wisely getting it in on record that it was not official San Miguel business and he would get nothing for his trouble. Paras set foot at the makeshift gym a day later. Of his own initiative (a point Black stressed again and again) the celebrated “Tower of Power” drew up a crash course to equip Bolado with the skills he would most need in the least amount of time. He spent a week on the rules, going through the league manual and playing Bolado hours of tape. From there they moved on to rudimentary drills—running, backpedalling, side-stepping, and then dribbling and passing. Finally, they came around to frontcourt training. He armed the *kapre* with the drop step, the jumpphook, and of course, the dunk—a basic arsenal Paras himself had lived off on. After a month of 16-hour training days, Paras blew his whistle a final time. Bolado was ready.

All six accompanied Black and Bolado on their first trip to the San Miguel offices. For all the giant’s potential, he was still supposedly a mythical creature, and Black expected anything from a drawn-out argument to an outright battle with management. What he hadn’t expected was what actually transpired. “After I played them the clips Benjie took,” he said, “they gave their buy-in instantly. It was the easiest sell I ever had to make.” Black didn’t have time to stay astonished. The very next day, December 26, 2002, a retinue of Ramon Ang’s bodyguards accompanied Bolado—complete with legitimate papers Danding Cojuangco himself had procured—to the PBA office. To a dumbstruck press, he announced that he was declaring himself eligible for the upcoming draft.

Predictably, everyone reacted as they would to a *National Enquirer* story. A *kapre*? *Seryoso*? Sports columnists and bloggers all dismissed it as a fraud. Some speculated it was yet another PBA marketing stunt, a desperate if creative attempt to parachute their free-falling ratings. Others snorted that he was probably yet another Fil-Sham trying to get in through the back door. *Magandang Gabi Bayan* analyzed the pictures of the clean-shaven, beaming big man and declared him a hoax. *Saksi* solicited the opinion of Dr. Damiana Eugenio, the country’s

foremost authority on folklore, who proclaimed that based on her extensive research, she was certain that whatever Bolado was, he was not a *kapre*.

Yet it was what followed that would turn out the strangest occurrence of the entire stretch. Within weeks, the jeering expectedly died down and settled into hushed speculation—only it wasn't about Bolado's roots. In a true reflection of the mystical Filipino love for basketball, the question on everyone's lips was: *Can he play?* Sure the *kapre* is real, but is he *for real?*

The intrigue only intensified when Black and San Miguel refused to divulge anything. They declined to make statements or release Paras' scouting videos, and instructed Bolado to hold back at the mandatory draft camp. And as draft day loomed closer, it became clearer and clearer that he was generating very real fear. In moves reminiscent of the injustice—and hilarious absurdity—of the Nancy Navalta investigation, team officials, led by none other than Chito Narvasa, filed cases for Bolado's disqualification from the draft. Whatever grounds they could dig up, they raised: that the “male” qualifier in the rule “Any Filipino male may apply” applied only to human males. That *kapres* may count time differently, potentially creating a loophole to the “at least 21 years of age” requirement. That he may not be a *kapre* but a Bigfoot—hence, not a “natural-born Filipino”. Expectedly, every single charge was dismissed, and on January 6, 2003 Bolado's eligibility was confirmed. A week later at the Glorietta Activity Center, Norman Black himself handed Bolado his symbolic San Miguel cap and jersey. And once the season began, opponents found out that mysterious rustling leaves were the last thing they had to fear.

At the time the PBA was in a dark period. Attendance and ratings were at an all-time low. While they would not admit it, the reason was obvious enough: Fil-Ams had overrun the league. Having cut their teeth in prestigious US college programs, and all bigger, burlier, and quicker than their pure Filipino counterparts, they smashed local records, snatched practically

every individual award, and divvied up the past four seasons' 12 conference championships among themselves. The old guard—Patrimonio, Lastimosa, Codiñera—all issued statements against their invasion, but well past their primes, they could not hold their own on the court and were eventually forced to retire. Then-commissioner Jun Bernardino made some small effort to turn them back, issuing indefinite suspensions to 'Fil-Shams' including repeat MVP Eric Menk, but he would also be the author of new rules granting them easier entry, such as permitting teams to directly hire one Fil-Am each. Asserting dominance both on the frontcourt and the front office, the "conquerors", as Rafe Bartholomew labeled them in his groundbreaking book *Pacific Rims*, ruled the league. And then the stranger known only as Bolado came to town.

