

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

Seattle’s Tokashiki blazes Japanese WNBA trail

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) has drawn from players across the globe, but few of those have come from Asian countries. A notable exception to that trend, Japan’s Ramu Tokashiki, has completed her second season with the Seattle Storm, where she helped the team rise from a disappointing 2015 performance to a playoff berth in 2016. Although the Storm was eliminated in the first round, the team is looking forward to more success with Tokashiki in the years to come.

Tokashiki came to basketball relatively late, at age 12. But seven years later, she was a standout rookie for the JX-Eneos Sunflowers of the Women’s Japan Basketball League (WJBL). In her first season with the Sunflowers, she led her team to the championship, earning Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player (MVP) honors. At more than six feet tall, Tokashiki towered over other WJBL players, slamming dunks with both hands and using her impressive reach to dominate the paint.

Over the next six seasons, Tokashiki became a WJBL force, as the Sunflowers won five straight championships and she was honored with two MVP awards. She further distinguished herself as a two-time MVP with Japan at the FIBA (International Basketball Federation) Asia championships.

Seeking a greater challenge, Tokashiki signed a one-year deal with Seattle before the 2015 season, becoming just the third Japan-born player to play in the WNBA. The first two, Mikiko Hagiwara and Yuko Oga, did not make much of an impression, each averaging less than three points per game.

But Tokashiki is a different player than Oga and Hagiwara, both of whom were guards. Tokashiki’s nickname is “Taku,”



Japanese slang for “strength,” and it’s a fitting one. At 6’3” and 176 pounds, she has the size and strength to play the low post and the speed to blaze down the court on fast breaks.

Her size makes her fairly average in the WNBA. But Seattle teammate and all-star Sue Bird raved about Tokashiki’s “crazy athleticism” and her great jumping ability, calling her “probably one of the fastest post players I’ve ever seen.”

Despite these natural talents, Tokashiki took some time to adjust to the WNBA’s more physical play. In 2015, Taku started the season’s opening game but struggled and found herself on the bench. She kept her head high, focusing on her defense, speed, and hustle. One opponent remarked, “She kind of plays with a little chip on her shoulder ... she was running the floor every single time ... that shows a lot about her.”

After scoring 21 points off the bench in June 2015, Taku found herself back in Seattle’s starting lineup. In the middle of

the season, however, she left Seattle to play with the Japanese National Team, leading the squad to a gold medal for the second straight year at the FIBA Asia Women’s Championship, which qualified them for the 2016 Olympics.

After her return, Tokashiki played so well down the stretch that she barely missed making the all-star team. Nonetheless, she was named to the all-rookie squad after a season in which she averaged 8.2 points per game, 3.3 rebounds, and 0.9 blocks. This production also put her in fourth place in the Rookie of the Year voting, with teammate Jewell Loyd taking the top honor.

Such an impressive rookie season put huge expectations on Tokashiki’s shoulders heading into 2016, which began with a multi-year deal in Seattle. Her coach, Jenny Boucek, said, “Taku is a key building block for our future. Her combination of passion, athleticism, fearlessness, and instinct for the game makes her a dynamic playmaker on both

SIZE, SPEED & STRENGTH. *Ramu Tokashiki of Japan has completed her second season with the Seattle Storm of the Women’s National Basketball Association, where she helped the team rise from a disappointing 2015 performance to a playoff berth in 2016. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson)*

ends of the floor.” Taku responded to those expectations by becoming a consummate team player. With the first pick in the 2016 draft, Seattle chose forward Breanna Stewart, who’d led the Connecticut Huskies to four straight National Collegiate Athletic Association championships, and won four straight Final Four Most Outstanding Player awards.

This shifted Tokashiki to the bench for the first half of the season, where she provided excellent support until the WNBA season broke for the Rio Olympics. In Rio, Team Japan finished in eighth place, thanks to Taku’s 17.0 points-per-game average, third best overall.

Rejuvenated, Taku saw her role grow again with the Storm, and she averaged seven points and four rebounds per game down the stretch to lead Seattle to the playoffs. They fell to the Atlanta Dream, 85-94 in the first round, but the Storm have plenty to look forward to in 2017, as Taku continues to develop with the team’s core of Bird, Stewart, and Loyd.

In the offseason, Tokashiki has returned to the Sunflowers in the WJBL to keep her skills sharp and challenge her stamina. Her role is different in Japan, where she dominates the middle instead of playing on the outside as she does in the WNBA. As she passes her way out of double- and triple-teams and grinds the ball inside, Taku is further developing the all-around game that will benefit Seattle in the future.

