

TEACH A MAN TO PLAY POOL...



... AND HE'LL NEVER FISH AGAIN. ASK DENNIS ORCOLLO, WHO USED THE GAME TO RISE FROM A FISHERMAN'S SON IN A POVERTY-STRICKEN COASTAL VILLAGE TO "MONEY-GAME KING" OF THE PHILIPPINES. BY TED LERNER

DENNIS ORCOLLO is clearly keyed up. He's in high spirits. And he wants to tell everyone about what he just accomplished. Not to worry, because now everyone within earshot is paying rapt attention.

It is well past the lunch hour, but the table inside Annabelle's restaurant is still crowded with plates of fish, meats, salad and other Filipino delicacies. Orcollo, who for the last year and a half has been considered the Philippines' "Money-Game King," has only the day before arrived back home in Manila after winning his first big international tournament, Matchroom Sport's six-man invitational World Pool League event, held in late September in Warsaw, Poland. The handful of folks on hand, including his manager, Perry Mariano, listen intently to tales of his travels, including how the small Filipino community in Warsaw turned out to support him, even bringing him cooked Filipino food.

"I can't believe how many Filipinos are there," Orcollo said. After taking down Ralf Souquet in the semifinals and Niels Feijen in the final, he said, "I'm very excited, very happy. It's big for me to win the World Pool League." Although small in terms of the number of players, the World Pool League has been a popular event on television in Asia for years. The only other Filipinos to

win the event are Efren Reyes and Francisco Bustamante.

"I was really nervous at first. I have nothing to show them. Most of them were champions already. But to calm my nerves I tell myself, 'Hey, this is 9-ball. I grew up playing 15-ball rotation.' I tell myself, 'This is

Bar Table 8-Ball Championships, the Hard Times Summer Jamboree, placing third in the IPT North American Open and sixth in the IPT World Open. As he looks forward to the 2006 World Pool Championship, taking place Nov. 4-12 in Manila, Orcollo is one of the clear favorites. And should he win,

it would come as no surprise to those who know him.

"He's cool," said Yen Makabenta, the Chairman of the Billiard and Snooker Congress of the Philippines, and the man behind bringing the World Pool Championship to the Philippines for the first time. "He doesn't mind if he falls behind. He's really very gritty. Over the last two years there's been nobody better [in the Philippines]."

Although laid back, friendly and rather short of stature, anyone who's played against Orcollo, or watched him compete, understands that a word like "gritty," is quite the apt description. Throw in "tough," "focused"

and "tenacious," and you'd have a good all-around picture of the Philippines' latest pool superstar.

These aren't just platitudes freely tossed about to describe a player on a roll. One only has to delve back into the early days of Orcollo's life and see the struggles, the pains, and the roadblocks that he has had to endure and overcome to fully comprehend this special talent — a man who has lived it,



The closest that Orcollo needs to come to sea life now is at the local market.

easy.' Also, I tell myself that I played in the IPT [International Pool Tour] and I realize, hey, I can do it. This is my chance. I tell myself that I'm a good player."

Orcollo may have to remind himself, but other people around the planet have already gotten the word. His win in Warsaw comes on the heels of a phenomenal run throughout 2006, including winning a major IPT tour-card qualifier, the U.S.

TED LERNER

DENNIS ORCOLLO

Orcollo gave up life in his native fishing village for the bustle of Manila.



TED LERNER

“EVERYONE KNOWS DENNIS IS THE MONEY-GAME KING. I CAN BEAT HIM IN TOURNAMENTS, BUT NOT IN MONEY GAMES.” — EFREN REYES

done it, and is clearly primed for big-time success. Indeed, in a land where hard luck stories are a dime a dozen, Orcollo’s tale would break some hearts.

The second of four boys, Orcollo grew up in the Pacific coastal village of Mangagoy, Bislig, Surigao del Sur, on the large southern Philippine island of Mindanao. Remote, rural and perpetually dirt poor, the community is inhabited mostly by several hundred fishermen and their families, all of whom have lived in the same manner as their ancestors since time immemorial.

Like many of the other men in the village, Orcollo’s father owned a small banca boat (a motorized canoe with outriggers). He fished the deep seas, catching mostly tuna and swordfish. He used crude equipment, only a line and hook and his bare hands to haul in a catch. Although the sea was always plentiful, fishing brought a subsistence living. Everyone was poor, but it was enough for a simple and relatively happy life.