His first game, broadcast on the now-defunct *Vintage Sports* on February 23, 2003, became the most watched event in Philippine television history at the time. In a savvy move by newly-installed commissioner Noli Eala, San Miguel opened the season against the Talk n' Text Phonepals, which boasted of the league's most dominant center, 6'8" Fil-Tongan Asi Taulava. The very first sighting of Bolado in action is burned into the nation's collective memory. How without seeming to leave his feet, he tipped the jumpball to their side. How Olsen Racela dribbled upcourt and calmly raised a finger to signal a low post isolation. How Bolado instantly stepped into his sweet spot and caught the perfect entry pass. And how, with Taulava crouched low as possible to establish a seemingly immovable base, Bolado simply curled towards the baseline and with hardly a hop rattled the rim with a dunk.

The rest of the season became one big game where every team tried coming up with their own 'solution' to Bolado. FedEx traded for a two center line up of Andy Siegle and Dorian Peña. Shell did them one better with a frontcourt of Rudy Hatfield, Ali Peek, and Mick Pennisi. Red Bull simply hired the dirtiest Fil-Ams left and hacked him at every possession. Bolado took them down one by one with a mighty arsenal of dunks and hooks, while on the other end, he blocked shot after shot until every team began settling for low-percentage jumpshots. San Miguel swept

their entire calendar by an average of 27.3 points to win the championship, and Bolado was unanimously voted Best Player of the Conference.

The second and third conferences looked to be a different story. With each team now allowed a full-blooded foreigner with no height ceiling, the most formidable set of imports the PBA had ever seen began flying in. Alaska signed up 7'1" Tahj Holden, who'd just started for the Maryland NCAA championship team. Sta. Lucia suited up 7'0", 260-pound Dejan Koturović of the 2002 Serbian FIBA gold medal squad. Talk N' Text spent six million pesos for former Chicago Bull James Dickey Simpkins to come in a year earlier than he'd been slated.

Black never blinked. For both conferences, instead of maximizing the height ceiling, he hired 6'2 Tony Rutland, who'd run Wake Forest's Tim Duncan-centered sets under the famed Dave Odom. As for Bolado, he brought him to none other than Mon Fernandez to develop the big man's quickness and agility. And once again, San Miguel tore through everyone. Against the now taller and stronger opposition, Bolado combined his height with his enhanced speed, exploding across the court to catch an alley-oop or swat a lay-up. San Miguel swept both conferences to capture only the fourth grand slam in league history.

When the smoke cleared, Bolado had averaged 64.3 points, 35.2 rebounds, and 10.1 blocks. He'd easily surpassed Mon Fernandez's revered 1984 27-point, 15 rebound, 9.9 assist statline, and had outdone Paras's Rookie of the Year + MVP debut by also winning Defensive Player of the Year—laying to rest even the most enduring achievements of his proverbial fathers. And not only did he set new records in virtually every category, his new marks eclipsed even the import records, which had traditionally been separated from the locals'. It seemed one of those improbable seasons in a sports league's infant years, when rules had yet to be refined, the playing field yet to be leveled, freaks of nature yet to be foreseen. When he was done, it was clear to everyone that Bolado was simply out of their league.

The first ‘Filipino’ in the NBA was Raymond Townsend. A 6’3” 175-pound point guard, he played college ball at UCLA under John Wooden and was part of the 1974 national championship team. He would be selected 22nd in the first round of the 1978 NBA draft by the Golden State Warriors, and eventually end his NBA career three years later with Indiana. But despite the national custom of claiming anyone with so much as a drop of Filipino blood, the opposite is the case with Townsend. As he himself has grumbled, hardly anyone knows of him. Several explanations have been offered: the NBA was hardly televised globally; he came at a time when black and white were the only races that mattered; more important events were occurring in Philippine society. Yet what seems closest to the truth is the simple fact that he was half-American—and everyone knew it was his American half doing the playing (still some would say it was his Filipino half which kept him from lasting more than three seasons). So despite having Townsend in the books, the nation still waited before laying claim to a Filipino NBA player.

