

## Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

## Lin's Hornets on the rise, Spoelstra's Heat on the decline

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

Asian-American talent in the National Basketball Association (NBA) seems headed in two different directions. Jeremy Lin led the rising Charlotte Hornets to their first playoff win in 14 years, though they eventually fell in the first round. Coach Erik Spoelstra led the team that defeated them, the Miami Heat, who lost in the second round to the Toronto Raptors. Even though they exited the playoffs sooner, the Hornets felt triumphant, while Spoelstra and the Heat were disappointed.

Spoelstra, the NBA's first Filipino-American head coach, felt disappointed only because he had previously reached dizzying heights. From 2010 through 2014, Spoelstra had one of the best lineups in league history, with point guard Dwyane Wade, power forward Chris Bosh, and forward LeBron James.

James, considered one of the best players ever, was key to the Heat's success, helping them reach four straight NBA Finals, winning two. But James opted out of the final year of his contract to return to the Cleveland Cavaliers.

The Heat hasn't been the same since. In 2015, injuries hammered the team, which lost Bosh down the stretch, and Miami missed the playoffs for the first time since Spoelstra became head coach.

This season, the Heat added point guard Goran Dragic and rookie small forward Justise Winslow, while second-year center Hassan Whiteside led the NBA in blocks. The team again lost Bosh down the stretch, but Miami still finished first in the Southeast Division, securing the Eastern Conference's third playoff seed.

In the first round of the playoffs, the Heat faced the Charlotte Hornets, whose surge in the second half of the season was fuelled by Chinese-American point guard Jeremy Lin. Lin exploded onto the NBA scene in 2012 with the New York Knicks, creating the "Linsanity" phenomenon and its "Lin" puns for his ability to take over the game in the fourth quarter.

After that successful breakout, Lin was signed by the Houston Rockets, where he slipped from starter to reserve before being traded to the Los Angeles Lakers, where he remained on the bench. Once his contract was up, Lin inked a two-year deal with Charlotte worth far less than his previous contract with the Rockets. Amid eroding offensive numbers, Lin was now seen as a bench player to boost Charlotte's second-team offense.

Lin served well in this role, occasionally starting before catching fire in the second half of the season. In March, he scored 29 points to lead Charlotte to a 23-point comeback against the San Antonio Spurs, and then poured in 25 points three weeks later to help the Hornets defeat the Boston Celtics in the Garden.

But Lin really shone in the playoffs against Miami. After Charlotte lost the first two games in the series, Lin dropped 18 points on the Heat in Game 3, giving the Hornets its first playoff win since 2002. He followed this up with a 21-point performance in Game 4, tying his best playoff performance ever, and the 89-85 win by the Hornets evened the series at two apiece heading back to Miami.

The home team had won each of the first four games, and the Heat had won its home games in the series by an average of 22 points. So everyone expected Spoelstra to rally Miami to a Game 5 victory. Instead, Lin electrified off the bench again, scoring 14, with six rebounds and a team-high seven assists. His effort helped Charlotte outscore the Heat 25-17 in the fourth



quarter to win Game 5, 90-88.

The Hornets headed back home for Game 6, ready to win their first playoff series since 2002. But Spoelstra and Miami stifled Courtney Lee and Marvin Williams, who had combined for 31 points in Game 5. In Game 6, Lee scored just two points and Williams was shut out entirely, while Lin scored only eight points, adding one assist and one rebound.

For their part, the Heat put together a

true team effort, with five players scoring in double digits. Their 97-90 win sent the series back to Miami for a crucial Game 7. On their home court, the Heat outscored the Hornets 29-18 in the first quarter and never looked back. They held the lead throughout, once again sharing double-digit scoring among five players, while holding Lin in check with just nine points.

"I think our basketball team needed to go through that," said Spoelstra after the

**HOT HORNETS, LOW HEAT.** Jeremy Lin (#7) of the Charlotte Hornets shoots past Miles Plumlee of the Milwaukee Bucks during a National Basketball Association (NBA) game in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in this March 26, 2016 file photo. In the bottom photo, Miami Heat coach Erik Spoelstra motions to his team during an NBA basketball game against the Portland Trail Blazers in Portland, Oregon, in this April 2, 2016 file photo.