When asked about his childhood, Orcollo, like people everywhere who grew up utterly destitute, describes his early years in terms of life’s basic essentials.

“Sometimes I eat once a day, twice a day,”

he says with a smile, as if he was thankful for at least that.

The other memory from his early years is a haunting one, of an incident that devastated the entire family. It happened when he was 3, maybe 4 years old, he’s not sure. He remembers it was a bright sunny morning. His father, like he did each time he went out to sea, hugged his four children goodbye and, along with an uncle, boarded their simple wooden boat and headed toward the far horizon to find some fish. But soon after the boat was gone from sight, the seas kicked up, the sky turned dark, the wind howled, and the rain started coming down in sheets. A signal number four typhoon rolled through, the strongest possible category, and unleashed the awesome and terrible force of nature.

The father and uncle, along with over 100 other men from the village, never returned. His father’s body was never found, which led the grandparents to continually hold out hope that their son was still alive.

“Many years passed, and still my grandmother and grandfather still don’t believe he’s dead. They’re still hoping he comes back. I was still hoping he comes back too.” It wasn’t until several years later, when he

was 9 years old, that Dennis came to the realization that his father was indeed dead.

“I was sleeping and I was dreaming that my father was standing there,” he said. “He was wearing white, and there were a lot of lit candles everywhere. All my brothers and I were there and we embraced my father. When I woke up, I ran and told my grandparents. They were crying.”

With the breadwinner taken by a storm, Dennis’ mother left the children with the grandparents and headed to a nearby town where she found work in the public market selling fish. She would return home once a week to bring small amounts of money and check up on the children.

Dennis’ first exposure to the game of pool came when he was 8 years old, when his grandfather, giving in to a lifelong passion, bought a second-hand pool table and put it outside the house.

“My grandfather would invite his friends over, and they’d all play pool for hours,” Dennis recalls. “But my grandmother, she’s unhappy, because there is gambling.” The men played 15-ball rotation and poker pool, a combination of pool and poker where the players are dealt cards and have to shoot the numbered ball which corresponds to

the number on the cards they held. Dennis wasn't allowed to play then, so he racked the balls, held the cash and kept score, tasks for which he would receive tips, and sometimes a small percentage of the bets.

"I loved the game, and all I wanted to do was play," he said. "But my mom and grandmother don't want me to play pool. Sometimes if they catch me, they would bring out the belt." To satisfy his newfound interest, he would wake up at 3 a.m. and, so as not to wake anybody, quietly crawl across the floor. "They used to keep the balls in these stainless steel containers. And I'd reach in and quietly pull them out one by one. Then I would play outside on the table until the sun rises. When I hear my grandfather wake up, I would quickly gather the balls and run back to sleep."

Because of lack of money, and interest, he quit school after grade three and never went back. Soon after, at only 9 years old, he began down the only path boys and men in this poor part of the Philippines have known for generations — a path his father, his uncles, his grandfathers and their fathers had all followed; he became a fisherman.

Often going out with an uncle, he steered their small motorized boat out to the deep Pacific waters looking for tuna and swordfish.

"I like being a fisherman," Dennis said. "You see the sea, and there's lots of fish. But it's a very hard life. One time we were in the middle of the sea and we got lost. We cannot see the land anywhere. We were crying and we only have a little gas left. So we inverted our shirts for good luck. And suddenly we found land, and we reached the shore just as we ran out of gas."

During the fishing season, which lasted for only half the year, a trip out to sea would last for two days, and they would usually come back with enough fish to sell for about \$20 to \$40. It was a difficult life, but at least it satisfied the simple daily needs of the family. But that was about all.

"I'm lucky if I could buy just one new shirt a year," Dennis said. What money he did make he would spend on food for

him and his family, and his new passion: playing pool. Since he was not allowed to play on his grandfather's table, he would go to small poolhalls around town and play money games for hours on end.

"When I wasn't fishing, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., I played pool," Dennis said. "I became a good money-game player."

He left home when he was 16 years old, going to stay with a cousin several hours away in Campostella, a lawless gold mining town infamous for being a haven for ne-

farious and sordid characters. Dennis headed straight for the local pool joints to play money games.