It seemed that player had finally come in 1998 in the form of Johnny Abarrientos. After leading Alaska to a grand slam and bagging the MVP trophy in ‘97, every columnist declared that the 5’7” point guard could be the first true Filipino with NBA potential. The chatter culminated in a much-hyped offer from Charlotte Hornets scout Jon Bettencourt to participate in their summer camp. Abarrientos, however, declined. At the time, he was the best player on the best team, with millions already guaranteed, and he wasn’t going to put it all on the line for a try-out. And so the myth of the Filipino NBA player remained a myth.

It was a myth that would lose its luster in the years to come. The Philippines had long been on a string of disappointing results in international competition, and after another heartbreaking finish to the 2002 Asian Games, it seemed even the Filipino’s famously indomitable passion for basketball was waning. The PBA declined to send players to the 2003 FIBA Asian Championships. A bloc of congressmen proposed bills to cut basketball development funding to hardly any resistance. Columnists—even those who’d churned countless prescriptions on what the Philippines needed to do to crack the international scene—wrote that perhaps the

disproportionate resources would be better spent on sports Filipinos were genetically better-equipped for, perhaps football and track besides well-tilled ground such as boxing, bowling, pool, and even chess. Quinito Henson himself wrote in the *Philippine Star*, “While I too dream of seeing our players make it globally, perhaps it’s time we treated the national past time as what it really is: a past time.”

The lone dissenting voice was longtime PBA sage Recah Trinidad. In his *Inquirer* column, he came out with a bold, grand prediction:

Despite the heartbreaking non-event of Abarrientos’ NBA bid and our recent international disappointments, I believe our time will yet come. One day, the Philippines will spawn a player with the right skills, the right height, and the right heart to make it to the biggest league and restore glory to Philippine basketball. I can only hope to see him in my lifetime.

Of course, no one took his words seriously at the time. Like Black when Shane Parks had told him about *kapres*, everyone considered the idea ludicrous, agreeing with Henson that basketball was a past time whose time had passed. That is, until December 15, 2003. That day—the day after San Miguel sealed their grand slam—Sev Sarmenta’s *Inquirer* column would famously read the headline, “Why Bolado Can Make it to the NBA.” In characteristic Sarmenta rococo, he proclaimed:

He has not just height, but a heightened sense of height... He has power, but not just a gorilla’s brute strength, but the owl’s wisdom to know when to bang it inside ala-Shaq, and when to feather it in ala-Hakeem... He isn’t just graceful, he is also gracious; he does not trash talk, not even after smashing a dunk on someone’s face... Finally, the

Philippines has found its Yao Ming, its Dikembe Mutombo, its King Kong. World, meet Bolado.

And just like that, the hope that seemed to have died with Abarrientos' flare-out had returned, this time stronger, louder, giddier. Everyone weighed in with every kind of opinion, from Conrado de Quiros's flighty "I'll be the first to admit, I was never a fan of the bloated support and attention thrown basketball's way. But I guess that's the real magic of Bolado. With his Clint Eastwood-style annihilation of his PBA foes and now his very plausible PBA bid, he has united a 7,107-island, 80 million-population nation, and lent some childlike hope to even the most cynical, cranky opinion writers,"; to Bill Velasco's scholarly "To be perfectly frank, the difference between Abarrientos and Bolado is that Abarrientos was trying to get in through the backdoor. What was a genetic shortcoming in height was being sold as a strength. On the other hand, Bolado has the capacity to join the world's best at his own position, on his own terms."

The speculation ended (some would say truly began) on January 3, 2004. At a press conference at the Peninsula Manila, Bolado finally made an announcement: he'd received blessing from Danding Cojuangco to leave San Miguel, and was taking the rest of the year off to train for the NBA. And suddenly the public, as much it loved having Bolado around—he endorsed everything from Gillette razors to A.B.E. International Business College, had appeared in a movie (Gil Portes' *Homecoming*, in which he became the first PBA player not to be cast in a comedic role) and a slew of TV shows (most notably a unintentionally hilarious appearance as a 'traditional' version of the *kapre* in GMAs *Pedro Penduko*), and most tellingly, local boys were sporting his PBA jersey everywhere (something that would've been too embarrassing with any other local player)—could not wait to see him go. Every imaginable kind of merchandise flooded tiangge stalls and online stores, all with a Russian constructivist-style portrait of Bolado and the line 'The Promised One'.

