

***Philippine Basketball, Economy and Politics:  
How the COVID-19 Pandemic Hit the Filipinos' Most Beloved Sport***

Anthony Andrew G. Divinagracia, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines

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**Abstract**

This paper explores how the prolonged quarantine measures in the Philippines affected the economics and politics of basketball, arguably the most beloved sport among Filipinos, given its sub-cultural underpinnings and significance as a venue of public interaction. It presents the sport and its foremost structure (basketball court) as an "economic hub" in limbo because of strict lockdown measures implemented by government under the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) to ensure the public's safety amid the rise of COVID-19 cases in the Philippines, specifically from April to July. This led to limited people movement, and consequently empty playing courts devoid of any economic activity. The void left by the "economic hub" discourse is now greatly filled by the politics of "public utility" hinged on the utilization of basketball courts as quarantine sites and holding areas for lockdown violators, among others. But in late September, the country's basketball stakeholders have moved to restart the sport by staging a bubble tournament in Pampanga province, north of Manila, and later joining the second window of the 2021 FIBA Asia Cup qualifiers in Manama, Bahrain as its pitch for a return to "basketball normalcy" in the country. The descriptive-analytical method of narration supported by historical sources and online news updates were employed for this paper to contextualize the discussion and show how Philippine basketball as a subaltern topic can transcend the realm of the "apolitical" and become an outpost of relevant scholarship at the time of the pandemic.

Keywords: Philippine Basketball, COVID-19, Quarantine Ligang Barangay, Economy, Politics

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## Introduction

It's a windmill of passion that never stops. At least allegorically, it shouldn't. But in mid-March, basketball in the region's undisputed hoops capital came to a grinding halt. Filipinos breathing the sport ran out of air, at least metaphorically.

Games and practices were abruptly called off after President Rodrigo Duterte placed Metro Manila, and later the entire Luzon island under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) to stem the impending onslaught of COVID-19 in the Philippines. The lockdown hobbled the economy, and with it, a slice of Philippine life as reflected in the sport of basketball.



*Figure 1. A poster card of a 2015 documentary explaining the Philippines' mad love for basketball at the height of the country's bid to host the 2019 FIBA World Cup. (Graphics courtesy of News 5)*

Like football in other parts of the world, it is a “religion” with a massive Philippine following steeped in ritual and tradition. As a testament to that, the Philippines was named Most Valuable Fans (MVF) Best Country in the 2014 FIBA World Cup in Spain with its iconic “*Puso!*” (Heart!) battle cry. During the awards rites in Madrid, FIBA played a video of Gilas (national team) fans cheering their hearts out as the Philippines officially became the darling of the tournament despite finishing tied for last place in its group (Castillo, 2014). But Philippine basketball is not just food for the heart and soul. Over the years, the game produced a complex market economy that has literally put food on the table for many Filipinos who have since treated the sport as their personal bread-and-butter. Yet as many others today, their lives suffered an economic meltdown worse than a bad shooting night as the global pandemic shut down basketball courts around the country.

For starters, the Philippines' basketball economy is a product of the unique sporting ethos the Filipinos have developed since the first playing court was erected in Intramuros, Manila during the American colonial period. Within the scope of state-building, athletic fields can become key instruments in fostering a shared interest

among people from different backgrounds, serving as a mode of collective self-expression and standing as symbols of a common identity (Antolihao, 2015, 66). The sport was part of the assimilationist blueprint of the US insular government in the Philippines. Soon after, it forged a nationalist bond with the people as Filipinos made waves in the pre-war Far Eastern Games and the Olympics.



