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Takuma Sato's dream comes true at the Indy 500

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

Asian athletes have made inroads into many different professional American sports, but open-wheel racing has not been one of them. That is, not until Japanese driver Takuma Sato won the Indy 500, the quintessentially American racing event. The former Formula One driver created a thrilling finish, winning just his second IndyCar race on a track he's had a special connection with for a long time.

Sato has made Asian-American athletic history before, when he became the first Japanese driver to win an IndyCar race at the 2013 Toyota Grand Prix at Long Beach. Though less exciting than Sato's Indy 500 victory, Long Beach showed his dominance, as Sato led 50 of the race's 80 laps. In victory, Sato beat Dario Franchitti, the 2009 Long Beach winner, who had stopped Sato from winning the Indy 500 in 2012.

In that Indy 500, Sato sat behind only Franchitti and Scott Dixon with two laps remaining. Franchitti passed Dixon, and Sato followed, so just one driver stood between him and victory at the biggest open-wheel race in America. On the first turn of the race's final lap, Sato tried to pass Franchitti but spun into the wall, finishing in 17th place.

Beyond redemption, Sato's 2017 win held deep personal meaning for him, since the Indy 500 inspired him to pursue racing as a career. At age seven, Sato watched his first race on television, the Indy 500, and he was amazed at the speed of the drivers. "After that, I was hooked on racing," Sato said. "I wanted to be a driver. I was going to be a driver."

The Tokyo native has worked a long time to get to the winner's circle. Sato began pursuing his dream in 1996, when he went from cyclist to kart driver. The following year, he won a scholarship to Honda's prestigious Suzuka Racing School. Sato could have been their driver in the 1998 All-Japan Formula 3 Championship, but he knew his path to Formula One would have to begin in Europe instead.

In Europe, Sato raced in the British Formula 3 series, taking just three years to rise to circuit champion, in 2001. The following year, he raced in his first Formula One event, the Jordan Grand Prix. He later placed fifth at the Japanese



AP Photo/Darron Cummings



AP Photo/Rob

Grand Prix, earning his first points in the Formula One World Championship race.

Sato became a full-time Formula One driver in 2004, making his mark immediately. Still with the British American Racing team, he finished 10 times in the top ten and five times in the top five, including a third-place finish at the United States Grand Prix. The track for this race was the Indianapolis Motor Speedway — the same one on which the Indy 500 is run.

That would be his best Formula One finish ever and just the second time a Japanese driver had reached the Formula One podium. The first, Aguri Suzuki, took third at the 1990 Japanese Grand Prix, but never realized his promise. Sato, by

contrast, went on to take eighth place in the 2004 Formula One championship, the best finish ever by a Japanese driver.

2004 proved to be Sato's best year in that circuit, however. He never again ranked higher than 16th or finished a race in the top five, amassing only six more top-ten finishes in the next four seasons. In 2006, Sato signed with Aguri Suzuki's Super Aguri team, which fell apart in 2008, leaving Sato without a team.

After a year layoff, Sato signed with the KV Racing Technology IndyCar team, finishing the 2010 season in 21st place on the strength of a single top-ten finish at Edmonton. Sato continued to rise in his new circuit, changing teams in 2012 and

VINDICATING VICTORY. Takuma Sato of Japan celebrates (top photo) winning the Indianapolis 500 auto race at Indianapolis Motor Speedway in Indianapolis, Indiana, on May 28, 2017. In the bottom photo, Sato crosses the Yard of Bricks at the end of the race. Beyond redemption, the victory held deep personal meaning for Sato since the Indy 500 inspired him to pursue racing as a career.

again to A.J. Foyt in 2013, when he secured that first victory at Long Beach.

Before the 2017 season, Sato consistently placed in the top 20 in the championship rankings, collecting a handful of top-ten and one or two top-five finishes each year. This season, Sato joined Andretti Autosport, a portentous sign, since the team had won four Indy 500 races overall, including two in the previous three seasons.

Sato remarked on this record after signing with Andretti: "The team has proven year after year that they are ultra-competitive on all types of circuits. Particularly the speed that the team has shown in recent years at the Indy 500 has been incredible."

