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# Rui Hachimura of Japan poised for NBA stardom

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

Chinese stars Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian have left their mark on the National Basketball Association (NBA), but only two Japan-born players have ever made it into an NBA game. Don't feel bad if you haven't heard of them. Yuta Tabuse played 17 minutes in four games for the Phoenix Suns during the 2004-2005 season, and Yuta Watanabe has logged just 52 minutes in eight games for the Memphis Grizzlies this season. But Gonzaga Bulldogs forward Rui Hachimura is ready to change all that.

Hachimura was born in Toyama, Japan, to a Beninese father and a Japanese mother. His father's West African heritage made Rui look distinctively different from other Japanese, and he sometimes felt ostracized for being *hafu*, or biracial. Despite this, he showed moderate success in school athletics, playing soccer, track, and baseball.

After a friend suggested he try out for his junior-high basketball team, Hachimura flourished. He led that team to second place in the nation, then led his high school team to consecutive national titles and played for Team Japan in a succession of International Basketball Federation (FIBA) youth tournaments.

In 2013, Hachimura and Japan took a surprising third place at the FIBA Asia U16 tournament. The following year, Hachimura led everyone in scoring at the 2014 FIBA U17 World Championships, outscoring future NBA players Harry Giles, Jayson Tatum, and Josh Jackson. Playing against the U.S., Japan was shellacked, 38-122, but Hachimura accounted for 25 of Japan's 38 points.

Already a big name in Japan, Hachimura gained international attention from those FIBA tournaments. In 2015, he was the only Japanese player invited to the Jordan Brand Classic, a premier showcase for under-16 basketball talent, and he caught the eye of a range of college recruiters.

Hachimura chose to enroll at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, for two main reasons. First, its climate was similar to Toyama. Second, its basketball program has a reputation for bringing international players to America, featuring athletes from France, Lithuania, Denmark, Germany, and Brazil, among others.

This gave Hachimura plenty of help, but his first season at Gonzaga, 2016-2017, included plenty of adjustments. He had to learn a new language and culture and adapt to a faster, more aggressive game. Hachimura came off the bench in 28 games that year, collecting 73 points, 38 rebounds, and three blocks in 128 total minutes. Though he contributed little, Gonzaga reached the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) finals before falling to North Carolina, 65-71.

In 2017-2018, Hachimura's impact off the bench grew.



He played in all 37 games and racked up 766 minutes, averaging more than 11 points and almost five rebounds per game. He made one regular-season start against IUPUI, and had the best game of the season against Texas, nearly recording his first career double-double with a 20-point, nine-rebound performance at the Moda Center in Portland.

But Hachimura's most dramatic game that season came in the 2018 NCAA tournament. Gonzaga survived a first-round scare against UNC-Greensboro, 68-64, and then beat Ohio State in the next round, 90-84, with Hachimura contributing a season-high 25 points.

Preparing to face Florida State, however, Gonzaga lost starting forward Killian Tillie to a hip injury sustained during practice. Suddenly, the sophomore Hachimura would be starting the most important game of his young career.

Though his stat line was lower than his game against Texas, one could argue that Hachimura played the best game of the season against Florida State, who were a much tougher opponent. He scored 16 points in 35 minutes, had nine rebounds, and blocked two shots, but the rest of the team didn't play as well, and Florida State held onto an early lead for a 75-60 victory.

Despite this disappointing early exit from the tournament, the team has surged back to the top this

**UP-AND-COMING STAR.** Gonzaga forward Rui Hachimura (#21) shoots against the University of Portland during the first half of a National Collegiate Athletic Association basketball game in Portland, Oregon. Hachimura has flourished since joining his junior-high basketball team. (AP Photo/Craig Mitchell/lyer)

season, and Hachimura has become a crucial starter. He was key in Gonzaga's biggest victory so far this season, an upset of top-ranked Duke in the Maui Invitational, vaulting the Zags to No. 1 in the country.

The 89-87 win featured a lot of great moments, but most prominent was the team's defensive stonewalling of the Blue Devils in the game's final minutes. Duke had seven chances to tie the score, but they were denied each time, including two rejections by Hachimura.

And the Japanese star didn't just shine in the final game, either. He averaged 22.3 points and six rebounds in the tournament, shooting well both inside and outside the three-point line. His performance earned him tournament Most Valuable Player honors and gave him a boost of self-confidence.

Two games later, against Creighton, Hachimura finally achieved his first career double-double, scoring 22, ripping down 11 rebounds, and adding three steals and three assists. Those assists mark a turn in his skills this season. In the next game, Hachimura scored 26 against Washington, his second-highest point total of the season, and then his numbers started to shift.

Since that Washington victory, Hachimura's scoring production has slipped a bit while his assists have risen. After averaging 22 points and 1.5 assists in the eight games before facing Washington, he has averaged 18 points and 2.2 assists in the 12 games since. As teams start to focus on him, he's learning to dish the ball, reflecting the recognition of his skills by his opponents and his growing understanding of the flow of the game.

The Gonzaga team has also slipped since that Washington victory. They dropped the next two games — losing to current number-one Tennessee and then to UNC, ranked 12th at the time — and fell from the top spot to eighth in the national polls.

Like Hachimura, Gonzaga responded to adversity, winning the next 10 and climbing to No. 4 in the nation. With 10 games left, none of them against top-ranked opponents, the Bulldogs hope to tune up for the NCAA tournament, when they will once again be favorites to rise from the first two rounds — if not further.