*Figure 2. Basketball courts can be found almost anywhere in the Philippines. This wooden court with children randomly playing is a common sight in the Philippine countryside. (Photo courtesy of philstar.com)*

Historically, the Philippines is a basketball powerhouse in Asia, alongside the region's traditional heavyweights like Japan, China, and South Korea. In the Far Eastern Games which was the precursor of the modern-day Asian Games, the Philippines won 9 of 10 golds in basketball. In the Asian Games itself, it was the first country to win four straight basketball golds, aside from winning the Asian championship five times. In the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where basketball made its debut as an official Olympic sport, the Filipinos placed fifth, the highest finish by an Asian team in Olympics basketball to this day. But the Filipinos' greatest feat came in the 1954 World Basketball Championship (now FIBA World Cup) where it won the bronze, the only Asian team to pull off a podium finish in FIBA history. These accolades were never lost in the Filipinos' social consciousness. In fact some Filipino expressions were derived from basketball like "bilog ang bola" (even underdogs can win), "timeout muna" (to take it slow or with caution), "rebound" (new relationship after a breakup), "foul 'yun" (offending someone), "sure ball" (it is certain), and "benta" (to deliberately lose/ sell the outcome). Conversely, some Filipino words were used as Philippine basketball terms. For example, the word "asawahin" (to marry) is employed to connote hard-nosed man-to-man defense. Other terms are: "payungan" (to shade someone with an umbrella) which means to defend someone with arms raised, "postehan" (to watch over), which translates to posting up a defender near the basket, "binubuhat" (to carry), which connotes singlehandedly leading the team, "buwaya" (crocodile), which implies a selfish player or ball hog, "bangko" (bench) which pertains to a seldom-used player or benchwarmer, and "luto"

(to cook) which alludes to biased officiating. All these are common lore and language in every community basketball court around the Philippine archipelago, especially during the months of the highly anticipated *ligang barangay* (village league).



*Figure 3. The barangay liga (village league) is a traditional crowd drawer in local communities, especially during the summer period. It's a tournament where almost every member of the community can participate, regardless of age and social status. In this photo, national police chief Debold Sinas [center] made the ceremonial toss to start the game. (Photo courtesy of sunstar.com)*

### **Economic hub**

Previously, Filipino basketball followers only intermittently come together as a collective body, typically when they supported the national team during international competitions. In the absence of these major sporting events, Filipino basketball followers generally retreated back to their own communities to follow the local or municipal leagues (Antolihao, 2015, 115). Before the pandemic, the *ligang barangay* (village league) was part of it as a cyclic activity that underscored the Filipinos' deep sense of community during the peak months (April, May, June) of the vacation season. Everyone is practically included in this annual local spectacle. Neighborhood lads as young as 10 to fathers and uncles in their 50s compose at least a team of eight to join the *liga*, pitting their basketball skills against folks across the street or some far-flung corner of the *barangay* (village). The *ligang barangay* continues to serve as the backbone of Philippine basketball where some of the country's top hoop prospects began to learn the sport. Arguably, it's also a microcosm of the Philippine Basketball Association (PBA), Asia's first professional basketball league. Its most popular ballclub – Ginebra – even carries the village (barangay) moniker as the unrivalled team of the masses bearing the iconic San Miguel tonic brand. The team calls its legion of fans as *kabarangay* (fellow villagers).



*Figure 4. Street food is popular among patrons of the barangay liga [village league]. Make-shift stalls are usually installed just beside the community court where the barangay liga is held. (Photo courtesy of pinterest.com)*



*Figure 5. Pick-up games and shoot-outs are common among street folks who literally earn a living playing basketball. But the pandemic has kept them away from the court for months now. (Photo courtesy of Daniel James Sajol Bersano/ News5)*

The basketball court transforms into a virtual tourist attraction once the *ligang barangay* (village league) tips off in late March or early April. From its sidelines, street peddlers converge to convene one of Philippine sports' enduring informal economies. Snacks – from street food staples like fried banana, camote (sweet potato),

*kakanin* (native rice cakes), barbecue, *isaw* (intestine skewers), fish and squid balls to packed cupcakes, bottled soda, and other home-made delicacies and refreshments – are sold just a few steps away from the playing venue, conveniently catering to everyone in the vicinity. The nearby *sari-sari* (variety) store usually doubles its sales during games, with cigarettes among the most procured items despite nicotine’s supposed mismatch to a lung-busting sport like basketball. The *barangay* women would often staff these make-shift snack bars and stores while hoarsely cheering for their husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, and other relatives play, or sit idly on the bench. It’s a loose reunion and a family feud at the same time.

