

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

# Asian NWSL players lead their teams to the playoffs — and beyond

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

The teams in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) aren't packed with Asian players, but as this year's playoffs show, clubs that have talent with eastern roots seem to rise to the top. The NWSL squads in this year's semifinals featured some of the best Asian players in the league.

The one team without Asian representation in its starting lineup is our very own Portland Thorns, who last season lost forward Nadia Nadim when she went across the pond to play for Manchester City, as well as midfielder Meleana "Mana" Shim, who mutually agreed with the club late last season to part ways and went on to play for Vaxjo DFF in Sweden. But Portland lined up more talent in the 2018 college draft, snagging forward Sandra Yu with the eighth overall pick.

A former captain for women's soccer powerhouse Notre Dame, Yu won two state championships and one national championship in high school. She has also been a regular fixture in the U.S. Soccer youth national team system since 2009, including appearances with the under-23 and under-20 squads.

After Yu was drafted, Thorns coach Mark Parsons said that she "is smart, versatile, and technical ... She can play anywhere in the midfield or on the front line and could even play at fullback ..." Yu's flexibility should ensure that she finds a spot on the Thorns, a team with plenty of talent already.

Portland's semifinal opponent, the Seattle Reign, has some of the best Asian talent from goal line to goal line. Keeper Lydia Williams, an Australian native with aboriginal heritage, excelled in her first



AR Photo/Jay Landis



AR Photo/Jay Lim

full season with the team.

Williams missed the first several games of the season while playing international

matches, but she allowed just 11 goals and notched 10 clean sheets in her 17 games with the Reign. She helped Seattle record its best defensive season ever, allowing only 19 goals while allowing just 0.79 goals per game, both club records. Her efforts placed her second in voting for the 2018 NWSL Goalkeeper of the Year honor, just behind Portland's Adriana Franch.

The Reign had Japanese help on offense from midfielder Rumi Utsugi and forward Nahomi "Naho" Kawasumi. Although both spent time away for international duties, Kawasumi again proved a good table-setter, tying for second on the team with three assists in 13 games played. Leg injuries and international duties sidelined Utsugi quite a bit, but on the pitch, she played well defensively and scored a goal.

Utsugi and Williams appeared in Seattle's semifinal matchup against Portland, while Kawasumi's absence was evidence of the Reign's offensive depth.

**PLAYOFF CITY, USA.** The semifinals of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) playoffs featured the Portland Thorns, Seattle Reign, Chicago Red Stars, and North Carolina Courage. Semifinal #1 featured the Thorns defeating the Reign, 2-1, at Providence Park in Portland. Semifinal #2, a match that was originally scheduled to take place in North Carolina, was moved to Providence Park due to Hurricane Florence. The Courage defeated the Red Stars in the match, 2-0, to advance to the championship game against Portland, also held at Providence Park. Forward Samantha Kerr (top photo, #20), who was traded to the Red Stars this season, led the league in scoring for the second consecutive year, again earning her the league's Golden Boot award. Goalkeeper Lydia Williams (bottom photo, center left, light gray jersey) and midfielder Rumi Utsugi (bottom photo, center right, navy jersey) of the Seattle Reign helped lead their club to the NWSL semifinal this year. The Reign allowed only 19 goals this season.

But the excellent keeping skills of Williams and the Reign's stingy defense were not enough to keep the Thorns from advancing, 2-1, to their third NWSL championship appearance.

In the final, Portland faced the winner of the semifinal matchup between the Chicago Red Stars and North Carolina Courage, a game that was moved to Providence Park due to Hurricane Florence. Chicago's offense was anchored by one of the league's best players, Samantha Kerr. Her 16 goals accounted for an incredible 42 percent of Chicago's total of 38, part of the young player's growing scoring legacy.

Kerr, who has Indian heritage, led the league in scoring for the second consecutive year, again earning her the league's Golden Boot award. Incredibly, she accomplished this despite missing five games to play for Australia, her mother's home country. She now has 59 regular-season goals, the most in NWSL history; she is also the only NWSL player to score more than 50 career goals.

Kerr also became the only NWSL player with three career hat tricks after a match against Sky Blue FC, the team that traded her to Chicago before the season. The trade placed her alongside another top Asian player, Japanese forward Yuki Nagasato. Known for her prolific scoring with Japan's national team, Nagasato joined Chicago in 2017 but missed most of the year due to a knee injury.

When she returned this season and joined Kerr on the front line of the Red Stars, Nagasato turned her attention to setting up her already-legendary teammate. Nagasato was second in the league and first on the Red Stars with seven assists, all of them to Kerr.

These two had their work cut out for

*Continued on page 11*

**DON'T LET TEXTING BLIND YOU**

**STOP TEXTS STOP WRECKS.ORG**

Ad Council

NHTSA  
DISTRACTIONGOV

United Way of the Columbia-Willamette  
Give Today  
www.unitedway-pdx.org

Think you're an organ and tissue donor? Not if you haven't told your family.

Talk to your family about organ and tissue donation. Talk to your family about donating life.

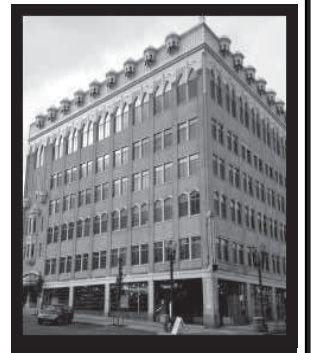
For a free donor card brochure, contact:  
Donate Life Northwest  
(503) 494-7888  
1-800-452-1369  
www.donatelifenw.org



## Retirement Living

### CHAUCER COURT

- APARTMENTS - STUDIO, ONE BEDROOM, AND MOBILITY IMPAIRED
- FEDERAL RENT SUBSIDIES AVAILABLE
- NO BUY-IN OR APPLICATION FEES
- AFFORDABLE RENT 30% OF ADJUSTED GROSS INCOME
- IDEAL URBAN LOCATION NEAR RESTAURANTS PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION, MEDICAL FACILITIES, & SHOPPING



503-224-3559

Come Visit Us and See Our Renovated Apartments!



1019 SW 10TH AVE • PORTLAND 97205