

Fil-Ams fuel baseball drive

Written by Joaquin Henson
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GENO ESPINELI

MANILA — Former San Francisco Giants pitcher Geno Espineli and at least eight other Fil-Ams will reinforce the Philippine squad bidding to top one of four qualifying brackets in Taipei on Nov. 15-18 for a ticket to the World Baseball Classic next year.

It won't be easy surviving the Taipei qualifiers with the host country heavily favored to rule the four-way tournament but national team manager Marty Eizmendi said the other day he's not ruling out an upset.

The Philippines, reigning Southeast and East Asian champion, was chosen by Major League Baseball (MLB) to battle Chinese-Taipei, New Zealand and Thailand in a qualifier for the first round of eliminations to eventually decide the finalists of the third World Baseball Classic at the

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AT&T Park in San Francisco on March 17-19.

The World Baseball Classic is sanctioned by the International Baseball Federation (IBAF) and was created by MLB and the MLB Players Association allowing pros to represent their countries.

The first World Baseball Classic was held in San Diego in 2006 with Japan claiming the championship.

The second was staged in Los Angeles in 2009 with Japan retaining the title.

For the third World Baseball Classic, organizers seeded 12 countries into the first round of eliminations — Australia, China, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, Puerto Rico, U.S. and Venezuela.

In the qualifiers preparatory to the first round, 12 countries were invited to compete in four brackets.

Spain won the first bracket over France, South Africa and Israel in Florida on Sept. 19-23.

Canada topped the second bracket over Great Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic in Regensburg on Sept. 20-24.

Panama, Brazil, Colombia and Nigeria will slug it out in the third bracket in Panama City on Nov. 14-18, while the Philippines, Chinese-Taipei, Thailand and New Zealand will face off in New Taipei City on Nov. 15-18.

The winners of the four qualifying brackets advance to join the 12 seeded teams in four pools

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then the top finishers are drawn in two pools where the survivors move on to play in the finals in San Francisco.

If the Philippines tops its qualifying bracket, it will compete in the first round of eliminations in either Pool A with Japan, China and Cuba in Fukuoka on March 2-6 or Pool B with South Korea, Netherlands and Australia in Taichung, Taiwan, on March 2-5.

“We reached out to as many as 20 Fil-Am players, including Tim Lincecum,” said Eizmendi whose involvement with the national team began in the last Southeast Asian Games.

“Some begged off but I think the players who are committed to play will give us a big boost. I know it’s tough beating Chinese-Taipei which is solid with at least three MLB players but we’re coming in with a positive mind-set. We’re putting together a team of 28, probably with 14 pitchers. The nucleus is from our Southeast and East Asian champion teams. The guys are practicing every day from 8 a.m. to 12 noon at Rizal Memorial, Monday to Friday, with coaches Colbi Hidalgo and Tata Emfasis. A week before the competition, we’ll bring in Jim Ramos from the U.S. to beef up our coaching staff. We’re hoping most if not all of our Fil-Ams will be in Manila two weeks before leaving for Taipei.”

At the moment, Eizmendi said there are 50 players in the national pool, including ace pitcher Darwin de la Calzada of UP, crack hitter Jonash Ponce of Zamboanga City and Southeast Asian Games veterans Alfredo Olivarez of NU, Matt Laurel of Ateneo and Carlos Munoz of La Salle.

“We might just surprise everyone in Taipei,” said Eizmendi.

“That Ryder Cup upset is our inspiration. We’re the underdogs but with our Fil-Ams, we’re unpredictable.”

Eizmendi said after the qualifiers, the Philippines will return to Taipei for the Asian Championships on Nov. 28-Dec. 2.

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“We’re No. 5 or No. 6 in Asia and No. 1 in Southeast and East Asia,” said Eizmendi.

“The MLB is very supportive of our campaign to promote baseball and they’re paying to fly over the Fil-Ams. They’re footing the bill for board, lodging, transportation and even uniforms. The World Baseball Classic is like the World Cup of football. In 2009, the games were shown on TV in over 200 countries. If we make an impact in Taipei, it will be a tremendous accomplishment for Philippine baseball.”

Espineli, 30, has confirmed his participation.

The 6-4 left-handed pitcher made an auspicious debut with the San Francisco Giants in 2008, striking out the first batter he faced Mike Cameron of the Milwaukee Brewers.

He posted a 2-0 record with eight strikeouts in 15 outings before relegation to the minors.

The southpaw was born in Houston to Filipino parents Leonilo Espineli, a UP engineering graduate from Cavite, and Thelma Macalalag of Lumban, Laguna.

Other Fil-Ams being tapped for the Philippine squad are Edwin Jimenez, Jonathan Laygo of the Fresno White Sox, Andres Vasquez of Rutgers University, William Ireton of the East L.A. Dodgers, Trent Garrison of the Los Angeles Angels, Kurt Rathjens, Devon Bryce Ramirez of California State-Dominguez and Clay Rapada of the New York Yankees.

“The Fil-Ams aren’t being paid a fee to play,” said Eizmendi.

“They’re all excited to play for the national team. We’re grateful to the POC, PSC and private individuals, like Mr. Kunifumi Itakura, for supporting us. Mr. Itakura is from Japan and constantly helps out our national teams, even the 12-and-under boys. He has donated or arranged for

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donations of baseball equipment to provincial teams. We'll be fighting in Taipei to make our country proud and give back to everyone who has supported us from Day One."