



by Mason King

# ISLAND FEVER

THE POOL-CRAZY PHILIPPINES HOSTED THE 2006 WORLD POOL CHAMPIONSHIP AND CROWNED A NATIVE SON AS VICTOR. BUT NOT THE ONE YOU'D EXPECT. FAVORITES FADED QUICKLY, AND A NEW WAVE OF SHOOTERS WHIPPED THE CROWD INTO A FRENZY.

photos by Lawrence Lustig



Smack down: Reyes packed the stands early (left) but Alcano had the last peck.

**RALF SOUQUET** sat motionless and silent, sealed off from the commotion and racket around him. Nearby, a thousand Filipino pool fans jostled for a better seat or a better view of the impending final for the 2006 World Pool Championship, packing a 600-seat arena and standing four-deep on a wide overhead balcony.

Souquet hid in a vacant playing stage next to the arena stands, a refuge walled off by risers of empty seats. He sat with his bald head bowed. Meditating, presumably. From overhead in the cavernous convention center, he looked like a stationary dot on a weather map — a quiet coastal town, as a giant, swirling storm coalesced just off his shore and threatened to sweep him away.

In a sense, the 2006 World Pool

Championship found itself in the eye of a “perfect storm,” as it played out Nov. 4-12 at the Philippine International Convention Center in steamy Manila. The pool-crazy Philippines hosted the event for the first time, just as the next generation of hungry Pinoy players was emerging from local poolhalls, hoping to prove themselves worthy of the nation’s established giants. No fewer than 21 Filipinos earned spots in the field of 128, by far the most of any of the 43 participating nations. Their countrymen crammed the stands, chanting “Phil-i-ppines” during matches and unfurling their flag from the balconies. Neighboring Asian nations also were on the rise as pool powers, and they sent dozens of print journalists and broadcasters to cover the event. And to nearly everyone’s delight — especially

the local and regional networks — a salt-of-the-earth native son had advanced to meet Souquet in the final: wiry and wily Ronnie Alcano of the Philippines.

Of course, if anyone could withstand the pressure of playing against an entire country, it was the sagacious Souquet. No pool player had traveled more miles, played in more places, and won so many times. He claimed the WPC title in 1996 at the age of 27, and he finished runner-up in 2001. Good old Ralf — he’d been there, done that.

“He can handle this,” said German countryman Thomas Engert, his voice a tight rasp as he tried to speak above the hubbub on the balcony. Forty feet below, Souquet continued his imitation of a Buddhist monk.

“He knows what he has to do,” Engert



Reyes walked the walk, but he couldn't sink the shots against upstart Alcano.

continued. "Believe me. He knows how to handle this thing. When he wants to be the best, and when he wants to win a tournament, he's unbelievable."

Many of the other scattered gringos from the West believed it as well. Souquet is too disciplined, they said. The pressure will get to Alcano. His resume is nothing to lose sleep over — a few titles, mostly in Asia. He'll fold like a napkin.

Idly setting up bank shots on a practice table, Alcano barely looked like he could support his own weight. Although 34, he had the gangly form of a 15-year-old, and he often shifted his shoulders as if his body was an ill-fitting prom suit. He looked like a funhouse-mirror version of his hero Efren Reyes — the same inscrutable, toothless face, but with the torso stretched out to bean-pole proportions. How could this guy put the hopes of 86 million countrymen on his spindly shoul-

ders and hope to run through 17 racks before Souquet?

Over the three-and-a-half-hour final, Alcano would shrug off the pressure that doomed his better-known countrymen and play the match of his life on the biggest stage of his career. The kid who grew up penniless in the barrio of the nearly Laguna province would become the biggest star in the Philippines and pocket \$100,000 — an immense sum in this Third World nation.

After sinking the final 9 ball in his dominating 17-11 victory, Alcano briefly shot his hands up to the ceiling. But then it was his turn to go blank. He quickly sat back down, his mouth flattening to a thin crease.