His decision was not without its detractors. PBA old-timer Manolo Iñigo foresaw a Wang Zhizhi tragedy where Bolado would turn his back on invitations to participate in national competition. Political analyst Alex Magno predicted that after a few months of hanging out at Beverly Hills or Manhattan with the likes of Jack Nicholson and Spike Lee, he would eventually renounce his Filipino citizenship. But there was none more vocal than Norman Black. With what can be supposed is fear at San Miguel's inevitable collapse (and, some quipped, a mentality that reflected he'd become truly Filipino) he was quoted by Beth Celis saying, "He's good, no doubt. But the NBA? I don't know... I played there a couple of years... and I've attended a few games and practices recently. To be honest, I don't think he has the skills to make it... I never taught him any of that."

With that, Black exited frame on whatever his former ward's future held. Which would lead to the entry of perhaps the most critical figure in Bolado's career—the enigmatic, heretofore unknown Wilson Tan. Together they would show everyone that while they'd already watched Bolado change history, the truth was the world hadn't seen anything yet.

Urban legends about Tan abound. Red Bull coach and Pampanga vice-governor Yeng Guiao claimed he was a brilliant but disgruntled assistant trainer to the Chinese National Gymnastics Team in the 80s. *BULGAR* published a report about purported ties to Philip Medel. His *Wikipedia* page contains speculations of antropophobia and agoraphobia. None of these stories, however, cite credible sources; by all accounts, the most accurate facts about his life have come from interviews with former employees and business associates. According to them, Tan was born in 1971 to Fookien migrants. A self-made multi-millionaire, he made his part of his fortune from an empire of small shops: toy stores, computer boutiques, appliance centers, snack stalls. But in large part, it was from running the local NBA gambling syndicate. In the early 90s, he'd read about the glut of European NBA signings and predicted a global boom which could prove lucrative. He put up big money betting circles and recruited ambitious Ateneo

and Benilde students to run them. His forecast was spot on. By the late 90s, NBA gambling was a multi-million peso industry, and Tan was its unseen (and reportedly untouchable) epicenter. As with most great kingpins, his success lay in how he was an obsessive student of his business. He devoured autobiographies, biographies, books, magazines, DVDs, everything that had been or was being written about the league and its players. He watched every game beamed through his 3 satellite TV subscriptions, sometimes 8 or 9 at a time. He made regular trips to the US to sit in at training camps and workshops and catch live matches. He anonymously joined hundreds of online fantasy leagues and was abreast of practically every player of every team. Studiously observing the game from his secluded mansion in Baguio, the bigger picture always in sight, it is no wonder he was able to grow his pet enterprise so effectively. And why, more than anyone, he was the best possible mentor to Bolado.

In 2006, the rarely-seen Tan appeared on Pia Hontiveros's *Shop Talk* for his first—and so far, only—interview. At his request it has never been replayed by ANC, but for those who had the fortune of catching it, it is one of the most riveting on-camera interviews in Philippine television history. Hontiveros led off with the question that had been on everyone's mind for years: How did he land the job? "It was simple," he replied with a backhand wave, as if it had indeed been the simplest thing. "When I confirmed rumors that he was announcing his retirement, I asked my people to set up a meeting. I presented my plan, and named my price. No more, no less. He signed on the spot."

Yet it was not the gossip that would be the most revealing part of the interview, but the tale of Tan's tutelage. When asked how the camp kicked off, a ruthless perfectionist streak was immediately apparent. "He asked me to evaluate his strengths and weaknesses," Tan said. "I told him no. The first thing he needed to understand that as far as the NBA was concerned, he had no strengths." He pointed out the holes in Bolado's game: he had a single post move, could only play off isolations, and his main weapon, height, was irrelevant: many others, including some much taller than him—the 7'8" North Korean Ri Myong Hun, the 7'10" Yasutaka Okayama from

Japan—had all met with rejection by the NBA. “I needed to destroy any idea he had of being successful and make him feel small. Only then could I build him up to something of value.”

