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Asian highs and lows on the World Series mound

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

This year's Major League Baseball (MLB) World Series was one of the best ever, featuring some great as well as terrible performances by Asian pitchers Kenta Maeda and Yu Darvish. But a racist incident directed at Darvish shows how far Asian MLB players have come — and how far they still have to go.

Both Darvish and Maeda came to MLB after successful careers in Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB). One of the most hyped Japanese pitchers ever, Darvish began his MLB career in 2012 with the Texas Rangers, who paid nearly \$110 million to sign him to a six-year deal.

Living up to the hype, Darvish led the league in strikeouts in his second season and has averaged more than a strikeout per inning while steadily driving his walk rate down. He has earned four All-Star appearances in five MLB seasons, missing 2015 due to Tommy John surgery.

Older than Darvish and already suffering from elbow problems, Maeda was signed in 2016 by Los Angeles to an eight-year contract worth at least \$25 million. After a solid 2016, Maeda struggled to start this season, was demoted to the bullpen, and later returned to the rotation and completed another strong season.

Darvish joined Maeda on the Dodgers at the trade deadline when the Rangers, out of contention, swapped him to Los Angeles. The Asian pitching duo proved essential to the Dodgers' early-round playoff successes, as Darvish won his two starts, surrendering one run in each, and Maeda pitched five scoreless, hitless innings over five games.

In the World Series, the Dodgers faced an excellent Houston Astros team that included Yuli Gurriel, a Cuba-born player who played for the NPB's Yokohama Bay Stars in 2014. Two years later, Gurriel defected to the U.S. and signed with the Astros. After working his way up in the minors, Gurriel spent 2017 as Houston's first baseman before creating the feel-bad story of this year's World Series.

Darvish started Game 3 of the World Series after the teams split the first two games. After a scoreless first inning, Darvish allowed a leadoff home run to Gurriel in the second. Gurriel rounded the bases and returned to the dugout, where he was caught on camera pulling his eyes into a slant and apparently saying "chinito," a derogatory Spanish term for Asians.

Though he did not see the gesture, Darvish surrendered three more runs and



AP Photo/Eric Gay



AP Photo/Tim Bradbury, Pool

was replaced before the end of the inning. Houston went on to win, 5-3, giving Darvish the loss, and after the game, discussion swirled around Gurriel's racist conduct.

When asked about the gesture, Gurriel apologized, explaining that "chinito" was a common Cuban term he hadn't intended in an offensive way. He said he used the gesture and the term to joke that Darvish had given him an easy pitch to hit because he thought Gurriel was Japanese.

For his part, Darvish was gracious and forgiving, saying the gesture was "disrespectful to people around the world," but added "Nobody's perfect ... We'll learn from it and we have to go forward." Gurriel offered to apologize to Darvish personally, but Darvish said it wasn't necessary.

The league chose to suspend Gurriel for

five games at the start of next season, explaining that the player's union would likely have appealed any suspension that kept Gurriel out of the World Series. The resulting arbitration hearing would have created even more off-field drama, and the arbitrator could have postponed Gurriel's suspension until next season anyway. And since players do not accrue salary during the postseason, suspending him next season ensures he will suffer a pay cut.

The series continued with Gurriel still playing. The Dodgers scored five runs in the ninth to win Game 4, and the Astros won a slugfest in Game 5, 13-12. Then Los Angeles came back from an early deficit to win Game 6, 3-1, setting up a winner-take-all Game 7 in an already dramatic series.

As he had been in the playoffs, Maeda

MOUND MANAGEMENT. This year's Major League Baseball (MLB) World Series was one of the best ever, featuring some great as well as terrible performances by Asian pitchers Kenta Maeda (top photo) and Yu Darvish (bottom photo). But a racist incident directed at Darvish shows how far Asian MLB players have come — and how far they still have to go.

was brilliant throughout the series, throwing almost six scoreless innings across four games. But he did not appear in Game 7, which was started by Darvish, seeking redemption.