"I was holding back tears," he said. "I did not know this is how it feels to be a world champion. I tried to control my emotions all throughout the match, and

I was successful in not breaking down and crying."

**ALCANO REALLY** had no business being in the final. Even in the Philippines, hardly anyone outside of local pool circles could tell him apart from Jharome Pena or Jeff De Luna or Rudy Morta or any of the other dozen or so talented but faceless Pinoy hopefuls. He certainly wasn't a Filipino superstar in the league of former world champs Efren Reyes and Alex Pagulayan, or longtime pool icon Francisco Bustamante.

The 2006 World Pool Championship was supposed to be Reyes' tournament. The 52-year-old Hall-of-Famer merited a No. 2 seed in the 128-man field, behind 17-year-old defending champion Wu Chia-Ching of Taiwan, but Reyes was the sentimental favorite by a wide margin. He also was the odds makers' choice, and for good reason — Reyes had played some of the best pool of his career over the previous 12 months, winning several major events and a mind-bending \$850,000 in prize money. By hosting the WPC, many in the Philippines hoped to coronate their beloved "Bata" on home soil.

The Philippines needs heroes, and Yen Makabenta, the Filipino pool guru and businessman who brought the event to Manila for the first time, realized that the WPC could create more than one. He was most interested in showcasing the Philippines' strength as a whole, and in the context of all the emerging pool powerhouses across Asia.

"I think Asia is going to be the hotbed of pool for years and years to come," said Makabenta, who is the chairman of the Billiard and Snooker Congress of the Philippines.

Through his sports promotions firm Raya Sports & Events, Makabenta paid a \$1.1 million site fee to regional broadcaster ESPN Star, and spent another \$200,000 to cover logistical requirements of the event. He planned to cover the expense with advertising and sponsorship dollars.

"When we invested in this, we were not investing in it only for one time," he said. "I projected we would suffer a shortfall in the first year, but we were aiming to host the championship for at least one or two more years."

The third party in the deal was U.K.-based Matchroom Sport, which owns the worldwide TV rights to the Championship and organizes the event. Barry Hearn, chairman of Matchroom, welcomed the

shift in locale from Taiwan in 2004 and 2005 to the pool-steeped Philippines.

"It's like bringing the sport back to where it all began," he said. "I like the enthusiasm of the people. The site itself is a terrific venue. I like that [Makabenta] took a chance and gambled on it."

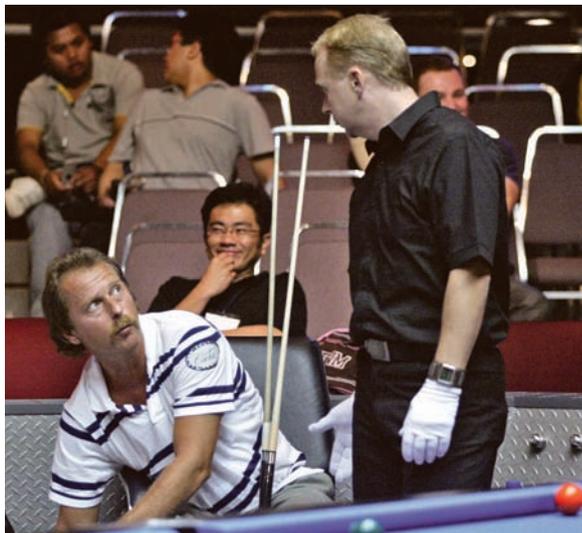
As far as generating local interest, the Filipino players didn't disappoint. Twelve Filipinos qualified for the field through conventional means, and another nine earned spots either as substitutes for players who dropped out of the event, or through a 10-tournament qualifier event in Manila just prior to the championship.

All eyes, of course, were on Reyes. And it turned out that the legend didn't enjoy the attention.

**THE TOURNAMENT** began with a round-robin stage, dividing the field into 32 groups of four players each. And for the second straight year, "The Magician" performed a disappearing act.

