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Reading Article GP2

Article #8: "Magic" Pablo

by Mark Brazaitis

Pablo and I liked to play "Let's imagine." We'd be walking down the street, a basketball cradled under one of our arms. Clouds would be gathering in the east, as they tended to do in early evening. A light rain—*chipi-chipi* is what everyone in town called it—might even be falling.

"Let's imagine," Pablo would say, "that Michael Jordan is walking with us." He would smile. "What would these people say?" he would ask, pointing to the woman in the dark blue *cortes* and white *huipiles*, the native dress in this town in the Northern mountains of

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"Michael Jordan versus the two of us."

Pablo would consider this. "No," he'd say, "it'd be you and Michael Jordan versus me."

Pablo was sixteen when I met him, another indistinguishable face in my English class of forty-five students. I was twenty-five when I arrived as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Santa Cruz Verapez, a town of 4,000 people. I was prepared to be alone during my entire two-year service. I figured this was the way my life was supposed to be: silent sacrifice. I wasn't, at any rate, expecting to make a friend my first night in town.

But the night after my first English class, Pablo knocked on my door. I invited him in, and he entered, looking around shyly. On a table in my dining room, he saw a copy of *Sports Illustrated* that my stepfather had sent from home. He pointed to the cover photo.

"Robert Parish," he said. "The Chief." Pablo, it turned out, knew as much about basketball and the NBA¹ as I did, and I was a former sportswriter. I don't know where he got his information. *El Grafico*, the only daily newspaper from the capital sold in our town, rarely had stories about American basketball. A Mexican TV station that reached Santa Cruz showed NBA games on Saturday mornings, but the town's electricity was so unpredictable—occasionally it would be off for three or four days in a row—that I wondered how many of these games he could have seen. Pablo just seemed to know, and he was familiar not just with Robert Parish and other All-Stars; he could talk about obscure players like Chris Dudley and Jerome Kersey as if he were an NBA beat reporter.

Pablo would come to my house at night and we would draft imaginary line-ups. Pablo liked non-American players. Hakeem Olajuwon was his favorite. He liked Mark Aguirre because he'd heard that Aguirre's father was born in Mexico.

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We had long arguments about who was the best player in the NBA. Hakeem Olajuwon versus Michael Jordan. Hakeem versus Patrick Ewing. Hakeem versus Magic Johnson. Pablo stuck by his man. Pablo and I played basketball on the court next to the cow pasture. Pablo was taller than Muggsy Bogues but shorter than Spud Webb, both of whom played in the NBA. When we first began playing, I could move him around with my body, backing him close to the basket. If I missed, I was tall enough to get a rebound.

In games to twenty-one, I would beat him by nine, eleven, thirteen points. Pablo was the first to tell me about Magic Johnson. He came over to my house one night, late.

"What is it?" I asked.

His head was bowed.

“What is it?”

He looked up. He wasn't crying, but he looked like he might need to. He said, “Magic has the AIDS virus.”

We mourned together. Feeling sentimental, Pablo admitted, “Magic might be better than Hakeem.”

Pablo's dream was to dunk a basketball. We calculated how many feet he would need to jump—about four. Pablo drew up a training plan. He would jump rope two hours a day to build his leg strength. Every other day, Pablo would ask his younger brother to crouch, and he would leap, back and forth, for half an hour.

Two weeks later, Pablo came to my house and asked me to set up a hurdle in my courtyard. I stacked two chairs on top of each other, then another two chairs a few feet

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We stood there, gazing at the broom.

“You sure?” I asked again.

“I'm sure.”

More gazing.

Then he backed up, took a few quick steps, and jumped. His knees shot to his chest. He leapt over the broom like a frog.

“You did it!” I yelled.

“I can dunk now,” he said, grinning.

The next morning, we went to the basketball court. Pablo dribbled from half court and leapt. The ball clanked off the rim. He tried it again. Same result.

"I don't understand," he said.

I didn't have the heart to admit I'd misled him: to dunk, he'd have to jump four feet without bending his knees. As a player, though, Pablo was getting better. He couldn't dunk, but he'd learned to use his quickness to drive by me and score. He had grown stronger. I could not back into him as easily.

Also, he had developed a jump shot.

"Let's imagine," Pablo would say, "that David Robinson came to visit us."

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"And you'd make him dinner."

"Sure."

"And at night," Pablo would say, "we'd sit around and talk about basketball."

Pablo was not my best student. He was more interested in basketball than books. But he knew how to make his teacher laugh.

When he missed a quiz, I allowed him to make it up by writing five sentences— any five sentences of his choice— in English.

He wrote: 1. Charles Barkley sang a song in my house.

2. I beat Patrick Ewing in slam dunk.
3. I beat David Robinson in block.
4. Hakeem Olajuwon is my brother.
5. Magic and Pablo are the best friends of Mark.

Despite his interest in basketball, Pablo's best sport was soccer. He played for San Pedro Carcha, a nearby town. Pablo was a good play-maker. Quick dribbler. Good passer. Soccer's equivalent of a point-guard, not a power forward. I'd seen several of Pablo's games and had watched him make gorgeous passes, beautiful sky-touching passes that his teammates batted into the net for goals.

My last week in Guatemala as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I attended a game Pablo's team played against San Cristobal, a town nine kilometers west of Santa Cruz. The game was tied 1-1 going into the final minutes. Pablo's team had a corner kick.

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We played our last game the day before I left Guatemala. We played in the evening, as a light rain—a *chipichipi*—fell. He had learned to play defense. I tried to back him toward the basket, but he held his ground. I was forced to use my unreliable jump shot. I could no longer get every rebound because he'd learned to block out. And, of course, he could jump now.

I got lucky and hit two straight jumpers to pull ahead by four. But he countered with a reverse lay-up. He scored again on a long jump shot, a shot he never would have made when we first played. The rain fell harder now. Puddles were beginning to form on the court. Pablo and I were both panting. It was getting dark; we could barely see the basket.

"Let's quit," I said. "Let's leave it like this."

"If you want," he said.

"Yeah, let's leave it like this. A tie."

"All right," he said. "A tie. Good. Let's leave it."

We hugged each other.

"Let's imagine," Pablo said, as we walked to my house for the last time, "that you and I played against Michael Jordan. Who would win?"

"Jordan," I said.

"No," Pablo said. "We would. Believe me, we would."

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