



UNLIKELY ASCENSION, WORTHY CHAMPIONS

The Green Archers'
steep climb atop
the UAAP mountain

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“From the moment the buzzer sounded, the court in the midst of the packed Mall of Asia Arena was turned into a veritable montage from a sports film, when a team had finally triumphed against the odds.”

For what must have been the umpteenth time, Jeron Teng found himself at the top of the key, the game on the line, the leather on his hands, with a minute and a half remaining in the game. His defender, University of Santo Tomas’ lanky forward Kevin Ferrer, stood a few paces in front of him, well aware of what the former Xavier Stallion intends to do.

But as he had done throughout the game, Teng blew past Ferrer and sprinted towards the basket, attracting a couple of other defenders, Aljon Mariano and his own brother Jeric. From about twelve feet, Teng sprang as if to attack the rim, with Mariano’s outstretched hands partially obstructing his vision. At the last moment, he sees an open teammate from the right wing beyond the three-point line: Almond Vosotros, whose heroics had saved the Archers several times in the past.

Vosotros received the jump pass and appeared to take a three-pointer, drawing the defense of Jeric Teng, who jumped to try to bother his shot. Vosotros, however, opted to take one more dribble and draw closer to the basket, before launching a jumper from the elbow. Time seemed to have slowed to a crawl as the ball traced an unseen parabola in the air.

Opposing big men Arnold Van Opstal and Karim Abdul were already jockeying for position near the basket in case of a miss. That turned out to be unnecessary, the ball splashed through the net. “Pagod na rin kasi ako eh,” Vosotros would later explain to reporters regarding the move of drawing closer to the

hoop. “Siguro marami na rin nag-pray na pumasok ‘yun [that last shot].”

That basket, which turned out to be the game’s last, gave the Green Archers the slimmest of margins, 70-69, against the UST Growling Tigers. A split at the line by graduating Archer LA Revilla would increase La Salle’s lead to 71-69, with about nine seconds left. Abdul tried taking matters into his own hands for the Tigers, but his first crack at the basket grazed the hoop before rimming out, while the second one sent the ball sailing out of bounds. The third one was a heave at the buzzer which was well-defended by Van Opstal, as the red light appeared on the sides of the board and the shot clock, signalling the end of the game.

After being down by as much as fifteen points, the Archers slowly crept their way back into the contest, forged an overtime period, and hit timely baskets and charities to finally triumph against the Tigers and win their eighth University Athletic Association of the Philippines men’s basketball title in the league’s 76th season, and their first since 2007.

Scene from a sports film

From the moment the buzzer sounded, the court in the midst of the packed Mall of Asia Arena was turned into a veritable montage from a sports film, when a team had finally triumphed against the odds. Players, coaches and staff, were hugging each other as white confetti rained down on the court. Several of them, as well as some fans and supporters from the stands, were shedding tears.

Jeron Teng, who would later be adjudged as the finals MVP, had one fist raised in victory amidst the falling white confetti. Vosotros, who had 16 points, including the game-turning basket, squatted in the middle of the court in tears. Van Opstal, who won the Most Improved Player award and averaged 12 points and nine boards in the series, shared a long hug with former Archer and assistant coach Jun Limpot.

Team captain Norbert Torres, who earlier in the day skipped La Salle's graduation rites in preparation for the match, was handed a graduation cap and wore it. Mythical Five member Jason Perkins, who scored 13 points and 18 boards, embraced his mother. Revilla was atop one of the baskets, busy taking down the net.

One man, however, remained calm, as he had been throughout the team's campaign. But when Archers Yutien Andrada, Van Opstal, and several teammates and members of the staff hoisted him, as he was showered by cheers of "Juno! Juno!" by La Salle supporters, Juno Sauler finally broke into a smile.

Another chant had broken in the stands, this time for the man who was responsible for turning La Salle's basketball program around and was instrumental in securing several blue-chip recruits: "ECJ! ECJ!", for the Archers' top patron, former Ambassador Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco Jr.

The younger Teng, meanwhile, was on the other side of the court, searching for someone. Finally, he finds who he is looking for: his brother Jeric, who is himself shedding tears after coming so close to bagging his first championship.