DATE _____		V/S _____		LAST SCORE RESULT	
				1st GAME _____	2nd GAME _____
				BET: _____	WIN: _____
0-0	2-5	5-0	7-5		
0-1	2-6	5-1	7-6		
0-2	2-7	5-2	7-7		
0-3	2-8	5-3	7-8		
0-4	2-9	5-4	7-9		
0-5	3-0	5-5	8-0		
0-6	3-1	5-6	8-1		
0-7	3-2	5-7	8-2		
0-8	3-3	5-8	8-3		
0-9	3-4	5-9	8-4		
1-0	3-5	6-0	8-5		
1-1	3-6	6-1	8-6		
1-2	3-7	6-2	8-7		
1-3	3-8	6-3	8-8		
1-4	3-9	6-4	8-9		
1-5	4-0	6-5	9-0		
1-6	4-1	6-6	9-1		
1-7	4-2	6-7	9-2		
1-8	4-3	6-8	9-3		
1-9	4-4	6-9	9-4		
2-0	4-5	7-0	9-5		
2-1	4-6	7-1	9-6		
2-2	4-7	7-2	9-7		
2-3	4-8	7-3	9-8		
2-4	4-9	7-4	9-9		

Figure 6. This is a sample of the card used for “ending.” The name of the bettor is listed beside the two-digit combination he/she chooses. The triangular figure is shaded if the bettor has already paid the wager. (Photo courtesy of Shopee.ph)

All that however was nowhere in sight this year. For months, COVID-19 shut down basketball’s factory of hope, especially for the country’s marginalized who have since looked forward to spending the vacation season playing, bonding, learning – and earning – through community-organized leagues or *ligang barangay* (village league). The *liga* as a public gathering that binds Filipino industry and idiosyncrasy like the annual *piyesta* (village feast) was discarded after strict community quarantine measures were implemented in mid-March. Busy Metro Manila alleys, usually converted to playing courts in the afternoon or evening, were barricaded. Streetballers were also barred from playing outdoors. Professional and semi-professional leagues also reeled from the same experience. With no games to play, broadcast operations ceased. Venues were closed. Contracts were discontinued. This inevitably displaced TV crews, ushers, security personnel, and ordinary snack vendors who earn a daily take-home pay of P537 (10.74) or even less.

Philippine basketball's other working individuals like the beloved neighborhood tailor who used to earn P5,000 to P15,000 (\$100 to \$300) from completing a 12-piece set of basketball uniforms for every *liga* team, had to set aside his jersey-making business to produce the more in-demand cloth masks for P30 (\$0.60) a piece. Even the sport's much maligned official – the referee – is frowning the absence of the *liga*. Simply put: No *liga*. No games. No income. A referee can earn at least P2,000 to P5,000 (\$40 to \$100) for officiating a *barangay liga*. Meanwhile, professional referees in the PBA receive a basic monthly salary of P20,000 to P40,000 (\$400 to \$800) depending on which class they belong to (Badua, 2015). But now, no one's whistling, even if COVID-19 has committed the most brazen flagrant foul to their families' day-to-day survival.



*Figure 7. Jersey shops were forced to look into other means like face mask production with cheaper returns after the lockdown effectively suspended all community basketball leagues in the country during the summer. (Photo courtesy of dreamstime.com)*

Outside the organized *liga* is the customary *pustahan* (betting game) where locals earn money from wagers as low as P10 (\$0.20) to as high as P5,000 (\$100) as part of basketball's underground economy. The stakes can double, or even triple with more games played. All things being constant, the amount won from these money games is enough to buy rice, coffee, canned goods and other necessities to keep the family afloat at least for a couple of days. Others milk the sport by turning into bookies of "ending," a community-based numbers game where partakers bet on the last two digits of a basketball game's final score. The bettor who chooses the right ending-number combination wins the collected pot money from wagers as low as P5 (\$0.10) to as high as P10,000 (\$100). Live PBA, and sometimes NBA, games are the bases of these winning last-digit numbers. But the quarantine period has kept these basketball lifers off the court and away from their unconventional source of living.