The move paid immediate dividends, as Sato placed fifth in his first race and ninth in his third race. At Indianapolis, he qualified fourth, his best starting position of the season and the best in his eight previous tries at the Indy 500. On the day of the race, he later said, "It was the first time in my career at Indy when I felt like I could win it. When, in my head, I knew I should win it."

As the race progressed, Sato remained at the front of the pack, waiting for his moment to strike. With 22 laps to go, he found it.

He flew around Helio Castroneves and Ed Jones to set himself up among the top three. Ten laps later, both Castroneves and Sato passed race leader Max Chilton, and the two battled for first throughout the race's final laps before Sato flew ahead for good, holding off Castroneves until the finish. "I know Helio is always going to charge," Sato said. "But he's just such a gentleman and such a fair player."

After Sato emerged victorious, team owner Michael Andretti said, "We had the right guy ... He drove a superb race." Andretti fielded six cars at this year's Indy 500, and Sato seemed lost in the shuffle. But he exceeded all expectations and, at 40 years old, may have finally found the right combination to fulfill his childhood dreams.

Filipino hoops sensation Kobe Paras seeks fresh start in L.A.

By Beth Harris
AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES — Kobe Paras is back in Los Angeles looking for a fresh start.

The guard, who is a celebrity in his native Philippines, is hoping he finds it at Cal State Northridge after a false start at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and a single season at Creighton.

Paras was welcomed to campus by Matadors coach Reggie Theus, who presented him with his No. 21 jersey. As a transfer, Paras will have to sit out the upcoming season because of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules.

"It's a new beginning and it's very humbling for me," Paras said.

He played at Cathedral High in Los Angeles before transferring to Middlebrooks Academy for his senior year. Paras was a highly touted recruit, having shown off his skills in several elite showcases and with the Compton Magic, his Amateur Athletic Union travelling team.

Theus tried recruiting Paras back then, but he committed to UCLA under coach Steve Alford. Last June, the school said he had failed to meet academic requirements.

"It's been hard for me the last couple years," he said. "I've been through a lot of adversity and

my head's still high."

Looking for another opportunity, Paras headed to Omaha, Nebraska. "I just took a chance," he said. It didn't work out at Creighton.

Paras averaged 1.3 points in 15 games for the Bluejays last season. He never started and played a total of 70 minutes.

"As a freshman, I expected to play a lot," he said. "We had a strong lineup of older guys and he (coach Greg McDermott) believed in the older guys. Everything happens for a reason."

At Northridge, Paras joins a team that went 11-19 and lost in the Big West Tournament quarterfinals last season. The Matadors' last NCAA tournament appearance was in 2009, the same year they last won the regular-season league title.

Heading into his fifth season in Northridge, Theus believes he's found the player who can lift the Matadors to new heights.

"Kobe has endless potential and his ceiling is so high," the former National Basketball Association star said. "He went through some adversity last year and some things that weren't so good for him. He kept his composure. I'm really proud to have Kobe here."

Paras shares a first name with retired Los Angeles Lakers star Kobe Bryant. He also has a high-profile father who is actively involved in his son's burgeoning career.

Benjie Paras was a star basketball player in the Philippines, twice earning MVP honors in the Philippine Basketball Association while leading his team to two titles. The 6'7" center retired in 2003 after 14 years and became an actor.

"All I can say is he's all yours," the elder Paras said, turning toward Theus. "I won't interfere with anything."

Both father and son are celebrities in their native country.

"It's hard for me every time I go back home because people ask for pictures and autographs," said the younger Paras.

Benjie Paras gets asked all the time whether his son is a better player than he was.

"I always tell them he's way better than me, but I always tell them I'm better looking," he said, laughing.

He can practice with the Matadors next season, although he won't play in games or travel with the team.

"He's very hungry to prove what he can be as a college basketball player," Theus said. "We have an extra 800 seats up top that maybe he can put some people into."

Paras sounded relieved to have finally found a basketball home. "I've been recruited ever since high school and coach Reggie is still showing he wanted me to be here," he said.

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA



■ Polo

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