

JAI-ALAI

Game of wits, speed and skill

In a hall gray with smoke people eagerly watched a game that promises both thrill and fortune while players inside the long, rectangular court sustained an exciting display of wits — a matching of speed against savvy, a lively show of grace and skill. The attraction — or distraction — is the game "Jai-Alai," a Basque version of handball played on a three-walled court ("cancha"), more than half the size of a football field.

Jai-Alai is played in Manila "cesta a punta" style. Played in a court that measures 178 feet long and 35 feet wide, the game gets started with the first player ("pelotari") throwing a two-pound, tennis-sized ball at the front wall with a crescent-shaped contraption called "cesta." Often, the ball reaches speeds better than 100 miles per hour, justifying the claim that Jai-Alai is the fastest sport.

On the return, the opposing player catches the ball before or after the first bounce and hurls it back at the front wall or via the side wall ("double-wall" in Jai-Alai jargon). A "pelotari" who fails to retrieve the ball concedes a point, whereupon the winner proceeds to play against the next player. A single event is over when one player earns five points in the regular six-player event, or nine points in the case of the "llave" (a game played by 10 players).

The game is as exciting as it is beautiful — the skill, grace and strength of the players combining to fulfill the "game of a thousand thrills." Perhaps, it is the only sport where grace combines with strength, wit can contest skill, and speed can be pitted against size with none having a decided advantage over the other.

To the initiated, betting heightens the excitement of the game. Bets run along the "quinella," or first-and-second principle. All that one has to do is to pick a forecast combination

of winners for a single event or of two succeeding events. Tickets cost P5 each for a single event and P2 for the double-entry event.

A further attraction is the "Special Llave," an innovation introduced at the fronton every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. For only P2, bettors get a chance to win huge dividends with the correct winning combination in the order of Win, Second and Third.

The crowd that flock to the fronton at 4:30 p.m. daily, except on Sundays, attests to the popularity of the game. In a manner of speaking, Jai-Alai has come a long way.

It is said that Jai-Alai originated in Mexico, where the Aztecs played it fairly well, long before Hernando Cortes "won" the Aztecs and the whole of Mexico. Pelota, or a version of the game, was believed to have been brought to Spain by Señor Cortes.

Jai-Alai — which has come to mean both the game as well as the place itself — was first played in Manila long before other sports of foreign origin — basketball, soccer, football and baseball — were introduced in the country. It was brought to the Philippines by Spain toward the latter part of the 19th century.

There is a saying in Spain that wherever you find a group of basques, natives of the north-eastern Pyrenees, you will find a "fronton," a pelota court. It was quite natural then that the Elizaldes, natives of that region, were instrumental in putting up the first "fronton." It was built for Ynchausti y Cia, predecessor of the present Elizalde y Cia.

At first, only a small group of pelota enthusiasts, mostly employees of Ynchausti y Cia, patronized the sport. Later, a Jai-Alai club, aptly named "Club de Pelota Vasca," was organized and included not only Spaniards but also Filipinos, Ameri-



Jai-Alai building on Taft Avenue: Only rivaled by basketball

cans, Britons and French. Commonwealth Act 485 dated June 18, 1939, otherwise known as the Jai-Alai Franchise, legalized betting in the game. At an original cost of P1.5 million a huge four-story building was built along Taft Avenue. Equipped with modern facilities — air-conditioning in all floors, elevators, bars and restaurants and a spacious dancehall — the "fronton" not only became the center of the pelota sport but also the scene of many a social whirl.

The present edifice, is a tribute to

hardcore pelota aficionados who restored the fronton, soon after it was razed by the war, at a far greater cost.

A smaller fronton has been built in Cebu and still another one has been put up by private persons. But the sudden surge of enthusiasm in a less strenuous version (the pelota has 14 versions) of the sport propelled management of subdivisions, banks and other commercial corporations to erect more courts. To date, pelota (played with a racket instead of the "cesta") is only rivaled by basketball in its following among the young.

PEOPLE

Webster defines a technocrat as "an expert," a rather plain word to contain the complex qualities of a man of special skills, particularly if the man spoken of is Rafael Salas, one-time Executive Secretary in the Cabinet of President Marcos. Last month, he moved to the highest UN administrative position ever held by a Filipino when the governing council of the United Nations decided on his promotion to undersecretary general of the United Nations Development Program. Salas joined the UN in 1969 as executive director of the then newly created United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and is credited for developing the Fund from a shoestring operation to one of the largest single enterprises of the United Nations. He was further put into the limelight



Salas: Deserved promotion

when he was appointed overall coordinator of the UN's world population year in 1974. He will take charge of the year's activities and functions which will culminate in a UN-sponsored conference at

Bucharest in August 1974.

After almost two months in the Philippines, Tara Anne Fonseca, Miss Asia 1973, left for her home in Bombay. Arriving at the airport 20 minutes before departure time, she told a reporter of the "Philippine News Agency" in an interview: "I hate to leave. Everyone I met here was warm, wonderful and hospitable." She said she really wanted to stay longer in the Philippines because "everyone I met was so nice to me." After a tour of Asia, part of her prize in the "Miss Asia Quest" held in Manila last May, Miss Fonseca had returned to the Philippines and toured several cities, including Bacolod, Legazpi, Olongapo and Baguio.

Amidst the distinguished compa-

ny of Philippine men of letters who congregated in this to-do (Jose Garcia Villa was there in a favorite multi-colored quilt-patterned plaid jacket), there was at the center conspicuously absent. The affair was Yevgeny Yevtushenko's birthday celebrated by him and friends; the absentee was the fictionist-poet-dramatist and recently winner of the SEATO Literary Award for 1972-73 Nick Joaquin. As if to say, "I'm still around." And with reason: Nick Joaquin's prize-winning work "Tropical Gothic" is an impressive collection of some of his best short stories which, says Nick Joaquin is still a name (if not a legend) to reckon with. The collection includes three of his latest works — Candido's Apocalypse, Doña Jeronima and The Order of Melkizedek. Secretary of Foreign Affairs Carlos P. Romulo presented Joaquin the prize of US \$1,000 Monday, July 23, at the Department of Foreign Affairs.