The actual work-outs sound like a textbook intensive sports camp, as well as a storybook *Rocky* montage. They began with basic biomechanics. “I believe that like the tallest buildings, the best centers are built from the ground up,” Tan said. “So we started with his feet.” From there, he painted a picture of the first four months, in which Bolado performed no less than 50 different footwork and balance drills every day, and nothing else. Furthermore, the drills were not limited to basketball. Tan had Bolado master footwork techniques from other sports—*chasséing* from badminton, *rompre*, *passé arrière*, and *saut en arrière* from fencing, crossovers and fakes from football, and even intricate plyometric patterns from hopscotch. The tortuous sessions lasted from 6 am to 8 pm every day. “After every session, he would go—urgggghhh!” Tan recalled. “Then he’d wobble to the lockers and ice his feet for three hours.”

When describing their ensuing regimen with actual basketball skills, Tan displayed the terrifying extent of his basketball knowledge. In clipped, rapid-fire English, he rattled off what seemed an entire glossary of basketball terms. For defense, Bolado did superman drills, six-and-in drills, tap drills, hook drills, blocking out drills, then exercises on man-to-man defense, zone defense, blocking the lane, covering the weakside, defending the pick-and-roll, rotating, recovering, switching, reading fakes, and even staying out of foul trouble. For offense, Bolado practiced set shots, jumpshots, lay-ups, bank shots, floaters, hookshots, scoopshots, free throws, as well as what seemed every post-up move in the book, from up-and-unders, spins, turn arounds, step-backs, drop-steps, to every possible two or three-move combination of them.

But it was when Tan recounted the final phase of their training that the biggest revelation was bared: he was not just some sports trainer but a modern-day Chironian tutor, shaping Bolado into more than just a would-be NBA center, but a champion. “I wanted him to beat even the best of the best,” he said. “And for that he would need a special weapon.” What followed would become one of the greatest Philippine sports legends of all time, immortalized in

Paolo Villaluna's 2008 documentary *Hook of Longinus*. "In 1997," Tan related, "I had the chance to sit in at a training camp with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in Chicago. I arranged to speak with him after the session, and for a price—I mean a very big price—he gave me a demonstration of the Sky Hook." At that disclosure, even Pia Hontiveros could only stare blankly. Certainly, even she had heard of the Sky Hook; it was long held as the single most devastating move in basketball history, the one weapon which allowed Jabbar to end his career as the NBA's leading career scorer. But it was also an ancient move no one had seen in more than twenty years.

Tan went on to narrate how he'd passed it on to Bolado. To impress its latent power in his mind, Tan showed him endless tape of Jabbar—both as a gangly rookie and a washed up 38-year old—facing monster athletes such as Chamberlain, Unseld, Malone, Walton, Parish, cutting them all down with the seemingly magical move. From there, Tan taught him its intricacies step by step. The critical footwork. The necessary quickness. The feathery touch from any spot on the floor. Bolado, Tan said, needed all of two months to master it. By then he was taking and making it from as far as three and half meters. And the training that had started with feet reached its conclusion with the ball arching perfectly from the tip of his fingers and into the hoop.

The interview ended there, but the rest of the story is well-known. Tan, it turned out, had one last brilliant move of his own. On September 21, 2004, he went on ABC5 for a live press conference. He introduced himself as Bolado's trainer, and revealed that for the past year, he had been preparing him for the NBA. Then in a stroke of business genius (some say what the entire arrangement had really been leading up to) he announced that he was holding a two-hour demonstration event at the Fort Bonifacio open field in a month's time, billed simply as "The Exhibition." The entire nation was stunned. No one had ever seen or heard of the stern, inscrutable middle-aged Chinese man to whom Bolado had apparently entrusted his—and the country's—NBA dreams. The mystery all only added to the anticipation, and "The Exhibition" rolled on to become the most bankable show of the decade. Dozens of multi-nationals signed up

to sponsor. Commercial air time was reportedly sold at 10 million a spot while tickets to the live event were sold at 10,000, 30,000, and 50,000 pesos.

