

Spaelstra maintains he's every inch Pinoy

Written by Abac Cordero
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President Benigno Aquino III receives a Miami Heat jersey from head coach Erik Spoelstra at Malacañang Thursday. (Photo by Willy Perez)

MANILA — For more than an hour, the Larry O'Brien NBA championship trophy sat quietly inside the room, covered in yellow satin.

It was unveiled even before the man of the hour, Miami Heat head coach Erik Spoelstra, was called in and introduced to the press.

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The NBA champion coach took his seat, smiled at those present, and dished out a warm Filipino greeting, "*Mabuhay. Maraming salamat.*"

Spoelstra, whose mother, Elisa Celino, hails from San Pablo, Laguna, looked to his right, and glanced at the two-foot, 14.5 lb trophy in 24 karat gold overlay.

"I haven't seen that (trophy) for three or four weeks now. It looks pretty good," said Spoelstra, more than a month after steering the Heat to the NBA championship over the Oklahoma Thunder.

He is the first coach of Asian descent to win an NBA title, and at 41, is perhaps the youngest as well.

He is in the country as part of the NBA Trophy Tour, and its great outreach program.

Spoelstra has a very hectic schedule, which included last Thursday's press conference at Marriott Manila, and a meeting with President Benigno Aquino III in Malacañang.

He was at the Smart Araneta Coliseum the other night for a glimpse of the PBA Governors Cup finals between Rain or Shine and B-Meg.

"We have a busy schedule this summer. But I asked some people to move everything around and make a way for me to be back here for at least a week," said Spoelstra.

Without being asked, he talked about the program, and how glad he is being part of it.

"The NBA loves the fans out here. And we're here to share and spread the joy. We're trying to spend as much time with kids, and wish we had more time," he said.

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Spoelstra said to give back is something he learned from his mother.

“That’s what my mother passed along to me. It’s about learning how to give back. And I feel fortunate. I’m trying to reach as many kids as I can. I learned this quality from my mother,” he said.

Spoelstra recalled how his mother cried after he won the NBA championship, and how she avoided coming over to Miami during the recent finals.

“She thought she was the reason why we lost (in 2011) because she came to Miami. This year she stayed home in Portland and waited until we had the real opportunity to win,” said Spoelstra.

When the floor was opened for questions, the one thrown by a youngster stunned the former starting point guard for the University of Portland.

Spoelstra was asked if he has already chosen the player from the PBA who will play for the Miami Heat.

“From where?” Spoelstra, almost laughing, had to clarify.

“Oh, from the Philippines. I think I have to go back out there (PBA games) and scout,” he said.

Seriously, Spoelstra said he liked what he saw at the Big Dome, and he even had the chance to drop by the B-Meg dugout to see an old friend, B-Meg coach Tim Cone.

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“Last night’s game was very exciting. And I hope it goes seven games. I can’t root for one team over the other but I want it to reach Game 7. That will be good for the fans,” he said.

Was there any particular player that caught his eye?

He just couldn’t recall the name but said it had to be B-Meg gunner James Yap.

“He had a perfect game last night. I can’t talk more about the individual players but I like the competition. What I saw last night was of high level. The fans were passionate. You can tell it was the finals,” Spoelstra said.

The successful protégé of the great Pat Riley said the championship meant so much to him but not to the extent that it has changed his lifestyle.