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Asian talent growing in the NWSL

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

As the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) finished its second season, the league continued to add players of Asian heritage. Several came from Japan's Nadeshiko League, suggesting a developing pipeline between the two leagues. The new players joined an already successful pool of NWSL Asian talent, helping the burgeoning league draw in more fans with a better quality of play and a more international flavor.

The talent pipeline from INAC Kobe Leonessa began in the front office, as their head coach, Takayoshi "Taka" Ishihara, was hired by the NWSL's Sky Blue FC in January. Ishihara held many coaching positions in Japan, from Tsukuba University to the nationally known programs at Maebashi Ikuei and Teikyo high schools, but his greatest success came with Leonessa, already a force in the Nadeshiko League.

After serving as Leonessa's assistant coach and head coach of the development squad (similar positions he now holds with Sky Blue), Ishihara was promoted to head coach in 2013. Under his leadership, Leonessa set a record for women's professional teams by winning four titles last season, including their third straight Nadeshiko championship.

A month later, Sky Blue signed forward Nanase "Na Na" Kiryu, who has played for Nadeshiko's other powerhouse, NTV Beleza, since 2007. With Beleza, Kiryu has scored 40 goals in 127 appearances, helping the team win three league championships, three league cup championships,



INTERNATIONAL ADDITIONS. As the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) finished its second season, the league continued to add players of Asian heritage. Forwards from Japan who played in 2014 included Nanase "Na Na" Kiryu of Sky Blue FC (left photo, on right) and Nahomi "Naho" Kawasumi of Seattle Reign FC (middle photo). A player who gained experience playing in the Japanese Nadeshiko League, Rebecca Moros, was a member of the Portland Thorns (left photo, on left). Also playing for the Thorns in 2014 was Hawai'i native Meleana "Mana" Shim (right photo). (AR Photos/Jan Landis)

and two Empress Cup Championships. She earned "Best 11" honors last season, scoring 14 goals in 28 appearances.

Kiryu failed to score in her 16 games with Sky Blue, but the NWSL saw a dazzling debut from a teammate with Asian roots, Nadia Nadim. Nadim was born in Afghanistan but fled to Denmark with her mother and sisters after Taliban sympathizers executed their father. She flourished in her new country, and is now a star forward for the Denmark Women's National Team and Danish club Fortuna Hjørring, which loaned her to Sky Blue.

Although she joined Sky Blue with only six regular-season matches remaining, Nadim had a tremendous impact, notching

seven goals and three assists. Those seven goals tied her for the team lead with forward Kelley O'Hara, who took more than three times as many games to match Nadim. And only O'Hara and midfielder Katy Freels had more assists on the club than Nadim.

Another player from INAC Kobe Leonessa, Rebecca Moros, joined our own Portland Thorns this season. Moros played three seasons in the Women's Professional Soccer (WPS), the league that preceded the NWSL, and helped the Western New York Flash win a title in 2011 before joining Leonessa.

Portland secured the rights to Moros from the Seattle Reign, and the former WPS champion brought her offensive-minded style to the Thorns. Though she did not find the net in 2014, Moros took eight shots, four on goal, to lead all Thorns defenders.

Seattle has a Leonessa player of its own: forward Nahomi "Naho" Kawasumi, on loan from the Japanese team. With Leonessa, Kawasumi won league MVP in 2013 and "Best 11" honors in four straight seasons.

With the Reign this season, Kawasumi was dominant, winning the NWSL Player of the Week honor twice and scoring nine goals in 20 matches, second-best on Seattle and tied for fifth in the league. Her efforts earned her NWSL Best XI honors, making her the first Japanese player to earn the award in the league.

Beyond the contributions of imports from Leonessa, plenty of other players with Asian roots made their mark in 2014, like defenders Abby Erceg and Rachel Quon of the Chicago Red Stars. This dynamic duo helped Chicago allow just 26 goals this season, second-best in the NWSL.

Quon, who is of Chinese descent, has been a fixture on Chicago's back line, ranking in the top four on the team in minutes played in both 2013 and 2014. Erceg, captain of the New Zealand National Team, has played for teams in the Australian, Spanish, and German leagues. Erceg joined the Red Stars for the final 11 games of the season, earning the team's Unsung Hero award for her gritty play.

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1			6			7
	4	2			6	3
		3	2	1	8	
		7	4	2	1	
	3					5
		1	8	3	7	
		9	6	4	5	
	7	8			2	6
2			7			4

Difficulty level: Easy #16742

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last week's puzzle

Puzzle #64871 (Hard)

All solutions available at www.sudoku.com.

6	4	2	7	9	8	1	3	5
5	3	7	6	1	2	8	9	4
9	1	8	4	5	3	2	6	7
4	2	6	1	3	9	7	5	8
1	9	3	8	7	5	6	4	2
7	8	5	2	4	6	9	1	3
3	5	1	9	2	7	4	8	6
2	6	4	3	8	1	5	7	9
8	7	9	5	6	4	3	2	1