Everyone got their money's worth. To a crowd of a size last seen at Michael Jackson's '96 *HIStory* concert in Asia World City, Bolado showed exactly where the time off had gone. For the first half, Tan had flown in 10 seven footers from China, all of them starters in the Chinese Basketball Association, half of them past or present members of their vaunted national training pool. In a skills demonstration, they ran various permutations of double and triple and even quadruple teams against him—all of which he beat back with a stunning new arsenal of both finesse and power moves. In the defense portion, each of the Chinese big men tried scoring against him in a football penalty kick format. He repelled them just as easily, blocking or altering even their craftiest shots. The second half was only more astounding. Tan had assembled a squad of Americans imports from every major Asian league—all of whom had played no less than two seasons in the NBA—to play a 40-minute full court game against Bolado and the Chinese players. They fed him every possession and went at him every time on defense. Bolado displayed yet another new skill at every turn. In addition to powerful dunks and elegant whirls and pump fakes, he also made pinpoint passes out of triple teams to speeding cutters and spot-up shooters. As the final buzzer sounded, every one of the 60,000 in attendance got up for a riotous ten minute standing ovation. Thousands lined up for the one-hour P7,500-a-pop photosouvenir session. Every piece of merchandise hawked at the gates—jerseys, posters, t-shirts, bobble-heads, even calendar-rigged ball pens—was sold out.

Best of all, a day later Tan would receive a phone call from Rodney Heard, who introduced himself as a scouting director for the NBA Atlanta Hawks. He'd been very impressed by what he saw, he said, and was inviting Bolado to try out at their summer camp.

Nothing made fact that he was starting from scratch clearer than the press his arrival received. Once more, his origins came into discussion, only this time, the skepticism he'd already faced with the Philippine media was laced with outright ridicule. Atlanta newspapers and tabloids ran satirical press releases, features, and even comic strips, most riffing to Eddie Murphy's *Delirious* bit about Puerto Rican Bigfoots. The mockery achieved national attention with a Bill Simmons *Sportsguy* column; in it, he described about an imaginary interview with Shaq, asking him to create a nickname for the newcomer who was apparently the big foot of the Philippines. Shaq, Simmons wrote, replied that "If I'm the Big Aristotle, and Tim [Duncan] is the Big Fundamental, I guess he can take the Big Monkey." (A quip for which predictably the Philippine government demanded a public apology, which predictably Simmons never gave).

Yet once again, Bolado's play soon made believers out of everyone. A week after his first few work-outs, ESPN wrote, "Invited by the Atlanta Hawks to their summer camp, Filipino Bolado de Makiling has been displaying the skills, and certainly the height to make it to the NBA." CNNSI reported, "After Japan and China, another Asian nation just might make it to the big leagues. The 7'6 behemoth from the Philippines has been knocking expectations out of the park and seasoned vets to the floor." Back in the Philippines, the hometown crowd gobbled it all, never missing a line, hungry for any scrap of news. ESPN.com reported that 60% of its traffic was coming from Philippine-based URLs. *TV Patrol* and *24 ORAS* added special "Bolado NBA Report" segments Atlanta-based Filipinos attended training sessions and posted daily blog posts and YouTube videos. And so everyone was ready on October 17, 2004, just two weeks before the season began, when the news broke on the AP: "Hawks sign Filipino center to one-year non-guaranteed contract."

A DVD of the entire season was released by Solar Sports in partnership with the NBA, which sold out within two months (and perplexingly, has not been reissued). Entitled *A Season of Bolado*, it features every one of his games—to which, amusingly, the film's writers each gave nicknames. It begins, of course, with "First Blood at Phoenix". Played November 3, 2004, it

broke Bolado's own PBA debut record as the most-watched event in Philippine television history, and kicked off the trend of live sports broadcasts becoming promotional draws at cinemas, bars, and even fine dining restaurants. He entered the game in the second quarter. Alarmingly, his first few possessions evoked memories of Shawn Bradley rather than Yao Ming; he was easily outpositioned by Amar'e Stoudemire every time and did not receive a touch. But as the half wound down to the final two minutes, Bolado managed to jostle his way into his sweet spot, and was rewarded by a quick entry pass. Before Stoudemire even had the chance to lower his forearm, Bolado whirled to the center of the lane and lofted a jumpshot. It hit the bottom of the net clean. While hardly anyone cheered at Atlanta—it was just another basket in the second quarter, by a reserve no less—the entire Philippines erupted. Globe and Smart broke down for an entire fifteen minutes. *Magandang Tanghali Bayan* was interrupted by a newsflash and never resumed. Both AM and FM stations looped Bolado's Magic Sing hit *Tuktok ng Bundok* well past midnight. It would become one of those cultural watershed moments, akin to the Eraserheads rising to the stage to the opening bars of *Alapaap* at their reunion concert, and Charice Pempengco entering frame on *Glee*. He would end up with four points and two rebounds; the game ended up contested to the last minute, so he did not enter in the fourth quarter to possibly pad his numbers in garbage time. But as the rest of the DVD episode list showed, greater things were still to come.