### **Public utility**

The local Sangguniang Kabataan (Youth Council), in conjunction with the Sangguniang Barangay (Village Council), organizes the *liga* as annual age-group tournaments. A separate format for girls and members of the LGBTQIA+ and PWDs

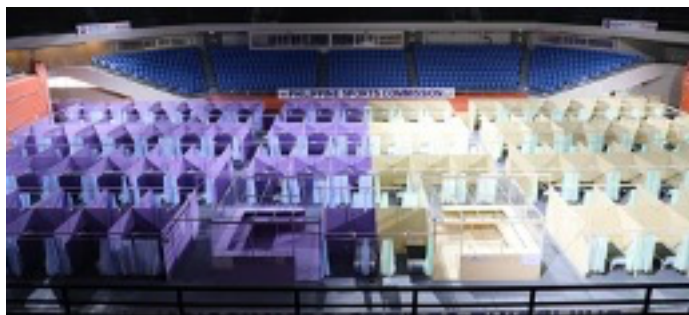
can also be arranged depending on the availability of participants. But no one organized any of that, at least last summer. The village council was busy front-lining the streets to ensure that lockdown protocols are followed, and that the community transmission of the virus is contained. In a more euphemistic sense, this is a new ball game, officiated by the national government, with every Filipino – now huddled in their homes – expected to play their best to defeat an unseen opponent. Who’s the coach? The village chief or the local mayor, perhaps. For one, they know the basketball and its nuances, especially as a potent political weapon during and after elections. They woo the community by building basketball courts “uniformly located in central plazas, alongside the other touchstones of Philippine society – city halls, public markets, and Catholic churches.” Politicians who regularly employ this “go-to tactic” believe in the overarching value of these structures to the lives of their constituents. Throughout the Philippines, in coastal fishing villages, courts were used in every conceivable way. At midday, when it was so hot that trying to play five-on-five would have people keeling over from heatstroke, farmers dried rice on the courts. This arrangement benefited drivers on provincial roads, who otherwise would have to dodge patches of grain scattered in the street. Parties for holidays, graduations, weddings, and debuts for girls on their eighteenth birthdays were all held on basketball courts (Bartholomew, 2010, 178-179).



*Figures 8 and 9.. Lockdowns to address the pandemic had greatly affected local basketball life. These playing courts in Tondo, Manila [top] and Quezon City [bottom] remained empty since strict quarantine measure were implemented last March. (Photos courtesy of Kennett Roger Garcia and Juno Buena)*



In the pandemic age, some of these basketball structures took an equally vital role, turning into massive quarantine sites for suspected COVID-19 patients and returning Filipino workers abroad. One of them is the Philippine Arena in Bulacan, the biggest indoor basketball venue in the country which is set to host the 2023 FIBA World Cup. The Iglesia Ni Cristo-owned indoor arena can accommodate 300 patients with mild symptoms, and house 300 health workers, but Bases Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA) President and CEO Vince Dizon said the facility “can later be expanded to cater to up to 2,000 patients.” (Esguerra, 2020). It also opened a mega swabbing facility with 96 testing booths which can do 1,500 swabs a day.