Whether they can accomplish that goal depends a lot on Hachimura, who is already being talked about as college player of the year and a top NBA draft pick. Whenever he decides to declare for the NBA draft, Hachimura should make a bigger mark on the game than either Yuta Tabuse or Yuta Watanabe, heralding Japan as a new source of basketball talent for Asian-American sports fans everywhere.

## Naomi Osaka wins Australian Open for second major, top ranking

By Howard Fendrich

AP Tennis Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia — So close to victory, Naomi Osaka suddenly was letting the Australian Open final slip away. Three championship points? Gone. A sizable lead? Soon all gone, too.

She was playing poorly. She yelled at herself. Slammed a ball. Tugged at her visor's pink brim. Trudged to the locker room between sets with a towel draped over her head.

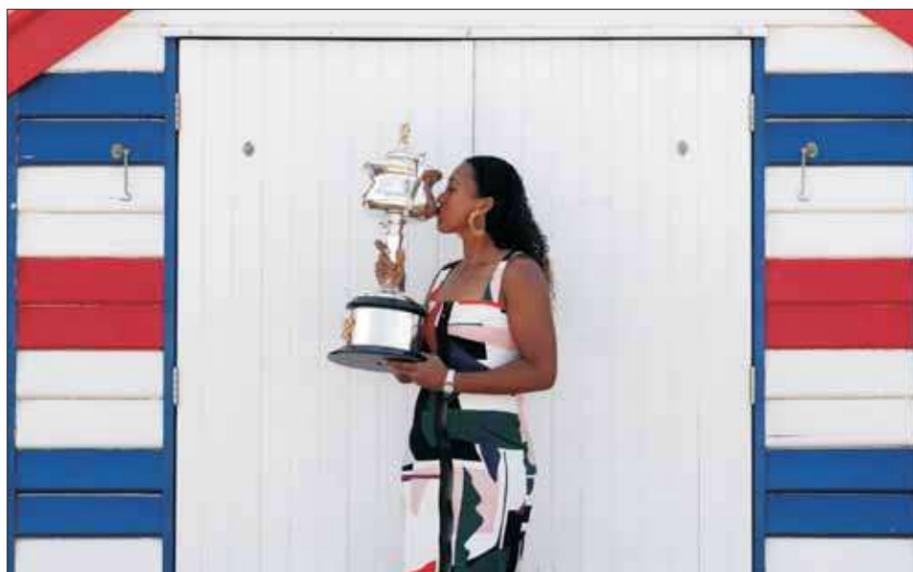
And then, after returning to the court, Osaka turned it all around just as quickly as she had dropped 23 of 27 points. Refocusing and reasserting herself, Osaka edged Petra Kvitova 7-6 (2), 5-7, 6-4 to win the Australian Open for a second consecutive Grand Slam title.

"I felt like I didn't want to have any regrets," Osaka said. "I think if I didn't regroup after the second set, then I would have looked back on this match and probably cried or something."

On top of that, Osaka will rise to No. 1 in the rankings.

"Amazing achievement," two-time Wimbledon champion Kvitova said. "Definitely she is a great one. We'll see what the future will bring."

Osaka added the Australian Open trophy to the one she collected in a U.S. Open final last September that forever will



be remembered for the way runner-up Serena Williams was docked a game after arguing with the chair umpire.

Unlike that day, there was no jeering from the confused crowd. No controversy. No chaos. No sharing the spotlight.

Clearly marking herself as the bright new star of tennis, Osaka is the first woman to win two major championships in a row since Williams picked up four straight in 2014-2015.

Almost didn't happen.

Osaka held three match points in the second set at 5-3, love-40 as Kvitova served. But Osaka couldn't close it out.

Instead, she completely lost her way.

That allowed Kvitova to come back and make a match of it, reeling off five games in a row to take the second set and go up 1-0 in the third.

At that point, Kvitova would say later, she figured it was going to keep going her way.

"In the end," she said, "it wasn't."

After Kvitova double-faulted to offer up a break point at 1-all, Osaka converted it with a cross-court backhand winner. There was still more work to be done, of course, and some additional drama when it began raining at the changeover right before

**SECOND MAJOR.** Naomi Osaka of Japan kisses the trophy of the Daphne Akhurst Memorial Cup at Melbourne's Brighton Beach following her win over Petra Kvitova of the Czech Republic in the women's singles final at the Australian Open tennis championships in Melbourne, Australia. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)

Osaka tried to serve for the match at 5-4 in the third set.

This time, Osaka would not falter. She would not let this lead disappear.

"I knew that Petra couldn't keep it up for that long if Naomi could just manage those emotions," said Osaka's coach, Sascha Bajin, "and she did that beautifully."

Osaka was born in Japan — her mother is Japanese, her father is Haitian — and she moved to New York at age three. Now she's based in Florida and has dual citizenship. Osaka already was the first player representing Japan — female or male — to win a Grand Slam singles title. Now she also is the first to top the WTA or ATP rankings.

At 21, Osaka is the youngest No. 1 in nearly a decade; Caroline Wozniacki was 20 when she first ascended to that spot in 2010.

And to think, a year ago, Osaka was ranked 72nd.

What a climb. What a quick climb.

Kvitova was playing in her first Grand Slam final since winning Wimbledon in 2014 — and the first since she was stabbed

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