



A STAR IS BORN FAR AWAY: Now a Gem in our Midst

Thein Phyu Stadium in Rangoon, a remnant of the 122-year British colonization of Burma – now Myanmar – was filled to capacity on May 9, 1988. Nang Ngwe Lin, "the queen" as she was respectfully known, was defending her national women's singles title for the 9th time. Most were there to both support her and see her route her latest challenger, 18-year-old Julie Biak Cin.

They would be disappointed.

The young girl who once brought a tattered, feltless ball to a backboard on a court in disrepair to practice her tennis pro father's instructions for the day "1,000 times," would prevail. Surprisingly, as she remembers today, to the delight of the partisan crowd she had won over with her stellar play.

At the end of the day, after a three-hour battle, Biak Cin, battling nerves as she edged closer, would craft the upset in the deciding third set. The queen, in the British tradition, was dead, and the genesis of the Burmese Scorpion, aka Julie Heitman as she is known today, had begun.

As transformational as that day was for Julie, another day just three months later overshadowed even her great triumph, a day that she can still recall today like it was yesterday.

Burma, no longer subject to British rule, had devolved into a socialist dictatorship. The Burmese Socialist Program Party, led by one Ne Win, was the country's only legal party. Love it or leave it. But leaving it was no easy matter.

Julie's parents were university professors and had suffered financially under the BSPP's rule, especially when Rangoon University was shuttered due to rising student unrest. It also cut short her pursuit of a college diploma at RU, studies she began at 15 in a five-year honors program.

When asked today what motivated her to leave all that she knew and loved for the unknown, she responds in earnest, "I wanted a better life both on and off the court. There was no future for me there." She was not buying into the accepted Burmese norm: being a married mom at an early age, never to venture out of the homeland.

Her father's tennis coaching did afford him some cache among the foreign diplomatic core that sought him out for lessons. Robert Biak Cin was once the best player in Burma. Coupled with the fact that he had a tennis superstar daughter – who ultimately caught the altruistic eye of more than one politically connected foreign service officer – it went a long way in raising both his and her profile.

Enter diplomat Robin McIntosh, whose parents lived in Gainesville, Fla., and knew Andy Brandi, the highly successful coach of the Gator's men's team. Julie's adventure was on, but many hurdles needed to be cleared.



First, no one outside of Burma had ever seen her play. So, Mac, as she soon began to refer to him, organized a videotaping to showcase her prodigious talent, which is still evident today among those in Charlotte County's tennis community – and beyond – who have watched her classic game and explosive ball striking in both exhibition and charity tournament play. Anyone who has played against her, including myself, fully comprehends the Scorpion reference.

Additionally, she was literally studying day and night for the required SAT and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) that were administered in English! Spoken English was uncommon in 1988 Burma, a residual of resentment towards the previous British rule.

McIntosh's parents, with Brandi's crucial endorsement, sent out the video to numerous Florida and Georgia schools, but timing was not on Julie's side since available scholarships had, by early summer, already been awarded.

The dream and hope of "getting out" was fading fast until a tragic accident intervened. Mandy Stoll, the #1 player at Stetson University, died in an automobile accident. Her scholarship was given to Julie.

Troubled and conflicted with being the beneficiary of Stoll's fate, she then managed to dodge more bullets with the help of sympathetic university officials after her test scores arrived late.

Then, on August 8, 1988, the very day that Julie was scheduled to depart Rangoon to attend Stetson, hard-earned Burmese passport and American student visa in hand – completely unheard of in a country that routinely subjugated women, especially those of Chinese decent – a military coup, engineered by General Saw Maung, previously a close associate of Ne Win, overthrew the BSPP and immediately established martial law.

Her father procured a UNICEF van through his part-time position and, with her mother and two sisters, gathered as many relatives and friends as possible to accompany her to the airport. There was an atmosphere of great joy and best wishes for her. Yet, at the same time there was a heavy, underlying sadness among them, realizing that it was very possibly the last time they would ever see their Julie again.

Meanwhile, all hell was breaking loose in Rangoon as the military junta was asserting control over the government, its people and its infrastructure. Roadblocks and armed checkpoints were being quickly established all throughout the city just as the van was making its way to the airport for her flight to San Francisco.

Freedom, opportunity and dreams were in serious jeopardy, just as the starting line for her new life was so close and after so many seemingly insurmountable hoops had been negotiated.


Robert Biak Cin, knowing his way around Rangoon, managed to avoid some of the obvious checkpoints all together, and somehow talk his way through others while those in charge were still, thankfully, unclear about who gets through and who doesn't.

Within hours, the airport would be closed down completely and occupied by the military, but not before Julie made it onto her flight. Once on the plane and in the air, knowing all too well that she also may not see her family and friends ever again, the tears that she stoically held back earlier came streaming out.

While playing mostly #1 in singles and doubles at Stetson, and adapting to a new culture, she earned a degree in accounting and math. She also met fellow student Gene Heitman, whom she eventually married and with whom she had three beautiful children

Many years later, she did happily reunite with her family, who followed her courageous path and settled in the Bay Area.

During the day, indefatigable Julie teaches pre-primary (ages 3-6) at Charlotte Academy in Port Charlotte, a Montessori school. After school and on weekends she shares her considerable knowledge of the game with both juniors and adults at her tennis workshop at the Twin Isles Country Club in Punta Gorda.

But don't let that beautiful, warm, endearing smile completely fool you if you find yourself on the other side of the net from her. There's a scorpion lying in wait, a Burmese one, with a game that will sting you in a heartbeat if you're not paying attention. 



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