ISLAND MAGIC

By

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I arrived on Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands in January of 1967 as a Peace Corps volunteer. My assignment was to teach English and physical education to elementary students at the Chalan Kanoa Elementary School. My Peace Corps training group’s (Phase III) language instructor was Felix F. Rabauliman who took great interest in insuring that the eleven NMI volunteers were comfortable in their new surroundings.

After being on Saipan for about 3 months, Felix approached me one day and asked me to coach the Oleai women’s team in the Saipan fast-pitch softball league. I was extremely proud to have been asked to coach this vaunted team as I had heard many tales of their greatness and achievements.

The women were even better than I was led to believe and had fabulous basic softball skills. During the 4-month-long league, the team was highly successful and finished with only one loss. The whole island was captivated every Sunday afternoon when the games were played at the softball field, which is now the site of the JoeTen-Kiyo Library. I spent many hours practicing these young ladies, instructing them in various strategies and tactics they had never been exposed to before. Their dynamic pitcher, a lanky, powerful young lady, was required to throw 50 pitches at every practice. Except for the week before the game they lost (a village wedding took priority), the ladies were always better prepared mentally and physically than their opponents.

Since two teams had tied for first place during the round-robin league, a playoff game to determine the league champion was to be played.

The morning of the playoff game, I walked into the Rabauliman house in Oleai. Upon entering the house, I noticed a very elderly lady of Carolinian descent sitting in a chair near the kitchen. Felix’s wife, Kina, was also present and acknowledged my presence. She then said, “See this lady? If she wants you to win today, you will win. If she wants you to lose, there’s nothing you can do about it.” I quickly countered, “Then I hope she wants us to win!”

I then walked outside to reflect on what had just transpired. I felt a genuine rush of excitement. The village of Oleai really took their women’s softball games seriously. Obviously, the elderly lady was the most powerful and perceptive lady in the village. How could the Oleai team lose? They had the combination of this magically powerful village woman influencing their every move and their own superior softball skills and strategy to dominate every game.

The Oleai women won that game 7-0 and never allowed a runner to reach 2nd base. Total domination! Oleai’s pitcher was phenomenal and virtually unhittable, and the Oleai hitters hammered the ball to all parts of the field.

Was it the mystical influence or the dominating playing skills that won the game? To me it has never mattered. What mattered most was that the players were confident, intense and focused throughout the entire game. Players have the right to rely on supernatural powers. I am sure that the opposing team was also applying or believing in some type of mystic force.

Another instance involving the talk of magic happened on the eve of the opening of the 1969 Micronesian Olympics (Games). Felix Rabauliman, who chaired the Micronesian Olympics Local Organizing Committee, and I were leaning on my pickup truck outside his house in Oleai Village on Saipan. It was dark and only a few hours before the opening ceremonies were to begin.

During a lull in our conversation, Felix looked at me and, in a very assuring and knowledgeable tone of voice, said “Prim, tomorrow and in the next few days you will see the power of the Trukese (Chuukese now) magic. They will win most of the medals.”

I waited a while before I replied: knowing that Felix had watched me play volleyball and basketball in the island-wide leagues at a very high level and knowing the degree and level of intensity I brought to each game I played.

I finally asked “Would the magic work on me? Would I be as successful an athlete if the magic was used on me?”

Several minutes went by before Felix answered my questions. He was in deep thought the entire two or three minutes, certainly recalling memories of my playing ability and intensity and attempting to interpret it in the context of the Micronesian culture he had grown up in. He finally answered in just one word, “No!” I didn’t respond and the conversation moved on to another topic. However, it has always been my perception that at that moment Felix came to the realization that, in some situations, perhaps island magic would have no influence.

Felix was correct. Preceding the opening of the Games, talk of witch-doctors being present throughout the competition to bedevil and hex opposing athletes was rampant. I would guess that these rumors and speculation were likely a product of the nervousness and apprehension felt by the six island groups coming together for the very first time. Not only did Chuuk apply their famous voodoo practices, but a member of their official entourage was their great cheerleader. Masitoki Steven added enormous and entertaining pageantry to the Games by way of his efforts to jinx and bewitch opposing athletes. Gyrating women from Palau and Ponape also enhanced the colorful spectacle of the Games. In the end, happily, the games fostered only camaraderie and life-long friendships among participants.

While not wishing to take anything away from the Chuukese and their beliefs and culture, it was Palau that dominated in the medal standings during the 1st Micronesian Games on Saipan in 1969.