

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

Seven Asian MLS difference-makers look to shine in 2017

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

As Major League Soccer (MLS) enters its 22nd season, the league's Asian contingent has grown increasingly diverse. While this season will see two fewer Asian players on the pitch, other top-flight players with eastern roots continue to shine and develop. In 2017, seven Asian players hope to make a difference for five different teams.

At the top of the list is Lee Nguyen, the New England Revolution midfielder who placed third in MVP award voting in 2014 after his breakthrough 18-goal season. Since then, the Vietnamese American has become one of the Rev's steadiest and prolific players. In just five seasons, Nguyen has the most penalty-kick goals in Revolution history, ranks second in shots, shots on goal, and game-winning goals, while placing fourth in goals and assists.

This last mark reflects Nguyen's increasing attention to passing as opposing teams have clamped down on his shot opportunities. He notched 10 assists in each of the last two seasons, starting at least 30 games each season over that span, including last season's team-leading 33 starts. His skills and dependability will help New England recover from a 2016 campaign in which they failed to reach the playoffs for the first time in four seasons.

Playing alongside Nguyen is Daigo Kobayashi, another sensational Asian midfield talent. Since coming over to the Revolution from the Vancouver Whitecaps, Kobayashi has played a vital role in distributing the ball to New England's goal-scorers. In 2014, Kobayashi became just the second Rev player ever to appear in all 34 matches.

Injuries to his back and hamstring, however, held him to just 21 appearances the following season. In 2016, Kobayashi appeared in 27 games, scoring his first goal since 2013. Having this playmaker in the lineup throughout the entire season will be essential to the Rev's success.

Like New England, Toronto FC features two Asian players: Tsubasa Endoh and Steven Beitashour. Beitashour, a dual Iranian-American citizen, has spent his entire career in MLS, playing with San Jose and Vancouver before joining Toronto in 2016.

Beitashour's ability to press forward and deliver a devastating cross distinguishes him from other fullbacks. Between 2011 and 2015, he accumulated 24 assists, more than any other defender in that span. Beitashour was named an all-star in 2012 after notching 13 assists in two seasons, and he has appeared in 10 playoff matches.

If Beitashour delivers a ball into the opponent's penalty box, Endoh will be looking to receive it. The ninth overall pick in 2016, Endoh was coveted due to his precise skills



MLS TURNS 22. A.J. DeLaGarza (#20) of the Houston Dynamo and Darlington Nagbe (#6) of the Portland Timbers run during a match played at Providence Park on March 18, 2017. In January, the Houston Dynamo traded for A.J. DeLaGarza, who had shown his versatility and durability with the L.A. Galaxy. The Guamanian fullback made 20 or more starts for six straight seasons with the Galaxy, anchoring a back line that helped L.A. win three MLS Cups during his time there. The MLS 2017 season, the league's 22nd year, kicked off this month. (AR Photo/Jeffrey Lim)

honed in Japan's youth talent development program and at the University of Maryland.

With the top-flight Maryland squad, Endoh scored 12 goals and gave 16 assists in 85 matches. Maryland won the ACC conference tournament in 2012 and 2013, the Big Ten conference championship in 2014, and the Big Ten conference tournament in 2015. In the NCAA championship, the team reached the semifinal in 2012, the final in 2013 (falling to champion Notre Dame), the second round in 2014, and the quarterfinal in 2015.

In his first season with Toronto, Endoh appeared 21 times, including 15 starts, scoring two goals on nine shots on goal. His 1,387 minutes played ranked tenth on the club and fourth among Toronto forwards, a great sign of his growing importance to the club. Just 23 years old, Endoh will be an exciting MLS player to watch for years to come.

Another offensive-minded player, midfielder Justin

Meram, is beginning his seventh season with the Columbus Crew. When Meram was young, his Iraqi family moved to Michigan, where he began his soccer career. After winning the NJCAA national championship with Yavapai College, Meram transferred back home to the University of Michigan, scoring 24 goals and recording 14 assists in 41 matches. Defender

With the Crew, Meram has started 104 matches, most of them since a breakout 2014 campaign in which he doubled his career bests with eight goals and four assists. He went on to score 11 goals and give 18 assists over the next two seasons, adding two goals in seven postseason starts. Meram will be crucial to a Columbus squad looking to recover from a ninth-place finish in 2016 after narrowly losing the 2015 MLS Cup to the Portland Timbers.

Continued on page 16

Malaysia soccer squad barred from travelling to North Korea

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — The Malaysian government has barred the country's national soccer team from travelling to North Korea for an Asian Cup qualifying match on March 28 because of security concerns.

Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) secretary-general Hamidin Mohamad Amin issued a statement saying Malaysia's expulsion of North Korean ambassador Kang Chol has "made the current situation unsafe for Malaysians to travel to North Korea for the moment."

Hamidin said FAM has written to the Asian Football Confederation to ask for the venue to be shifted from Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, to a neutral arena.

The North Korean ambassador was expelled from Malaysia over his criticism of the investigation into the killing of Kim Jong Nam, the exiled half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, at a crowded airport in Kuala Lumpur.

Ambassador Kang Chol said Malaysia was taking "extreme measures" that will do "great harm" to bilateral relations.

North Korea disputes Malaysia's determination that the victim was killed by the nerve agent VX. Malaysia has rejected the North's contention that he may have suffered a heart attack.

The March 28 Asian Cup qualifier in Pyongyang had been in doubt for weeks. At a news conference in early March, Hamidin said he would leave it up to the Asian Football Confederation to decide whether or not to postpone the match or move it to a neutral venue.

There have been other occasions when international issues caused games in Asia to be played in a neutral country — including the Asian Champions League that kicked off recently.

Saudi Arabia and Iran's lack of a diplomatic relationship means that for the second straight year, meetings between clubs from the two nations in the continental championship are taking place in a third country.

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

Difficulty level: Hard #94561

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 issue's puzzle

Puzzle #53692 (Medium)

All solutions available at <www.sudoku.com>.

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

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