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# Polynesian awards highlight some of the best Asian college football players

By Mike Street  
Special to The Asian Reporter

At the college and professional level, most Asian football players are Polynesian, hailing from Hawai'i, Samoa, Tonga, and New Zealand. Two top-flight pro players, Samoans Jesse Sapolu and Ma'a Tanuvasa, founded the Polynesian Football Hall of Fame in 2013 to honor Asian athletes. A nonprofit located at the Polynesian Cultural Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i, the Hall of Fame inducts Polynesian football standouts and gives out awards to the top college and professional Polynesian players each year.

In this month's sports column, we look at the nominees for 2017 Polynesian College Football Player of the Year, along with the eventual winner. Four of the five nominees attend college in the west, and all of them have made major contributions to their National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) teams, mostly at the versatile position of linebacker.

The only nominee to head to the east coast, Andrew Motuapuaka, had a great senior year at Virginia Tech. The Tongan linebacker was second on the Hokies with 85 tackles, adding an interception, a fumble recovery, and 3.5 sacks to his stat line. Motuapuaka was named ACC Defensive Player of the Week after notching 12 tackles and a sack against West Virginia.

After his sophomore year, Motuapuaka recommitted himself to hard work and becoming an example for younger players. Now he is a team leader respected by teammates and opponents alike. Pitt coach Pat Narduzzi said of Motuapuaka, "The success they have had, it all starts with that linebacker, not only with his intelligence, but the way he plays. He's a heck of a football player and he's a leader."

The only nominee from the Mountain West Conference, Samoan linebacker Jahlani Tavai, finished another dominant season at the University of Hawai'i. A junior, Tavai had his second-straight year with over 100 tackles, amassing 124, almost 40 more than his nearest teammate and 11th in the NCAA.

Tavai also had 5.5 sacks, an interception, and a fumble recovery, earning him second-team Mountain West All-Conference honors after making the first team in 2016. Hawai'i's Rainbow Warriors had a similarly disappointing 2017, finishing with a 3-9 record that kept them out of a bowl game.

Hawai'i had a tough season, but Oregon State was even worse, winning just one game. Despite this, senior linebacker and team captain, Tongan Manase Hungalu, has been a standout. He amassed 97 tackles (57 unassisted), 2.5 sacks, and two interceptions. Those tackle stats were the best for the Beavers, while his sack total ranked second. In his best game of the season against Cal, he made a whopping 20 tackles, earning him Pac-12 Defensive Player of the Week honors.

Hungalu draws inspiration from his Hawai'ian family, saying, "I'm always thinking about my parents, and even when they are tired, they don't have any other options, they have to work hard. So I never underestimate what it means to work hard." He will look to bring this work ethic to the National Football League (NFL) next season.



**PROFICIENT POLY PLAYERS.** Nominees for the 2017 Polynesian College Football Player of the Year award included Hercules Mata'afa (top left photo), Manase Hungalu (top right photo), Vita Vea (bottom left photo), Andrew Motuapuaka, and Jahlani Tavai. Four of the five nominees attend college in the west, and all of them have made major contributions to their National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I teams, mostly at the versatile position of linebacker.

At the opposite end of the Pac-12 rankings, the Washington Huskies had another strong season, finishing 10-2, which placed them second in the Pac-12 and 15th in the nation. They owe much of their success to their fifth-ranked defense, anchored by Tongan defensive tackle Vita Vea.

Vea stands 6'5" and weighs 340 pounds, and his strength, size, and speed make him a disruptive force. He hurries quarterbacks, redirects running backs, and pushes plays in another direction. Hindered by near-constant double or triple teams, Vea didn't put up amazing stats — 37 tackles and 3.5 sacks.

Though statistics don't tell Vea's tale, awards do. This season, Vea was named to the All-Pac-12 first team and the All-American second team. He also won the Pat Tillman Pac-12 Defensive Player of the Year award and the Morris Trophy, given to the Pac-12's best offensive and defensive linemen.

Vea has been good, but Samoan defensive lineman Hercules Mata'afa has been great. Playing for Vea's cross-state rival, Washington State University (WSU), Mata'afa has put up gaudy numbers and received more than his share of national awards.

Even more than Vea, Mata'afa combines power, speed, and quickness with devastating results, plowing over or around blockers to stop running backs cold or take quarterbacks down. The Cougars leveraged his versatility by deploying him at tackle or end, further confounding opposing offensive lines.

Mata'afa led WSU with 9.5 sacks, which ranked 10th in the NCAA FBS. His 43 tackles don't seem terribly impressive, until you note that 30 of them were

unassisted, which registered sixth best in the NCAA. And he led the Pac-12 in both sacks and tackles for a loss.

Hercules earned Pac-12 Defensive Player of the Week honors against Utah, to which he added semifinalist finishes in both the Bednarik and Walter Camp Awards, and spots on every major All-American list. The Associated Press named him the Pac-12 Defensive Player of the Year at both defensive end and defensive tackle, recognizing his versatility. And he did all this after missing two games and part of a third.

The Polynesian Football Hall of Fame added to Mata'afa's list of awards by naming him their College Football Player of the Year. The list of finalists shows the depth of Asian football talent in the college ranks, which could extend to the NFL.

Tavai, Vea, and Mata'afa are juniors, so they could stay in college and dominate another season, or leave for the NFL and become a top pick. Hungalu and Motuapuaka are both seniors and will draw some attention during the draft, though not as much as the other three. Regardless, all five show the strength of collegiate Polynesian football players.

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

Difficulty level: Easy

#39581

**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 #25374 (Hard)

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

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