"After one week nobody wants to play me," he said. "I can't make money playing pool there. And the place is dangerous. Every day there are shootings, robberies, killings." Unable to get a money game, he

went to work for his cousin as an errand boy and doing laundry. He even learned the art of extracting gold from rocks. But after seven months, he'd had enough.

"I just wanted to get out of that place. Nothing will happen to my life. I just want to play billiards. It was then I decided no more fishing, no more errand boy, no more gold mining. I want to play billiards." He returned home, and soon after he turned 18 he decided he had to head north to the big city.

"I wanted to go to Manila," he said. "Some people were suggesting that I go there. I heard there are a lot of good players there, a lot of action." Flat broke, he asked his aunt for help. She bought him a ticket, and together they took the day-and-a-half boat ride to the nation's capital. He disembarked with just \$6 in his pocket. Luckily his mom had by this time already moved to Manila for work, so he went to stay with her.

She lived in teeming squalor in a shantytown beside a river. Her home was a hovel made of tin sheeting and scrap wood. This hardly mattered to a wide-eyed Dennis. He was hungry to start trying his luck earning money on the pool tables of the big city. Not knowing his way around, he had his mother take him to Manila's university



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Mariano, right, took Orcollo under his wing.



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belt, a bustling area of the city home to a large concentration of colleges. Pool is one of the favorite pastimes of Philippine college kids, and poolhalls proliferate near every school.

"I dressed like a student in nice clothes," he said. "I'm making 500 pesos or 1000 pesos [\$10 to \$20] every day playing students. That's very good money for me. Playing students is very easy." Almost instantly he was earning more in one day playing pool than he would earn in two days of arduous fishing. And with fishing, nothing was ever guaranteed. With pool, the money was a sure thing. He had been looking for just this opportunity and he wasn't about to let it go.

"I'm thinking, 'This Manila is very good. I can do it. This is everything I need. I need the money. I have to make money. This is my chance.'" Like all regular winners, Orcollo quickly found a circle of friends, and they soon started taking him around to different poolhalls where the competition was better and the money was bigger. He continued to win more than he lost, and found

himself with more money than he ever had before.

"I spent my money fast," he said smiling. "I don't drink or smoke. I'm always buying clothes, and eating good food."

For several years he tore through the money-game circuit, taking the cash off of mostly mid-level pros. During one memorable streak in 2001, he says he played money games every single night for a month and won every time out.

Orcollo graduated to the big leagues of Philippine pool in 2002 when he played Reyes, at the time the consensus "Money-Game King," and received a two-game handicap. Although Orcollo lost, and subsequently lost several more times in the ensuing months to "The Magician," the experience was obviously a learning one.

"The first time I played Efren, I was very nervous," Orcollo said. "I can't even shoot. But I learned how to plan and I watched his technique. One year later I finally beat him." Since that momentous step, he hasn't looked back, by all accounts beating not only Reyes again and again, but just about

everyone else. In one remarkable week in 2004, Orcollo defeated Reyes twice, Bustamante twice, and then, in one night which ended at 10 a.m. the following morning, he allegedly took down Alex Pagulayan four straight times at \$5,000 per set.

"When [Jose] Parica was considered the money-game king of the Philippines, there are many players that he still can't beat," Mariano said. "Now there are even more good players, and Dennis can beat them all." Even the proud Reyes has conceded his throne.

"Everyone knows Dennis is the money-game king," Reyes said recently. "I can beat him in tournaments but not in money games. He plays good in money games. I'll play anybody for money but I won't play him."

In the Philippines, you get proclaimed money-game king when nobody will play you anymore, and by 2005 Orcollo had clearly risen to the top of the local scene and grabbed the mantle once held by legends Reyes and Parica. Along the way there, however, he began to dabble in tournament play. For one, he increasingly found it difficult to find matches without giving a handicap. And he also wanted to test himself in a different environment.

One of the reasons money games have always been held in such high regard in the Philippines is that, for years, professional tournaments in the country were few and far between. That's why, said Mariano, "In the Philippines, if you are not considered money-game king you are not recognized 100 percent, especially in the poolhalls. Money games still count."