There is the “Breakthrough at Washington”, his first double digit game twelve contests later, followed by “Double Double at Milwaukee”, which featured his 10-point 11-rebound effort against the Warriors. And then there are his match-ups against the marquee centers of the time: “Clash at Denver” against Marcus Camby, “Battle in New Jersey” against Alonzo Mourning, “Stand at Golden State” against Eric Dampier. Yet by far the most memorable—and significant—was “The Battle at Houston”, against none other than the 7'6, 305-pound Yao Ming.

It was, without question, his penultimate challenge. Yao was two years removed from his rookie season, and—with Shaq entering his twilight and Dwight Howard still a rookie—was

slowly coming into his own as the league's best center. Even in Philippine newspapers, pregame previews were grim: what could Bolado possibly have against the similarly fleet-footed and fundamentally rock-solid giant? The answer came in the very first quarter. Bolado started the game and to that point had limited Yao to zero points on three bricks. But Bolado was being dealt even worse punishment. He'd been blocked twice by Yao, both on his trusted jumpshots. On his other touches, he couldn't even get a shot off; Yao was simply too big and strong to be backed down, forcing Bolado to kick the ball back out. When he called for the next entry pass, the crowd began to cheer—clearly, he had nothing against Yao. But this time he did not go to the drop-step or jumpshot. Instead he drove to his left, startling Yao, who shuffled to get back between Bolado and the ring. Yet even his quick recovery could not stop Bolado's next move: he planted his left foot perfectly parallel to the baseline, and then lifted his right leg. At the same time, he palmed the ball and raised it with his right arm, which seemed to extend higher and higher and higher. Hitting the apex of his reach, he coolly flicked the ball forward, casting it in a perfect arch from his fingertips, above Yao's outstretched arms, and into the waiting net. It fell in with a swish. A whole second of dead air filled the commentary box. Yao and the rest of the Rockets stood in their tracks, thunderstruck. The crowd fell still, their mouths frozen open as they stared at Bolado, as if trying to remember where they'd seen that move—or perhaps stunned they were actually seeing it once more. A moment later, the stadium broke into respectful applause.

By the all-star break, he was averaging 7.1 points, 4.1 rebounds, and a block in 18 minutes of playing time, and had become the Hawks' most potent threat off the bench after fellow rookie Josh Smith. While he did not make the all-rookie squad (once again causing public outrage and political grandstanding in the Philippines), the snub only seemed to fuel him. In the ten games that followed he turned in six double doubles, upping his season averages to eight and six, and began starting almost every game. After a 21-point, 13-rebound performance against Tim Duncan and his San Antonio Spurs, ESPN Atlanta columnist Kenny Fernandez remarked

that his season had begun to mirror Yao Ming's own rookie run, where after a slow start he played a break-out game against the Lakers, and from there ended the season with 13.5 and 8.2 rebounds—easily making the all-rookie first team and finishing second in the Rookie of the Year voting.

The hype was picked up by a host of national papers and websites, and soon Bolado was being discussed in every US sports media outlet. *SLAM* and *Sports Illustrated* ran features on his rise. 11-time sportswriter of the year Rick Reilly dashed off one of his signature human interest pieces for *ESPN the Magazine*. Mixes of his highlights popped up on YouTube. His replica jersey cracked the NBA.com store's top-20 best-sellers. Bill Simmons himself changed his tune, devoting an entire two-week, four-part article to the similarities of Bolado to characters from fantasy genre films. Interestingly his non-traditional origins had come to the fore once more, but this time in a completely opposite light—he was cast as a figure of fantasy, an epic archetype, a heroic avatar. And then March 14, 2005 came.