But Darvish struggled with his control, again failing to escape the second inning after giving up five runs to the Astros. While the off-field drama might have unsettled Darvish, a more likely explanation lies in the baseballs.

Many pitchers complained that the official World Series baseballs were too slick, making it harder to control breaking pitches like Darvish's slider. So, more pitches caught too much of the plate, and more of those pitches were hit hard. The statistics bear this out, as the eight home runs in Game 2 and the 24 total home runs in the series are both World Series records.

But instead of a record-breaking series, what will remain in the memory of Asian sports fans is Gurriel's racist conduct towards Darvish and its consequences — or lack thereof.

On the one hand, we can take heart from the outrage against Gurriel. No significant sportswriter tried to defend him, dismiss the outrage, or argue against a suspension. His behavior was acknowledged and condemned as obvious racism, and Gurriel himself was instantly contrite.

On the other hand, Gurriel's punishment is relatively minor and did not affect his World Series performance. When he initially made the gesture, none of his teammates apparently called him out on it. Moreover, his behavior is a clear indication that racism still exists in baseball.

Baseball, like other American major-league sports, has a long history of racist policies, players, and practices that it has only relatively recently begun to address. Baseball was segregated for 60 years, and the last team to integrate, the Boston Red Sox, did so less than 60 years ago.

Five years after that, Masanori Murakami became the first Japan-born MLB player. But only in the last 16 years have Asian players joined MLB in significant numbers. Clearly, far more progress needs to be made. We can only hope that the low point of this year's World Series draws greater attention to racism in sports and that this kind of behavior no longer finds a place in our national pastime.

Trump choosing white men as judges, highest rate in decades

By Catherine Lucey and Meghan Hoyer

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is nominating white men to America's federal courts at a rate not seen in nearly 30 years, threatening to reverse a slow transformation toward a judiciary that reflects the nation's diversity.

So far, 91 percent of Trump's nominees are white, and 81 percent are male, an Associated Press analysis has found. Three of every four are white men, with few African Americans and Hispanics in the mix. The last president to nominate a similarly homogenous group was George H.W. Bush.

The shift could prove to be one of Trump's most enduring legacies. These are lifetime appointments, and Trump has inherited both an unusually high number of vacancies and an aging population of judges. That puts him in a position to significantly reshape the courts that decide thousands of civil-rights, environmental, criminal-justice, and other disputes across the country. The White House has been upfront about its plans to quickly fill the seats with conservatives, and has made it clear that judicial philosophy tops any concerns about shrinking racial or gender diversity.

Trump is anything but shy about his plans, calling his imprint on the courts an "untold story" of his presidency.

"Nobody wants to talk about it," he says. "But when you think of it ... that has consequences 40 years out." He predicted at a recent cabinet meeting, "A big percentage of the court will be changed by this administration over a very short period of time."

Advocates for putting more women and racial minorities on the bench argue that courts that more closely reflect the demographics of the population ensure a broader range of viewpoints and inspire greater confidence in judicial rulings.

One court that has become a focus in the debate is the Eastern District of North Carolina, a region that, despite its sizeable black population, has never had a black judge. A seat on that court has been open for more than a decade. George W. Bush named a white man, and Barack Obama at different points nominated two black women, but none of those nominees ever came to a vote in the senate.

Trump has renominated Bush's original choice: Thomas Farr, a private attorney whose work defending North Carolina's redistricting maps and a voter identification law has raised concerns among civil-rights advocates.

Kyle Barry, senior policy counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said that when diversity is lacking, "there's a clear perception where the courts are not a place people can go and

vindicate their civil rights."

In recent decades, Democrats have consistently named more racial minorities and women to the courts. But even compared to his Republican predecessors, Trump's nominees stand out. So far, he has nominated the highest percentage of white judges in his first year since Ronald Reagan. If he continues on his trend through his first term, he will be the first Republican since Herbert Hoover to name fewer women and minorities to the court than his GOP predecessor.

The AP reviewed 58 nominees to lifetime positions on appellate and district courts, as well as the Supreme

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