Reyes' first match was against unseeded American Tony Crosby. Cheered on by a crowd of more than 600, Reyes appeared nervous as he missed a number of gimme shots. In the end, he dogged a simple 9 ball to effectively hand the match to Crosby, 8-7.

In 2005, Reyes lost his first two round-robin matches and couldn't recover in time to earn a spot in the top-64, single-



**A warning from Rees, right, sent Strickland storming.**

elimination stage. This year — to the blue-faced relief of a nation holding its breath — Reyes righted his ship with two wins and navigated a route to the knockout rounds. But he knew he needed to conquer that queasy feeling playing in front of the hometown crowd.

"There is a lot of pressure playing in the Philippines," he said. "People here in the Philippines are expecting me to win. So I am ashamed to lose, you know."

As per usual in the controlled chaos of the round-robin stage, pool fans could percolate on several diverting subplots — some all too familiar. In what will come as no shock to any followers of pro pool, mercurial American Earl Strickland lost his cool in his first-round match. In this instance, Strickland was handed a warning from referee Nigel Rees for consistently fiddling with his cue while opponent Vincent Facquet was shooting. Strickland then said, "I don't care; I'm out of here," and then stormed from the arena, ceding the match to Facquet.

In day two, his temper adequately primed, Strickland performed a full flip-out against Taiwan's Ying-Chieh Chen. His often outrageous behavior included throwing his cue to the ground after visits to the table, swearing to the audience, and then threatening to hit Chen over the head with his cue when his opponent refused to shake his hand after Strickland's 8-6 win. The display earned Strickland an official warning from the World Pool-Billiard Association, the sanctioning body of the event, and prompted an apology from the tarnished "Pearl."

The two players in each group with the best records — by virtue of matches won and total racks both won and lost — would move on. Alcano appeared to be out of the tournament after first losing to Luong Chi Dung of Vietnam, 8-7, and Germany's Christian Reimering, 8-3. But after doing the math in the tight bracket, he realized that if he beat final opponent Marcel Martens of The Netherlands by a score of 8-2, he would squeak through.

His strategy would have to change, however. Noting that he was having



**True colors: Scotsman Holtz paid tribute to home.**

trouble finding the 1 ball after his break, he decided to try a soft break to bring both the 1 and cue ball back up table while the rest of the pack mingled below the foot spot. The result: an 8-2 victory, and a ticket to the next stage.

**EVEN IN** the field of 64, Alcano was an afterthought of sorts. Twelve Filipinos waltzed into the first single-elimination round — almost 20 percent of the survivors. Several favorites were still in play, including Reyes, Bustamante and Marlon Manalo, third-place finisher in 2005.

Keeping pace, Taiwan also placed 12 shooters in the mix, including defending champion Wu — or at least two-thirds of him. The wunderkind had dropped 60 pounds since the last WPC with a strict diet of protein, fruits and vegetables, and sported a newly svelte physique.

The American squad was lost in the shuffle. In fact, one could say they got lost on the way from the Manila airport. Of the 12 U.S. players slated for the event, Gabe Owen, Charlie Bryant and Shawn Putnam declined their invitations for health-, financial-, and travel-related reasons. During the round-robin stage, the group lost Crosby, Rodney Morris, Mike Davis, and Robb Saez. That left Strickland, Johnny Archer, Charlie Williams, Cory Deuel and Jeremy Jones.

Each had plenty of international experience — and each crashed in the first knock-out round.

“It’s so hard to come all the way over here,” said Deuel of America’s worst showing ever at the Championship. “The guys have 15- to 20-hour flights, and when you get over here, you can’t sleep. I personally woke up at 4 a.m. every day. It was really hard to get into it.

“And all these [Asian] players play good, too. ... It’s just coming down to who is spending more time practicing, and who is shooting straighter. They take it a little bit more serious over here. They all have coaches, and they’re praised by their countrymen. Over in the States, Americans don’t care too much about pool players. It’s not like we have a bunch of people trying to coach us and help us.”