With the help of the Internet, however, and a push by a new crop of promoters in Manila, the sport began to open up in the early 2000s. Through the assistance of Aristeo Puyat, the promoter of Reyes and Bustamante, Orcollo secured a spot in the 2002 World Pool Championship in Cardiff, Wales, and took 17th place. That same year he traveled and played in several tournaments in Japan, grabbing the 17th spot in the Tokyo International Open. The next year, he returned to Cardiff and finished 33rd. Then at the 2004 World Pool Championship, he took ninth place. That same year, Orcollo won a spot on a Philippine team of rising stars put together by a local cable sports network and which beat a team of stars from Taiwan. Then, after getting knocked out in the early rounds of the 2005 World Pool Championship in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, he came back to claim runner-up in the Philippine Open.

It was in 2005 that Orcollo signed on with Mariano, a Manila nightclub owner whose

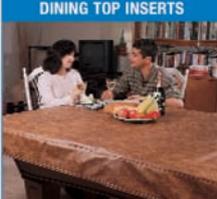
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stable of rising pool stars now numbers nine players, including Ronnie Alcano, Gandy Valle and Antonio Gabica. Mariano was ready to send Orcollo to the States to play in tournaments, but twice his requests to travel and compete in America were rejected by consuls at the U.S. embassy in Manila. (Travel abroad has never been easy for Filipino players, as foreign visas have been extremely difficult to come by, not to mention the money to travel.) Finally, on the third try, Orcollo got the coveted stamp in his passport. Another hurdle cleared, another opportunity to grab.

2006 will long be remembered in pool circles as the year Dennis Orcollo had his coming-out party on the international scene. In winning the IPT tour-card qualifier in February at Hard Times Billiards in Sacramento, Calif., he plowed undefeated through an extremely strong field. He



Orcollo rose above the World Pool League's heady field.

captured the U.S. Bar Table Championships 8-ball division, and placed fourth in the 9-ball division, despite having little experience on the smaller bar table.

He returned to the States in June and

promptly withstood the challenge of an inspired Kim Davenport to win the Sands Regency Reno Open. Then he followed that up with a win in Sacramento at the Hard Times Summer Jamboree. The word had spread widely by July, as evidenced when Orcollo entered the IPT's North American Open 8-Ball Championship in Las Vegas as a dark-horse favorite. He didn't disappoint as he finished third and took home \$80,000. Six weeks later, he continued to fulfill expectations by finishing sixth at the IPT's World Open, earning \$66,000. Just a few weeks after that, he won World Pool League in Warsaw, pocketing \$20,000 in the process.

No stranger to hardship, Orcollo has adjusted well to life on the road. In Poland, he quickly realized that Filipinos everywhere turn out to support one of their own. Longtime U.S. resident Parica has taken Orcollo under his wing in the States,



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and with the growing number of Filipinos now also playing in America, Orcollo hasn't been hurting for company. Not surprisingly, he's starting to talk more about the money he can make in tournaments than the money he can make gambling.

"I like the tournaments there [in the U.S.]," Orcollo said. "If I play in tournaments in the U.S., I can make money. Now I like tournaments more than money games. Actually I like both. I want to get the money and to be known as a great player. But in tournaments there's no handicaps, you can win big money, your name is going up and then you can get invited to different places around the world."

With his American visa, mounting credentials, and reputation as both a solid player and likeable guy, Orcollo can expect plenty of invitations in the near future, plus lots of chances to play around the world. With his wife, Ronah, a 4-year-old son and a daughter on the way, "The Money-Game King" has everything to play



Orcollo and wife, Ronah, are expecting great things.

for, and, as he's proven throughout his already incredible life, looks set to cash in on the new opportunities.

"His rise is phenomenal," Mariano said. "Five years ago he was not that good. He was getting a handicap in the Philippines. In

three years he's fighting on equal footing with the best in the world. In the fourth year he is beating the best. He's a very intelligent player. It makes a difference when the game is tight. His attitude toward the game is different. He lives the game. He's disciplined."

"I believe that Dennis is one of the top 10 players in the world right now," said Makabenta. "People are starting to realize this guy is tough. It's beginning to surface that he's going to be around for a while. I believe he'll win the World Pool Championship sooner rather than later."

Not bad for a young man whose future prospects in life not too long ago consisted merely of a coming struggle with a fish, and the promise of a meal or two a day.

"In the States when I'm sleeping I sometimes think how amazing this is," Orcollo says. "I think about what my life was like before. I'm just a fisherman. I am a poor man. I don't have money. I thank God for giving me all that. I've worked hard for this. I've spent a lot of time, many, many years to get here."

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