Simply entitled “Detroit” in the DVD, they were up against the defending champion Detroit Pistons. Assigned to Bolado was reigning Defensive Player of the Year Ben Wallace, the titanic anchor of their feared interior defense. It seemed to matter little. Against Wallace's superior strength and the Pistons' vise-like double and triple teams, Bolado simply turned to his nimble feet, slipping and spinning into position before they could smother him. By the end of the first quarter he had eight points, six of them off uncontested Sky Hooks. And as the second quarter started, he looked to do more of the same. Just three possessions in, he managed to whirl by Wallace to catch an entry pass once again, and wasting no time, he drove and planted his left foot parallel to the baseline as he'd done a hundred times. But this time, as his giant left foot hit the ground, his entire body froze. A grimace split on his face. A full second later, he crumpled to the ground. His mouth was fixed in a mute scream as spasms of pain shook the length of his body. The camera quickly zoomed in, revealing his hands wound in a white-knuckled grip around his foot. A referee called for an injury time-out, and the team doctor

scrambled to Bolado's side. He pried the big man's fingers open and pressed at the foot for few seconds. Noticeably paler, he asked Bolado a question, leaning an ear to catch his response. Even before Bolado completed his sentence, the doctor had bolted up and was waving frantically for a gurney.

The fall, broadcast live in the Philippines, elicited nationwide concern. Hours later, Ateneo and La Salle held joint masses praying for a successful MRI. GMA and ABS-CBN broadcast hourly reports and flashed all-day update tickers. A contingent composed of Fr. Carmelo Caluag, Congressman Miguel Zubiri, and Senators Robert Jaworski and Bong Revilla got on flights to Atlanta. The entire nation held its breath, holding vigil for their fallen hero.

The news broke at 7 a.m. the next day on CNN. Bolado, the report read, had suffered a stress fracture on his foot—a major injury that often afflicted oversized centers. Even more horrifically, not only was it season-ending, it was also potentially career-ending. The doctor revealed that his feet had simply taken too much torture, both from training and from having supported his extreme height and weight for so long. A week later, Atlanta declared that they would have to waive him—it was, after all, a non-guaranteed contract (In an applaudable display of magnanimity, Atlanta management paid Bolado the remainder of his contract, as Chicago had done with Jay Williams after his career-ending motorcycle crash). Ironically, the burden his feet had endured to take to him to the NBA had also led to his downfall. As big of a legend as he was, in the end he was human after all.

His last stand at Atlanta would be the last professional game he has ever played. Sure enough, he was invited by the PBA to return—it's been said Danding Cojuangco offered to put up an entirely new league around him—but he declined, and continues to decline every offer. He is well aware that even with a bum foot he would be too much of an advantage for any team. As for those still hoping for a return, there is the vow he had made at the press conference

upon his arrival: on the long-awaited day when the Philippines could make a serious bid for the Olympics finally came, he would take to the court and do battle once more.

Until that day comes, he has plenty to occupy him. Last year, he opened the doors of the Basketball Center for Big Men, with the goal of training the next generation of centers. His vision, he explained, is for Philippine basketball to be ready when the next seven footer comes along. And from the televised inaugural work-out, it seems the future of Filipino big men is in good hands. In attendance were Rico Espiritu, the 6'6" UAAP MVP from De La Salle, Zedrick Tapang, the gangling 6'9" UST senior who was Rico's junior division MVP Counterpart, and 6'8" Filipino-Chinese Jedrek Lao, the second pick in the year's PBA draft. As he drilled them on the jump-hook, whistling, correcting, whistling, correcting, he was the consummate instructor, explaining the logic behind every minute movement, giving direction rather than directions. Best of all, he was teaching by example; hyperbole has always been among the clearest ways to dramatize a point, and with Bolado, it doesn't get any more dramatic.

Still, it boggles the mind that anyone might actually match his achievements. In a span of three years, he put in the most amazing career any Filipino basketball player—many would say any Filipino athlete—has ever had. Much more than proving the myth of the *kapre* true, he proved the myth that the Filipino basketball player can hold his own against the world, without contextualization, without commiseration, without any brand of affirmative action. Living up to his legend would seem impossible, except that once upon a time, none of believed that *kapres* existed either. ✪