Of course, Deuel noted, the concepts of “coaching” and “practicing” are alien in the Philippines. Players are reared on a steady diet of money matches in the country’s pervasive gambling culture. And they learn a wide variety of shots and ways to win while playing on often-substandard equipment.

Alcano matriculated under those kinds of conditions while growing up in a cement-block house in the seaside province of Laguna. A few years ago, he fell under the wing of Buggy Promotions, a small managerial outfit based in Quezon City. Owned by nightclub entrepreneur Perry Mariano and his wife, Verna, Buggy kept a handful of players in its stable and provided many of them with something



**New Wu: The defending champ lost 60 pounds.**

they never had before — money and the means to travel outside the Philippines for tournaments and more seasoning.

Alcano wasn’t exactly a stranger to the U.S., but the Marianos provided him with good career guidance and kept his head on straight.

“He’s an entertainer, and he sometimes does silly things,” Verna Mariano said. “He loves to please the crowd. I think that is sometimes the problem. He’s so good, but sometimes he doesn’t take things so seriously. That is the reason he doesn’t make it to the top. ... He is so confident.

He’s very daring. In a way it’s good — you can see that he isn’t very nervous. But sometimes he can be too confident.”

His results started to improve, however. He won the Manila leg of the San Miguel Asian 9-Ball Tour in 2005, as well as two gold medals in the 2005 South East Asian Games. Winning qualifiers for both International Pool Tour events in 2006, he ended up earning an impressive \$57,000 and No. 14 ranking.

During the World Pool Championship, Verna drilled him with inspirational messages: “Every day I keep on texting him, ‘This is your time. You have the game, and this is your chance to shine, so don’t waste it. Prove to them that you are the man now.’”

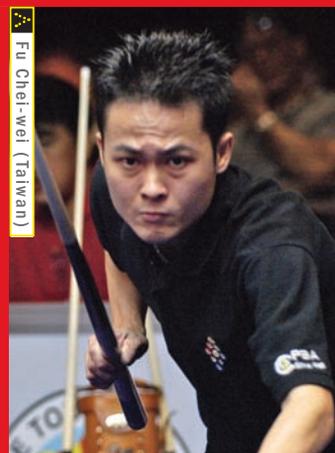
But he was going to do it on his terms. Call it confidence, or sticking with a comfortable routine, but Alcano reportedly could be seen playing money matches at the nearby One Side poolhall after play at the WPC was completed on some days.

**SOUQUET HAD** long ago sworn off action, if he ever entertained it at all. Embodying all 12 tenets of the Boy Scout Law, Souquet fit into the Philippines’ hustler culture about as well as Pope Benedict would fit in the girlie shows that littered metro Manila.

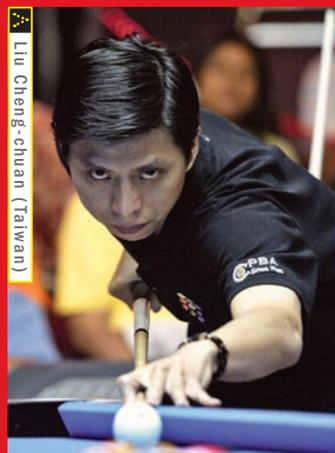
No money games for Ralf. He and compatriot Engert stuck close to their hotel and the tourist sights throughout the event, and quickly fell into their road rhythms. For example, Souquet would

**PARTY CRASHERS**

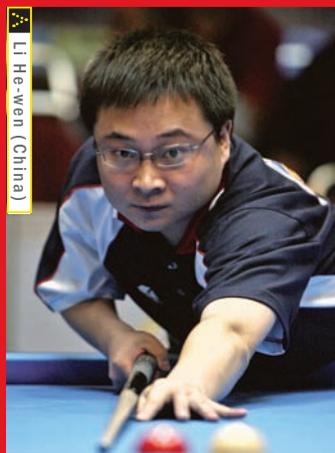
*No one expected to see these guys in the semis — more proof of Asian parity in pool.*



Nicknamed “The Draw Shot King,” 33-year-old Fu beat Marcus Chamat, Chao Fong-Pang, Steve Davis and Rodolfo Luat on his way to a third-place finish.