*Figures 10, 11 and 12. Some of the country’s premier basketball venues like the Mall of Asia Arena (top), Ninoy Aquino Stadium (middle) and Rizal Memorial Stadium (bottom) were converted into quarantine and swabbing facilities to accommodate and test suspected COVID-19 cases. (Photos courtesy of Bases Conversion and Development Authority)*

Another mega swabbing facility was built at the Mall of Asia Arena, where PBA and collegiate basketball games are regularly played. The 15,000-seater venue also hosted several FIBA tournaments like the 2013 Asian Championships and the 2015 Olympic Qualifiers. Now it is holding 72 testing booths which can finish up to 1,500 swabs a day. The 86-year-old Rizal Memorial Stadium, site of many historic basketball battles was also converted into a quarantine facility with 100 beds and manned by medical personnel from the military. The adjacent Ninoy Aquino Stadium also became an “instant hospital” with a 120-bed capacity, air-conditioned cubicles, plug-in outlets, free internet connection and round-the-clock monitoring. Meanwhile, the PhilSports Arena (formerly Ultra) which hosted PBA games and the 2011 FIBA Asia Champions Cup can accommodate 132 mild and asymptomatic cases as a quarantine facility under the Philippine National Police Health Service. The establishment of instant hospitals in Metro Manila and other parts of the country is a joint effort by the national government and the private sector to reduce the community spread of COVID-19, decongest hospitals in Metro Manila and ensure protection of both patients and frontliners from the disease (BCDA, 2020).



*Figures 13 and 14. Community basketball courts were turned into holding areas for residents who were caught violating quarantine rules [top]. Some of the violators were ordered by the police to make push ups as a form of punishment [bottom]. (Photos courtesy of News5)*

The village court is an equally valuable asset to the COVID-19 campaign as a haggling spot for mobile *palengke* (market), testing sites, as well as holding facility for locally stranded individuals (LSI) and quarantine violators, who were caught breaking curfew and stay-at-home regulations. Most LSIs who work in Metro Manila were barred from returning to their homes in the provinces after the lockdown was implemented (Punsalang, 2020). Some of them spent almost a day on the village court

exercising and listening to COVID-19 lecture videos as forms of punishment. Others were eventually transferred to jail facilities. From March 17 to May 31, police arrested and charged a total of 57,177 Filipinos for quarantine violations. Their records show 14,712 underwent inquest, while the rest were charged under regular procedures. Inquest means the person was arrested without a warrant. All in all, the police have apprehended a total of 188,348 Filipinos for violating quarantine. Of that number, 107,794 were warned and 23,377 were fined (Buan, 2020). Indeed, the space generated by these courts – both grand and humble – precede their utility as an extension of the Filipinos' complex political, economic, and social conditions in the pandemic age.

Ideally, sports should be apolitical. But in the Philippines, basketball is politics by other means. The venues turned into quarantine and holding areas are either government-owned or sponsored. Meanwhile, the owners of the other private structures used as COVID-19 facilities both wield immense political and economic clout. The religious group Iglesia Ni Cristo, which owns the Philippine Arena, is known for its bloc voting during elections. The Mall of Asia Arena owned by the Sy family belongs to the upper half of the country's wealthiest, according to Forbes. Some politicians have deep ties to the Samahang Basketbol ng Pilipinas (SBP) the country's basketball governing body, like Senator Bong Go, who was named government representative to the FIBA 2019 World Cup. Others like Senator Sonny Angara and Congressman Robbie Puno are key officials of the SBP, formed and sponsored by businessman Manny V. Pangilinan, who regularly engages government to obtain major deals in the country's utilities, infrastructure, and telecommunications sectors.

### **Depersonalized?**

Playing basketball outdoors is still prohibited under General Community Quarantine (GCQ) guidelines set by the Philippine government's Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Infectious Diseases. It has so far allowed non-contact sports like running, biking, golf, swimming, tennis, badminton, equestrian, range shooting, and skateboarding, among others to resume under GCQ "provided that the minimum public health standards such as the wearing of masks and maintenance of physical distancing protocols and no sharing of equipment when applicable are observed" (IATF, 2020).

Live sports such as basketball will only be allowed to return under a Modified General Community Quarantine (MGCQ) set-up. But in early July, the IATF approved the PBA's request to resume controlled practices. Per the PBA's proposal, only four players, a medical officer and a trainer will be allowed on the court for workouts behind closed doors (Villanueva, 2020b). The PBA has also adopted the FIBA "Return to Basketball" guidelines approved by the World Health Organization which prohibits "handshakes and high-fives between teams, referees, and table officials, as well as "unnecessary" fan engagement and "physical contact with an opposition team, referees or match official," while maintaining social distancing on the bench (FIBA, 2020).