"When the buzzer sounded I didn't know how to feel," Teng later confessed. "One part of me wanted to celebrate, but another part felt sad because I felt my brother's pain."

And flanked on every side by photographers and other members of the media, Jeron shared a hug with his brother, uttered a few words in his ear that managed to elicit a laugh from Jeric, and then raised his hand and pointed towards him, the ultimate gesture of sportsmanship between brothers, and a lasting image from this Finals series, arguably the most memorable in years.

Forcing the rubber match

The Archers, who had carried a nine game winning streak coming into game one, had finally lost for the first time since late in July. "Breaks of the game lang talaga," said UST mentor Pido Jarencio during the post-game presser, "Nagulat nga ako eh, panalo na pala kami." Sauler, meanwhile, said that he would live with the open shot taken by Vosotros, while ruing the Archers' anemic start.

In game two, La Salle proved that their opponents did not have a monopoly on heart while exploiting their height advantage to the hilt en route to a convincing 77-70 victory that forced a rubber match.





MENS BASKETBALL



WOMENS BASKETBALL



MEN'S TABLE TENNIS



MEN'S TAEKWONDO



WOMEN'S JUDO

La Salle gains early lead in general championship race

Five Lasallian varsity teams finished first in their competitions as La Salle storms off to an early lead against UST at the end of the first semester in the race for the general championship (GC) of UAAP Season 76. The Lady Archers, Lady Judokas, Green Paddlers, Green Jins and Green Archers all finished first in their respective events, giving La Salle 162 points after the first seven events of the season, enough for a 16-point lead over UST, which finished second with 146 points.

Aside from five gold finishes, which fuel the university's bid to retain the GC after first winning it in Season 75, three Lasallian varsity teams finished second: the Lady Shuttlers, Lady Paddlers and Green Tankers. Rounding out the podium-finishes are the Lady Jins, Lady Tankers, and Green Judokas, who all wound up with bronze.

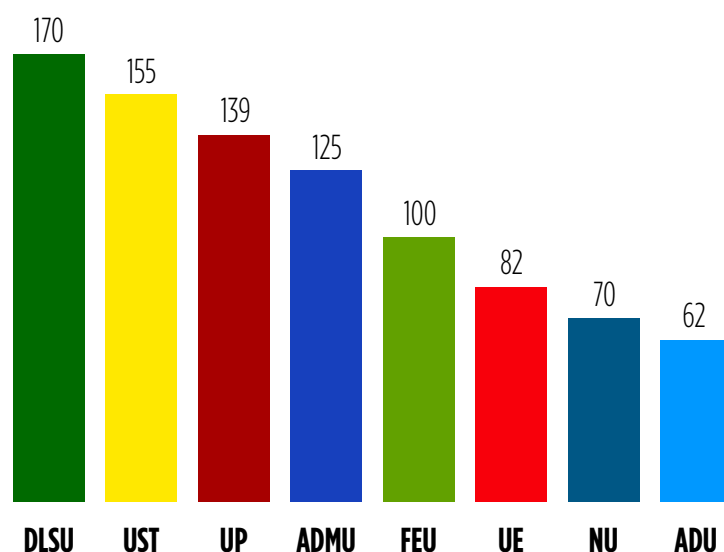
Anchored by the team's five championships, a number of Lasallian athletes also won the Most Valuable Player Award, such as the Green Paddler Walden Shayne Ledesma, Green Jin Kevin Louis Sia, and Lady Judoka Ridgel Nicole More. Green Tanker Johansen Aguilar won five gold medals and two silver medals to win his third straight MVP Award, while both Green Archer Jeron Teng and Lady Archer Trisha Piatos were finals MVPs.



MEN'S SWIMMING
WOMEN'S TABLE TENNIS
WOMEN'S BADMINTON



WOMEN'S SWIMMING
WOMEN'S TAEKWONDO
MEN'S JUDO





Sauler hoped to milk the post some more when asked regarding the adjustments that he planned to make come the next game, and he delivered on this promise as Norbert Torres, Arnold Van Opstal, and Jason Perkins poured in 37 of the team's 77 points, while grabbing 30 boards between them. The Archers thoroughly out-rebounded the Tigers, 57-39, while scoring 18 second-chance points.