After reaching the top 32 at the 2005 World Pool Championship, the 32-year-old product of Taiwan’s intense pool-training industry finished tied-for-fifth in Manila.



Nicknamed “Doraemon” after a Japanese cartoon character, the talented 26-year-old Li made his debut at the WPC this year, finishing tied-for-third.



After making a splash at the World Cup of Pool this year by pushing Vietnam to a third-place finish, 21-year-old Dung fulfilled expectations with a fifth-place run.



**A small army of shutterbugs covered the WPC and Alcano's run.**

eat the same food for breakfast every morning — soup, dumplings and sweets — and even sit at the same table in the hotel dining room.

After a strong year on the men's circuit, Souquet kept his stride in Manila. After winning all three of his round-robin matches, he handled Huidji See of The Netherlands, 10-3, and knocked off legitimate threat Yang Ching-Shun of Taiwan, 10-8. And it wasn't lost on him that his previous world title came a decade earlier, although he would never admit to looking ahead to the final.

"It would be nice [to win] after a 10-year break, but I'm not really thinking about it," he said. "I'm just seeing it from match to match. I'm looking forward to my match tomorrow. I try only to think from match to match, because when I start thinking about what could happen in the future, you may lose focus on the first step, which is the most important one."

That could have been Reyes' problem when he ran into Alcano in the round-of-32. "Bata" was not his normal self, spraying shots around the perimeters of the tight pockets on the Brunswick Metro table. Reyes dogged six or seven entirely makeable shots, and in the process began to lose his form — popping up from shots just after making contact with the cue ball, and steering shots with his cue.

Alcano vaulted to a 6-1 lead, and then hung on as Reyes temporarily regained

form. Within minutes, Reyes had recovered to 6-4 and was running out to further narrow the gap. But an ill-advised shot on the 7 in the side pocket clanged at the jaws, and Alcano cleared the table to take back the momentum.

Alcano later said that during his 10-7 win he had an epiphany: "If I can beat Efren, I can beat anyone."

**ALCANO WASN'T** the only player making a statement by reaching the top 16. In a remarkable bit of evidence for the growing parity in the international pool community, players from 11 different countries earned a spot in the final 16.

Of course, Asian players showed their new dominance, with nine competitors still kicking. Taiwan accounted for four of them, and the Philippines boasted three — Alcano, 49-year-old Rodolfo Luat, and 22-year-old Jeff de Luna. China and Vietnam also posted representatives. The remaining seven were a mish-mash of Westerners from Scotland, Germany, Serbia, Canada, Russia, Spain and England.

It was easy to pick Scotsman Pat Holtz out of the lineup — he was wearing a blue-and-white kilt in the pattern of his nation's flag.

"It's a traditional thing for the Scotsman who qualifies for the Championship," the 37-year-old Holtz said in heavy brogue. "It's my lucky charm."

Holtz unfortunately ran into defending

champ Wu, who was working his own clothing mojo. Like Tiger Woods, he had adopted the habit of wearing a red shirt when playing. After Wu shellacked Holtz, 11-6, Taiwanese journalists presented Wu with a spare red shirt to help ensure another title run.

Once the field was whittled to the eight players in the quarterfinals, one could have forgiven Matchroom officials if they had presented competitors with shirts with nametags sewn on. Souquet and Wu wouldn't be able to sneak up on anyone, and Alcano and Luat were known quantities in some circles, but the remaining four weren't on anyone's radar (see sidebar on page 46).