PBA teams were likewise baffled by this minimum contact conundrum. While most of the ballclubs have tested negative for the virus, conducting the games while

observing health protocols has been a subject of debate. Initially, the league supported a “no play, no pay” policy (Morales, 2020), which will not force players with health security concerns to suit up for their teams. Players and personnel feared they may contract the virus while in transit or in the game venue and eventually infect their families back home. A team official has proposed a “bubble format” similar to the NBA’s return set-up to prevent teams from bringing home the virus. Under the team quarantine (format), members will be housed together for 14 days, and only those who will not show COVID-19 symptoms will be allowed to participate in the tournament. Individuals are only allowed to go home once their mother teams have been eliminated. PBA and media personnel involved in operations will be quarantined as well (Villanueva, 2020a). But PBA Commissioner Willie Marcial shelved the proposal, citing logistical issues.

In sum, the no-contact rules are expected to depersonalize the sport defined by its physicality on one hand and geniality on the other, at least for a while. But basketball is also about empathy. During the lockdown, PBA teams and players chipped in from their own pockets to help front liners and fellow basketball workers hit by the quarantine period’s jobless spell. One of them is the enigmatic Calvin Abueva, who was suspended indefinitely after figuring in a fight with an American import last year. Several well-meaning politicians who are patrons of the sport have likewise channeled personal funds to buy medical and food supplies for the people. Among them is Senator Manny Pacquiao, the world boxing legend, who once figured in the PBA as a playing coach.

The pandemic pause also spawned a battle of perception between the PBA and some team officials. The league recently took national team program director Tab Baldwin to task for criticizing its one-import rule and “tactical immaturity” of coaches in the country’s *pambansang liga* (national league). Comparing the Philippines to its neighboring countries, it’s the only league which observes this setup. Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) teams can sign up two foreign players and another Asian reinforcement for its season. Two imports are allowed in the Korean Basketball League (KBL) and in Taiwan’s Super Basketball League (SBL). Meanwhile, the Japanese B.League allows at least three foreign players, excluding a naturalized Japanese player who is considered as a local. Even in the regional ASEAN Basketball League (ABL), teams are allowed to sign up at least three reinforcements per team (Leongson, 2020).

League officials slapped the American mentor a hefty P75,000 (\$1,500) fine and a three-game suspension (upon the PBA’s resumption) for his “uncalled for” and untimely comments against the league that is trying to regain its bearing after incurring P30 million (\$600,000) a day in losses due to the lockdown. Baldwin was eventually fired as assistant coach of the TNT Katropa, one of the storied franchises in the PBA, owned by telco magnate and national team godfather Manny V. Pangilinan, whose companies continue to pour financial support to the COVID-19 cause. No doubt, the pandemic and its economic and political repercussions have pushed Filipino basketball fans in a state of reflection, as they ponder the future of the sport which yearns its return to the streets, to the broadcast channels, and to the Filipinos’ collective consciousness as a people.



*Figure 15. An image of a game inside the PBA bubble in Clark, Pampanga. The PBA bubble was deemed the first step to reclaim normalcy in the country's basketball situation amid the ongoing pandemic. (Photos courtesy of Manila Bulletin)*

## **Conclusion**

On September 24, the yearning that seemed impossible to heed at first, given the country's public health dilemma, was heard loud and clear. No less than the IATF approved the PBA's proposal for a "bubble" tournament similar to the NBA. The PBA "bubble" which was initially turned down by the league's top officials, became the first step towards normalizing the basketball situation in the country. All 12 teams committed to this momentous step for Asia's first professional basketball league. Prior to its approval, players held a dialogue with PBA Commissioner Willie Marcial to express their support for the bubble concept instead of the other proposed closed-circuit playing model. Marcial explained the semi-bubble is the hotel-to-venue-to-hotel setup, while the closed-circuit concept is when the players, coaches, and other team staff travel strictly from their homes to the venue and vice versa. The latter "bubble" setup is adopted now by the PBA when team practices resumed (CNN Philippines, 2020). The PBA bubble was situated in Clark, Pampanga under the auspices of the Based Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA) and the Department of Health. Teams in the PBA bubble had to play almost every day to meet the two-month schedule for the Philippine Cup which began on October 13.