As she becomes even more of a force, Taku will continue to blaze a trail for other Asian players looking to make their mark in the WNBA. And she will give Asian-American sports fans someone to watch in 2017 — and beyond.

Talking Story: Alberto and Kolini and the Lion of Africa

Continued from page 6

world.

New Americans from all over — from the chaos of Arabia and Afghanistan; from the corrupt republics of the former Soviet Union; from the ethnicides of Southeast Asia, East and Central Africa; from the grinding violence of Mexico, Central and South America; from the sinking islands of our Caribbean and Pacific — love this democracy stuff. Like Kolini loves rugby.

While I’m leaning on Jimmy’s ugly car’s hip, he’s urging deeply wounded Rwandan grandpas and moms and kids out from behind apartment doors locked tight against Portland’s grimmest neighborhoods. Engage government, he says. Here, the governed must tell leaders how to govern us. Now, democracy is the antidote to bitterness. Trust me, he says.

And not only Jimmy Dogo says so. The president of the United States of America, says it too. That Hawai’i-born, Java-raised, Harvard-schooled, son of Kenya and Middle America, assured undocumented students brought here as babies, he assured parents without felonies, that it’s safe to come out from behind those doors. Engage government, Mr. Obama said. Do that, and

legal papers and work permits will be on the table.

America’s president is a bit humbled, tonight. River City’s biggest believers are stalled on chilly curbsides and slouched in emptied classrooms. Jimmy and me are watching rain run up and down his windshield. We’re all suddenly no longer sure. Not of our nation. Not of ourselves. Paralyzed.

This paralysis, insh’allaah, must be temporary. And partial. It must only be between you and me, inside this exhausted moment. Inside this doubt. Families with rent and utility bills due tomorrow, must never see us like this. Dreamy teens used to seeing their moms and uncles earnestly engaging government, must not be betrayed. Not by America. Not after all that awfulness that sent us here.

The bottom line, and the end of this essay, is more about Oregon’s policy and business leaders’ next moves than it is about our brown and black and blue guapos. Our community mechanics’ commitment, their compassion, is clear. Their persistence (stubbornness) is legend.

Also clear is where our America’s impending mood swing will send our institutions’ enormous momentum.

Will our institution’s leaders reciprocate with loyalty and love? These guys need government to tell them, to their tired faces, that they and those they care for, will be cared for. Like familia in good times and bad. Like A+ Alberto and his faithful BMW. Like Special K and his tough and tender aunties.

The Asian Reporter’s Expanding American Lexicon

aunties (Old World and New American): Term of affection and respect for women in the speaker’s community of nurture. With this form of address, comes an expectation of familial reciprocity — an exchange of duties traditionally expected between elders and youngsters.

BMW (German): Bayerische Motoren Werke. Since 1917, a Bavarian company making aircraft, motorcycles, and cars much loved by elegant engineers and simple motorheads everywhere.

carabao (Pan-Asian): Stubborn, reliable, working animal tenderly cared for by their families.

Dwayne Douglas Johnson (Samoan): “Maui” in Disney film *Moana*. “The Rock” in World Wrestling Federation (WWF) rings. Pro footballer and wrestler, movie producer and actor.

honky-tonk (American): As used here, a style of county western music,



typically narrating a love gone very wrong, and about bad behavior following. Similar bluesy stories run through “country” music of all continents and most islands in between.

Jah tentu (Indo patois): Yes, certainly.

familia (Spanish, Indo, and Filipino patois): Family. As used here refers to wider crew feeling and behaving in traditional interdependent ways. Every gender, every generation, every kind of schooling does different things well — share those things for a bigger and better familia.

kretek (Malayu and Indonesia

bahasa): A tobacco and clove cigarillo. Smokes nice, tastes like heaven.

krotjong (Indo patois): A regular guy. Kind of “country.” Also a popular music genre. See: honky-tonk.

tidak (Malayu and Indonesia bahasa): Nope.

Tongan: A Kingdom of Tonga citizen or, as used here, a River City resident. Tonga is a constitutional monarchy of about 102,000 people living there, of about 23,000 living in California, and about 1,000 in Oregon. The Kingdom’s 169 Pacific islands are about 3,200 miles southwest of Hawai’i, and about 2,300 miles east of Australia.

Singa Afrika (Malayu and Indonesia bahasa): Lion of Africa. In traditional cultures, great cats of the genus panthera, possess enormous spiritual gravity as well as physical power. As used here, a dutiful elder with those attributes, working one of Portland’s 70 or so ethnic streams.



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