In a competition that was becoming as unpredictable as snowstorms in August, the bespectacled Li He-wen from China came from the farthest regions of left field. In the first year that Chinese players had competed in the Championship, the 26-year-old Li seemed an unlikely trailblazer with his computer-nerd looks, monosyllabic attitude and slightly lost expression. His strangely appropriate nickname was "Doraemon," after a chubby Japanese cartoon character.

But Li had a strong rep. He reportedly was ranked No. 1 in China, and had finished second to Reyes in 2006 at the Ho Chi Minh stop of the San Miguel Asian 9-Ball Tour.

In the quarterfinals, he controlled his match with Vietnam's Luong Chi

Dung from the beginning, winning 11-7. Equally surprising, Wu suffered an 11-6 meltdown against Alcano. He never got on track, torpedoing his chances by scratching whenever he seemed to get a head of steam. And he got a taste of what his opponents must have felt during his championship run in Taiwan, as Alcano's Filipino countrymen packed the arena and overhead balconies, cheering loudly at any Wu mistake.

Alcano by that time was the Philippines'

last hope, as Luat had fallen to Taiwan's Fu Che-wei, 11-7. And Wu's departure certainly opened the door for Souquet, who bested Taiwan's Liu Cheng-Chuan, 11-8. From this point on, Souquet was the favorite.

**THE CRITICAL** shot in Souquet's semi-final match with Liu — the shot that would instantly become known as "The Shot" among spectators and TV commentators — came with the score knotted

at hill-hill. Phenomenally controlled and consistent, like most of Taiwan's assembly-line pool talents, Liu recovered from an 8-5 deficit and tied it up at 10-10, only to be forced to cede the break to Souquet in the alternating-break format. Souquet broke and ran to the 4 ball, but needed to break up a 5-6 cluster with his leave. The cue ball made contact, but not enough to nudge the 5 free. Thus began a 20-minute chess match of safeties, culminating in a wide-open look at the 5 for Souquet.

This wasn't any open look. This was a take-a-bathroom-break-and-rethink-your-career-choice open look. Souquet faced one of the toughest shots in pool, with the cue ball near the middle of the head rail and the 5 ball close to the foot spot. He seriously considered playing safe for a moment.

"I decided I'd rather go for it and take the chance," he later said.

Souquet speared the shot with authority and cleaned up for the win, putting him in the final. You wouldn't know from his expression, however. Placid as ever.

"He wants to win the title, believe me," Engert explained. "He wants to do it again. When you do it once, it can be a lucky tournament for you, but when you do it again, you are for sure a world champion."

"I've known him for 26, 27 years. I said three days ago — when I saw him playing, the way he was acting, how he is with me when we're not in the arena — I know he will win."

Meanwhile, the Marianos were putting their faith in fate, figuring Alcano's close shave in the round-robin stage was just some cosmic prank in advance of a life-defining victory. "Maybe this is his destiny," Verna said.

Li certainly helped Alcano's cause. He blew several makeable shots as Alcano opened up an early lead. With Alcano on the hill at 10-8, Li sank the 8 ball, only to roll the cue ball up to the 9. He missed the extreme cut by several inches and scratched to boot. The only thing left was to concede the match.

A huge contingent of autographs hounds and back-slappers now shadowed both Souquet and Alcano as they headed for their pre-final press conference. Most of the Asian press also made requests for signatures, usually right on their ID badges.

Anticipating a home-crowd frenzy on the following day, Souquet allowed, "I know that the crowd will be totally against me. I actually like the idea of being the

*This is Your Brain on Pool!*

**Ozone Billiards**  
Play in the ZONE

*Free Cases!  
Free Shipping!  
Any Questions?*

**www.OzoneBilliards.com**

underdog. ... As long as they don't throw stuff at me, I think I'll be okay."

Alcano said that he hoped the crowd would be respectful of Souquet. And he acknowledged the pressure that the audience would exert on him.

"Are you aware that 86 million Filipinos expect you to win?" a reporter asked.

Alcano nodded and said softly, "I know."

