

# Raymond Townsend First Pinoy NBA Player

by JOSEPH PIMENTEL / AJPress



**Galing Pinoy** showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit—the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, **Galing Pinoy** literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



**W**HEN legendary National Basketball Association (NBA) coach Pat Riley announced Fil-Am Eric Spoelstra to coach the Miami Heat, Spoelstra became the first person with Filipino and Asian heritage to coach in the NBA.

Filipinos in the Philippines, Fil-Ams and Asian Americans in the US celebrated seeing one of their own make it to the top. They hailed Spoelstra as the first ever Filipino to make it in the NBA. But there's a little footnote in the NBA history that many Filipinos and people in general forget. There was a Filipino-American who played in the NBA.

He was a groundbreaker for Filipinos, Fil-Ams and Asian Americans but he's not recognized as one, as he should be. Fil-Am Raymond Townsend played three seasons in the NBA. Many people forget his contributions because he played from 1978 to 1982, a time when the NBA was barely setting its foot to commercial success and the only race that mattered



Fil-Am boxer Ana Julaton (left) and Fil-Am former NBA basketball player Raymond Townsend are honored by the Golden State Warriors last month. AJPress Photos by: Joseph Pimentel

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was black or white. Townsend was the first Fil-Am to play in the NBA. He played for the Golden State Warriors and Indiana Pacers. He was the first Fil-Am and only Asian American to ever be drafted in the first round of the NBA draft. Seeing him at the Golden State Warriors Filipino Heritage night last month (where he was being honored), you would never suspect the 6'3", tanned skin, slick haired Townsend to be *Pinoy* or to have been the first Filipino to play in the NBA. The 54-year-old serves



FilAm NBA basketball player Raymond Townsend (right) poses with his cousin during the Filipino American heritage night in Oakland, Ca.

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as a youth development coordinator in sports for a high school in San Jose. And his height is uncommon for Filipinos. In an interview with the *Asian Journal*, Townsend said he's still surprised that he's the only Fil-Am to have made it to the NBA. "I would love to see another Filipino or Filipino-American player just somebody beside myself [play in the NBA] because it's been a long time," he said. Born to a Filipino mother from Batangas, Philippines and an American father, Townsend was a basketball star at UCLA before entering the NBA. Townsend was part of legendary coach John Wooden's last championship at UCLA in 1974. In four years at UCLA, Townsend was the starting point guard in two of those years, part of a team that won the Pac-8 division all four years, and named captain during his senior campaign. In his senior year, he won the Bob (Ace) Calkins Memorial Perpetual Trophy presented by the Sigma Pi fraternity to the UCLA varsity basketball free throw champion. In 1978, little did they know the Golden State Warriors made history when they drafted Townsend, a lanky point guard from UCLA No. 22 in the first round of the NBA draft. He became the first FilAm and Asian American to be drafted by

an NBA team. In three seasons in the NBA, Townsend played 154 games, scored 745 points, caught 157 rebounds and dished out 217 assists, according to basketballreference.com. The Dallas Mavericks cut him prior to the 1983 campaign. Many wonder now that if Townsend was Filipino why didn't he pronounce it to the world at that time. In those days things were different, he said. "I have never shirked nor been quiet of my 'pinoy' heritage," he wrote to a blogger. "I am a proud Filipino but in those days when I played your culture or heritage were never an important issue because the game was dominated by the black athlete." Townsend said during his time in the NBA then Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos invited him to the Philippines to run basketball camps. "IHeI took me back there in 1980 and I met so many good basketball players like Robert Jaworski and others," said Townsend. During his time in the Philippines, Townsend recalls seeing many great basketball players but those athletes never crossed over to the NBA. He noticed that the Philippines have enough young star athletes to be able to cross the Pacific and play in the NBA but those players tend to settle to play in the PBA instead.

"I think that Filipino athletes need to come to America, they need to pay their dues, play in college, [and] take a risk," he said. "You know what, what's the worst case? They could always come back and play in the Philippines." Townsend said he understands the plight of many Filipino athletes faced with that dilemma. "It's hard because they make good money over there, they got fame, but you know what...There is nothing greater than to play in this league [NBA] because it is the greatest league in the world. And I think there are Filipino players who have the ability they just need to step out and take a risk." With the NBA's popularity soaring around the world especially in the Philippines, Townsend is currently lobbying NBA officials to possibly become the Philippine ambassador for the NBA. He said his vision is to run camps and clinics throughout the Philippines and bring the NBA and its players to the country, while also bringing gifted Pinoy athletes over to the US. "In the Philippines, basketball is the unifying factor for a lot of Filipino people," he said. "It's a vision that I would like to do in order to represent the Filipino people here in the NBA and what better way to do it. I'm the only one who's made it."