

BLACK MAGIC

From Sports Legends of Micronesia, by Kurt Barnes (2012)

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

After being on Saipan for about 6 months, Felix asked me to coach the Oleai women's team in the Saipan Island-wide Fast-pitch League. I was extremely proud to have been asked to take over coaching this team as I had heard so many irrefutable accolades of their greatness and achievements.

The team was highly successful and finished the league with only one loss. Women's fast-pitch softball mesmerized the entire island every Sunday afternoon. I spent many hours practicing these young ladies, honing and developing their batting, throwing, and fielding skills, and incorporating some new and different strategy they had never seen before. Their dynamic pitcher, a real powerful pitcher, was required to throw 50 pitches at every practice. Except for the week before the only game they lost (a village wedding took place at the same time), the ladies were always better prepared mentally and physically than their competitors.

Since two teams had tied for first place, 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. Kina acknowledged my presence and then said, "See this lady? If she wants you win today, you will win. If she wants you to lose, there's nothing you can do about it." I quickly responded, "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 softball games seriously. Obviously the elderly lady was the most powerful, divine lady in the village. How could these ladies lose? They had the combination of the magically power of the village witch doctor and the supreme softball skills and strategy to dominate every game.

The Oleai women won this game 7-0 and never allowed a runner to reach 2nd base. A total domination. Our pitcher was absolutely unhittable and the hitters hammered the ball to all parts of the field.

Was it the magic or the dominating playing skills that won the game? To me it has never mattered. The players were extremely self-possessed and focused during the entire game. The fact that they won was what was more important. Players have the right to rely on mystical powers. I am sure that the other team was also applying or believing in some type of supernatural forces.

Another instance involving the talk of magic happened on the eve before the opening of the 1969 Micronesian Olympics (Games). Felix Rabauliman, the Chair of the Micronesian Olympics 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 Games' 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 (as Chuuk was known in 1969) magic". "They will win most of the medals."

I waited for about a minute before I replied. Knowing that Felix had watched me play volleyball and basketball in the Saipan Island-wide leagues at a very high level and knowing the ultimate level of intensity I brought to each game I played, I waited to ask him a question in response to his question.

I finally asked Felix. "Would the magic work on me?" "Would I be as successful of 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 skills and intensity and attempting to equate it to the Micronesian culture he had grown up with. He finally eloquently answered in one word, "No." I didn't say anything else and the subject was changed to another topic. However, it has always been my perception that at that moment Felix came to the realization that in some situations, perhaps the magic would have no power.

Not to take anything away from the Chuukese and their beliefs and culture, but Palau went on to dominate the medal standings during the 1st Micronesian Games.