*Figure 16. Calvin Abueva's return to the PBA from an indefinite suspension was welcome news to many Filipino basketball fans. During his suspension, Abueva spent most of his time helping frontliners and others affected by the months-long lockdown due to the pandemic. (Photo courtesy of CNN Philippines)*

In between games, government and league officials had to contend with suspected COVID-19 cases involving some players and team officials. Consequently, some of the games were cancelled while the suspected cases were quarantined and subjected to confirmatory tests to prevent the bubble from bursting following possible breaches on health safety protocols. The league withstood these challenges and with plenty to spare. Calvin Abueva was the bubble's greatest side-story. The erstwhile quarrelsome guard, who spent the early months of the lockdown helping frontliners to atone for his on-court misdeeds, was finally allowed to play after being suspended indefinitely by the league on June 4, 2019. A calm and collected Abueva, known in Philippine basketball as "The Beast" for his highly physical and energetic play, led his team Phoenix to the semifinals of the Philippine Cup. The livestreaming of the PBA bubble games drew record numbers by as much as 278,000 in one playdate, proving the Filipinos' love and support to their premier local league in lieu of physical attendance to the playing venues since the community quarantine was imposed. The PBA bubble also served a fitting end to its legions of fans as crowd darling Barangay Ginebra won this year's Philippine Cup. PBA Commissioner Willie Marcial described the bubble's last day as an early Christmas gift to him and to the league, noting all the league's sacrifices are for the fans. He also deemed the bubble as a source of inspiration to help Filipinos bounce back from the economic setbacks brought about by the ongoing pandemic.



*Figure 17. The Barangay Ginebra Kings celebrate after winning the Philippine Cup in the PBA bubble. Ginebra, the most popular basketball team in the Philippines, is the first PBA team to win a title in a bubble set-up. The team dedicated its victory to the Filipino people and pledged to support the country's efforts against the COVID-19 pandemic. (Photo courtesy of Philippine News Agency)*

The country's move to mount a semblance of basketball normalcy also took off with participation in the second window of the 2021 FIBA Asia Cup qualifiers in Manama, Bahrain, despite initial opposition, citing the possibility of exposing players to the virus while traveling abroad. The national basketball team composed of college standouts spent two weeks in a bubble-type training facility to quarantine and prepare for the qualifiers, where they eventually swept Thailand to remain unbeaten in their group. Some games in the third window of the qualifiers will be played in the Philippines using the PBA bubble set-up in Clark, Pampanga.



*Figure 18. Gilas Pilipinas, bannered by college standouts, swept all its games in the Bahrain bubble of the FIBA Asia Cup 2021 qualifiers. The national team's participation was part of initiatives to slowly restore basketball normalcy in the country amid the pandemic. (Photo courtesy of CNN Philippines)*

On the surface, these bold initiatives have reignited the Filipinos' basketball interest after months of staying away from empty playing courts, now utilized as make-shift

quarantine venues or sites for punishing quarantine violators. The informal basketball economy stays in the backseat as state regulations take the fore in optimizing the political utility of public spaces such as playing courts to beef up the government's infrastructure response against the pandemic. This is the new normal that Philippine basketball's stakeholders and followers will endure, but hopefully not for long. There is no doubt, the Philippines' basketball economy, now hinged on political utility as a means to attain normalcy under pandemic-time conditions, will soon emerge from the dugout. Patience and resilience are valuable basketball traits in the Philippines, perhaps a reflection of the Filipino psyche in general. Yet romanticizing them is like overdoing a timeout. The ball, however, is still in our court.



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