

President Fong *Talks Sports*



by Amy Vaerewyck

Before Bobby Fong became Butler University's president in June, the wooden bookstand in the president's office held a massive dictionary. It now holds Fong's baseball encyclopedia.

Nearby, two framed pictures hang one above the other. The lower one is a black and white photograph of Butler's 1921 baseball team side by side with players from Waseda University in Japan. Above, in Chinese characters are the words "little study place." The placement of these pictures epitomizes Fong's views of college athletics: academics come first.

"We have student-athletes, not athlete-students," Fong says. "Everyone comes here to get an education, but not everyone comes here to be an athlete."

He believes athletics are most valuable for the joy and life lessons they provide.

"Sports are a means to end, not an end in themselves. I don't want people to minimize sports but I also don't want to argue they are an end in themselves.

(Butler is) a university that looks for national excellence (in athletics) but we don't compromise academic excellence ... If they can't cut it in the classroom, they're not going to play at this school."

To give students a realistic perspective, Fong reminds them that their chances of getting into medical school are much higher than their chances of making it to the pros to make millions.

"Of course, you don't make (millions) a year being a university

president either," he jokes.

Fong's advice to students: "If you had to do one or the other, hit the books, not the ball, but if you can do both, more power to you."

He says he loves sports for their "relatively clear arena of value," in which race and gender are irrelevant. "(We) celebrate athletic excellence for its own sake."

The son of Chinese immigrants, Fong began to celebrate athletics in second grade when a teacher told him that to understand American life, he must first understand baseball. "I've been overcompensating ever since," he jokes. He soon became a die-hard Yankees fan — but not a sports star.

"I wrestled 103 in college and was the coxswain for the crew team ... (but) I'm a terrible athlete — there's no question about it," he says with a grin.

But with a 30,000-piece baseball card collection, an office adorned with autographed baseballs and limited edition bats and a memory chock full of sports trivia, there's also no question he's a sports fanatic.

Despite meetings, business trips and a family to nurture, Fong intends to attend at least one match of every Butler sports team every year.

Although baseball's his first love, Fong says, "I like the prospect of being able to root for Butler during March Madness."

He says the men's basketball team, with a new coach who's already familiar with the team, has the tools for a winning season. "I'm cautiously optimistic (about the season)," he says.

Whether it's in the teeming crowds at the first round of the NCAA tournament or on a frosty spring day watching the softball team bring it home in the ninth inning, you'd be well-advised to keep a look out for Butler's newest No. 1 fan.