



# MIAMI'S HIT

FIL-AM ERIK SPOELSTRA BRINGS THE BALL TO HIS COURT

By MALOU L. AGUILAR  
AJPress



"I'm very proud of my heritage and it's always a special trip to come out here in the Bay Area and feel very comfortable with the support we've had," said Miami Heat head coach, Erik Spoelstra, during an interview with the Asian Journal at the LA Sports Club in San Francisco. At 38, he is also the youngest coach in the NBA – and he's part Filipino.



Born in Evanston, Illinois to a Dutch-Irish father John Spoelstra, and Elisa Celino, a Filipina from San Pablo Laguna, Spoelstra grew up in Portland, Oregon where he played at Jesuit High School and University of Portland. After graduating from college, he spent two years as a player and coach for TuS Herten, a German professional team. His father was also an NBA executive for the Portland Trail Blazers, Denver Nuggets and New Jersey Nets.

However, admittedly, one of his regrets is not being to play for the PBA. "Probably one of the few regrets in my life," he said and explained, "I had the opportunity to play over there after college and I thought I was going to play for a long time so I wanted to see Europe and thought I was going to play there a year or two and go back to the Philippines and finish my career. But I got the opportunity to be with the (Miami) Heat, and 13 years later I'm still here. So that is one of my few regrets."

Last April, when Spoelstra was named successor to Pat Riley as head coach of the Miami Heat, only a few knew of his Filipino lineage. But most people in the league and the team have known him for

a long time, having joined the Heat staff in 1995 as the team's video coordinator. He moved up as Assistant Coach/Video Coordinator to Assistant Coach/Advance Scout and became Assistant Coach/Director of Scouting in 2001.

"Well, I'm very honored to have this opportunity and I know how rare it comes. There's only 30 head coaches in this league and I feel very fortunate that I got this opportunity with this team, because I've been here now for 15 years working for Pat Riley and have developed a strong working relationship," he said and added, "I understand and believe in the philosophy and culture of the franchise and I feel honored that I have the opportunity to carry on the torch that Pat created over the years."

However, Spoelstra, who was cited by *Sports Illustrated* in 2005 for honing star guard Dwayne Wade's "shooting balance and smoothing out his release after the Flash's return from the Athens Olympics," has a lot of rebuilding to do with the players' injuries, the loss of Shaquille O'Neal and having new faces on the team. Still, his open communication style seems to put him on the right direction.

"Well, I think it's important not only for myself being a coach to this team, but I think it's important for the players to communicate to each other and with the staff. We have to fast track our progression," Spoelstra said and added, "We have a young team, 6 new faces, 2 rookies and we can't leave anything

to chance and so the more we can communicate and the more we can get on the same page, the quicker the development will be."

As for plans to influence and help young Filipinos athletes back home, Spoelstra looks forward to developing the sport. "I'm already having discussions with the NBA about doing something in the future, whether this summer or the summer after. We want to do a joint effort and have some kind or introduce camps or clinics, something I've been very interested in, something I've been wanting to do for the last two years and will probably have the opportunity."

Spoelstra is also quick to add that with the Filipinos' passion for basketball, it is not impossible for them to attain what he achieved. Although he does not feel any added pressure now that he is being seen as a role model, he is more than happy to encourage aspiring Filipino athletes here and in the Philippines.

"I hope that this open doors for people just to dream because who would thought that 10, 15, 20 years ago that there might be a Filipino-American as a head coach in any major pro sports team," he said and added, "And the world is changing, clear that it is and it can open a door, a dream for somebody else, hopefully it can."



Coach Spoelstra during the 12/1 game at the ORACLE Arena. Copyright 2008 NBAE / Photo by Rocky Widner/NBAE via Getty Images

Publisher's Note:

## Dream Coach

Filipinos are die-hard basketball fans, whether cheering for their local PBA teams or supporting their favorite NBA players. But what makes the game more exciting for our kababayans today is the presence of our very own, Erik Spoelstra. Spoelstra is the epitome of the ultimate dream -- making it the mainstream pro sports and living the American dream. If you have the passion and work hard for it, anything is possible.

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