Heat's victory, "to be pushed and find a different level which we showed in the last two games." But the series wore down the Heat before its grueling second-round contest against the Toronto Raptors, who also took seven games to defeat the Pacers, winning their first playoff series victory since 2001.

The Heat and Raptors split the first four games, three of which went into overtime. Toronto took the crucial Game 5, 99-91, at home, but Miami won Game 6, 103-91, setting up yet another Game 7 for the two battle-worn teams. With the home-court advantage, the Raptors leaned hard on their backcourt of Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan, who scored 35 and 28, respectively. Their center, Bismack Biyombo, scored 17 and dominated the glass, dragging down 16 rebounds.

Spoelstra and Miami's backcourt could not respond, as Wade and Dragic combined for just 32 points on 12-for-30 shooting. Though the game stayed close for the first three quarters, Toronto pulled away in the final frame, outscoring Miami 30-11. Spoelstra said after the game, "Their most aggressive, most energetic burst was at the beginning of that fourth quarter, and they put it away."

Looking ahead to next season, Lin should remain a valuable bench player who will keep the Hornets on the rise. Spoelstra and the Heat, on the other hand, face a crossroads. They are still under contract to the fragile Bosh, while starters Wade, Whiteside, and Luol Deng are all free agents. They could retain their core or makes some trades and shift in a whole new direction. Asian-American sports fans will be anxious to see if their favorite coach can match the trajectory of their favorite player.

## Ichiro surpasses 4,257 hits in Japan, big leagues

By Jay Paris

The Associated Press

**S**AN DIEGO — With two hits in a game against the San Diego Padres, Ichiro Suzuki raised his career total in the Japanese and North American major leagues to 4,257, passing Pete Rose's record Major League Baseball (MLB) total.

"This wasn't like a goal of mine to get to this point," Suzuki said through a translator after the Marlins lost 3-6 to the San Diego Padres.

Suzuki had 1,278 hits for Orix in Japan's Pacific League (1992-2000) and has 2,979 with Seattle, the New York Yankees, and the Marlins. Rose was quoted recently by *USA Today* as saying: "I'm not trying to take anything away from Ichiro, he's had a Hall of Fame career, but the next thing you know, they'll be counting his high-school hits."

"Obviously, I've heard of Pete Rose's comments, and he wasn't happy about what they are saying about this record," Suzuki said. "To be honest, this wasn't something that I was making out as a goal. It was just kind of a weird situation to be in because of the combined total."

Suzuki's first hit was on a dribbler in the first inning. His second was a double into the right-field corner in the ninth.

"For me, it's not about the record," Suzuki said. "It's about my teammates and the fans."

Marlins president David Samson watched while having a sushi dinner in



**HUMBLE PROFESSIONAL.** Ichiro Suzuki of the Miami Marlins hits a single during the first inning of a baseball game in San Diego on June 15, 2016. Suzuki singled in the first inning to match Pete Rose's major-league hit record of 4,256. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

Germany.

"Ichiro gets a hit in the first inning and I loudly cheer. He looks at the TV and says 'Ichiro!' and the first thing he does is put down the tuna and extend his hand, and then he reaches to pull up his white coat like it's Ichiro's jersey and gets into Ichiro's batting stance," Samson said of the chef. "That to me was the most symbolic moment as it relates to Ichiro and his career. He transcends borders and demographics and religion and race. He does something very few people do. He does his job."

Suzuki joined the Marlins ahead of the 2015 season.

"If you could have 25 Ichiros, you would have 25 World Series rings," Samson said.

"He is a true humble professional who works as hard when he's 0 for 5 as when he's 5 for 5. That skill cannot be taught. In a world where sports athlete are rarely role models, Ichiro is a true role model off and on the field."

Melvin Upton Jr. homered and had two RBIs, and Derek Norris had a go-ahead, two-run single for the Padres, who stopped a four-game losing streak.

Luis Perdomo (2-2) allowed three runs and six hits in six innings. It was the fourth big-league start for the 23-year-old right-hander, taken by Colorado from St. Louis in December's winter meeting draft and acquired by the Padres later that day.

Continued on page 11