This time, it was the Archers who started the game on a blistering pace. Then came the rally by the Tigers, trimming DLSU's advantage to just a single point midway through the third. La Salle responded with its own barrage of points despite a 28-point outburst from Jeric Teng, who was visibly tired during the game's windup after none of his teammates other than Karim Abdul barged in double figures. And with La Salle sitting on a fourteen-point cushion with about four minutes left, everyone's minds were already on the mad scramble for tickets for game three.

A trump card which Sauler played during the match was a short seven-man rotation of

Revilla, Vosotros, Teng, Perkins, Van Opstal, Norbert Torres and Thomas Torres, which had caught the Tigers by surprise, although the players eventually did show signs of fatigue. During the post-game interview, when asked by TV commentator Boom Gonzales on the reason for his short rotation, Sauler looked at the monitor, saying two words that have since been etched into the mind of anyone who stood in front of a television to witness it: "My choice."

Completing the climb

It was a scalper's dream and a UST fan's nightmare. The UAAP men's basketball finals was going to a third and deciding game for the first time since 2009. The MOA Arena took measures by selling tickets on game day. Twenty four hours before the game, fans have already camped out in front of the arena's booths for standing room only tickets. Despite the threat of bad weather that could postpone the game for four more days, the UAAP Board made the decision: the game will push through.

Roughly twelve hours later, a new champion was crowned. The Green Archers' steep climb

atop the UAAP mountain was complete.

About an hour after the game, Jeron Teng and a Gatorade-soaked Sauler were answering questions in the press room. Teng discussed about how he felt for his brother, about his pass to Vosotros, and shrugged off praises about being the team's leader, saying it was a team effort. Sauler was then asked on whether or not the feeling of being champions has finally sunk in. "Hindi pa rin eh," he said.

"Bakit kaya, coach?"

"Hindi ko alam eh," was his answer, eliciting laughs from the room.

"But are you finally happy, or satisfied?" offered a female media member.

"Of course, winning. But there is something more important than winning."

"Which is?"

"Continuing to improve on a daily basis. I'd rather be the best at what I do, rather than be champions and not the best." 🏆



THE ZEN MASTER



Three weeks before the start of UAAP Season 76, the Lasallian community received startling news regarding the Green Archers: their head coach, Gee Abanilla, was to be replaced by one of his assistants, Juno Sauler. But Sauler, who had previously served as the mentor of De La Salle Zobel Junior Archers and Lady Archers, whom he guided to three consecutive championships from 1999-2001, was already brimming with coaching experience and was ready to take on the challenge. After starting the first round with a middling 3-4 record, La Salle won 11 of its next dozen matches en route to the institution's eighth UAAP crown. The man who had calmly piloted the Archers amidst trials and tribulations finally smiled as he was carried aloft by his players and the coaching staff.

Juno Sauler attended De La Salle-Zobel from the preparatory level until high school, after which he majored in Economics at DLSU. He suited up for the Team-B squad for two years before finally being fielded in the Archers' line-up by Coach Gabby Velasco and then Virgil Villavicencio, as the back-up at power forward for one of the team's stars and a man who would join him later on the sidelines as an assistant coach, Jun Limpot.

He never won a championship during his three playing years, and was the team captain of the 1994 squad that lost in three heart-stopping games to UST. He, however, was able to win a championship as a rookie college coach, a feat that was last accomplished by UST mentor Pido Jarencio in 2006.

Roughly a couple of hours after game three, the Green Archers and its coaching staff, including Sauler, found themselves in a stage crammed full with people in the middle of the Henry Sy Building, which is the first of a string of post-championship celebrations. Sauler was asked by his players and the supporters to smile, and he obliged. When he was handed the microphone, he spoke a few words, as he is wont to do, but what he said encapsulates the hardwork that he has preached to his players, and a promise to the team's supporters who are already looking forward to next season: "We will be better next season."

And with Sauler as well as deputies Allan Caidic and Jun Limpot flying to Australia and then San Antonio to observe and learn from the practices and pre-season games of the San Antonio Spurs of the NBA helmed by multi-titled Gregg Poppovich, with the Green Archers welcoming a fresh crop of recruits next year, and with this current team coming into next year with championship experience, it looks like the team and its coaches are ready to deliver on the promise.