He must not have been too worried, however. Alcano was spotted early the next morning goofing around on the street with his pals near the One Side pool-hall. Don't tell Verna.

**TRUE TO** Alcano's wishes, the door-busting crowd of 1,000 gave Souquet a rousing welcome when he was introduced at the final. Alcano, looking well rested and relaxed, received a standing ovation.

The first two racks encapsulated the race-to-17 match. Souquet won the lag and broke. He sank the 7 and 8, but had no clear shot for the 1. He played safe, watched Alcano play a better safety, and then left the 1 exposed after a tough kick shot. Alcano mopped up for the first game. Then Alcano had his turn with the rack, again employing the soft break that consistently left the 1 ball by the right side pocket and the cue ball in the middle of the table. The rest of the balls were equally compliant, falling into tight but manageable patterns.

Alcano had passed the first test, not showing any signs of stiffening. He had the touch of a jeweler, dissecting the table with precise strokes. Souquet might as well have been playing with a sledgehammer. He couldn't find his speed on the break, and on position shots he consistently lost control of the cue ball, which usually rolled long when he wasn't underhitting to correct the problem.

A buzz started to build in the stands as Alcano took an 8-2 lead.

"My game plan was to try to get the breaks and take a two- or three-game lead," Alcano said later. "When I finally got a six-rack lead, I felt comfortable, but I knew it wasn't over."

No, it was over when Alcano extended his advantage from 9-4 to 12-5. With alternating break, recovering from a seven-

game deficit would be all but impossible. At the three-hour mark, Souquet mustered the hint of a comeback, trailing 14-9, but his hopes sank with the cue ball on a scratch at 15-9.

Alcano remained steady. At 15-10, he put on a show, sinking a cross-side

few more words before he was overcome with emotion. He wiped his face with his hands, unable to speak. Spontaneously, the audience began chanting "Sou-quet! Sou-quet! Sou-quet!" until the stoic German finally raised his hands and waved to the crowd.

"Thank you, that means a lot to me," he said. "I think [Alcano] really deserved this title this year. He played great. My goal will still be to win the World Championships. Hopefully I can do it here in the Philippines."

**THAT'S VERY** possible. Makabenta anticipated losses of only \$100,000 from his first stint hosting the WPC, and was eager for a second chance. Although talks were still under way in December, Matchroom officials were confident they could come to an agreement.

Potential advertisers and sponsors certainly would be impressed with the numbers. Early ratings data from ESPN Star estimated that about 89 million people viewed the championship across Asia, a marked improvement over telecasts in 2004 and

2005. According to Makabenta, Filipino TV officials guesstimated that about a third of the nation's population — 30 million or so — tuned in.

Of course, a Filipino champion helps Makabenta's cause as he tries to rally more support

from big business in the Philippines.

"It really got the country behind the event," Makabenta said. "Sport has become a unifier here in the Philippines. Every time a sports phenomenon emerges here, it unifies everyone around it."

That much was evident as Alcano obliged a giant scrum of fans by signing autographs for well over an hour. Bleary-eyed and somewhat dazed, Alcano began to contemplate his new life as Filipino hero. It had its perks.

"I'm trying to figure out what I need to do with the money," he said, "because this is the first time that I've had this much money."



**Souquet couldn't catch a break on his break, leading to a tearful end.**



bank and a one-rail kick on the way to his runout. As he lined up the 9 ball, the audience admonished itself to "Shhhhhhh," and then roared "Ron-nie! Ron-nie!" after the 9 dropped. The ending for Souquet was mercifully short, as he sank the 9 on his subsequent break, and then watched Alcano drill a 1-9 combo in the next rack for the championship.

An ESPN Star commentator took Souquet aside after the match for an on-camera interview and laid out the obvious: "Your luck seemed to run out in this final. You were breaking very well, but you never saw the 1 ball."

Souquet paused, bowed his head and said, "That is true." The crowd laughed.

"I don't know what to say. It's very frustrating," Souquet continued, mumbling a