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MLS Cup highlights a year of rising Asian stars

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

In this year's MLS Cup Final, the Seattle Sounders overpowered Toronto FC, 3-1, a game that pitted two Asian stars against each other. Seattle's Kim Kee-hee and Toronto's Tsubasa Endoh illustrate two very different paths that Asian stars can take to Major League Soccer (MLS). We also saw the debut of an MLS player who charted a middle path right between theirs.

Kim Kee-hee joined Seattle in 2018 after an illustrious international career. He began in Korea's top professional league, winning back-to-back titles before Shanghai of the Chinese Super League signed him for a whopping \$6 million in 2016. But a change in league rules about foreign players forced Shanghai to drop Kim in 2018.

Shanghai's loss was Seattle's gain, however, and the Sounders quickly inked Kim. Intended to fill in for an injured Román Torres, Kim became an essential part of Seattle's back line. In his first season, he ranked second on the team in interceptions, fourth in tackles, and fourth in minutes played.

After finishing second in the Western Conference, the 2018 Sounders were eliminated from the playoffs by the Portland Timbers, who lost in the final. This season, Kim has proved essential in his club's drive to reach the championship match, despite considerable turmoil at the other center back position.

Thanks to injuries and suspensions, Kim has worked alongside three different center backs, two of them South American players who also speak English as their second language. The frequent changes led to a more porous Seattle defense that surrendered 12 more goals than they had in 2018.

But down the stretch, Kim and the back line tightened, finishing the regular season with shutouts in three of Seattle's last four games. In the playoffs, the Sounders surrendered three goals in the opening match against FC Dallas but let in just two more in the next three games, including a first-half tally in the Western Conference final.

Although his presence was essential, Kim remains unsigned at the moment, and in August he was talking with Al Nassr of Saudi Arabia's Pro League and could end up there. Losing him would leave a huge hole in Seattle, but one of Kim's championship opponents shows one path to filling it.

Toronto's Tsubasa Endoh was born in Japan, but he's become more of an American product. A top-flight player at Japan's youth level, Endoh left Japan after the Fukushima disaster to attend the University of Maryland, where he notched



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12 goals and 16 assists with the always-tough Terrapins.

After Endoh was named Most Valuable Player at the 2016 pre-draft combine, Toronto FC chose him ninth overall. In his first season, he started in 15 of his 21 matches, but only managed two goals in nine shots on goal.

Disappointed with Endoh, Toronto only gave him three starts in 2017, then announced after the season that they would not offer him a first-team contract. Instead, they gave Endoh a contract for their brand-new second-division club, Toronto FC II.

Undaunted, Endoh played even harder with TFC II, scoring eight goals and adding two assists in 20 games, earning a contract with the first team before this season. Even then, he didn't start for nearly four months, in a game against the defending champion, Atlanta United. Endoh didn't waste any time making an impression, scoring his first goal of the season just 29 seconds into the match, pouncing on a deflected cross to flick the ball past the keeper.

Endoh delivered two more goals and two assists in nine more starts, earning Man of the Match honors with the goal that

earned Toronto an important draw against Los Angeles FC, the top MLS team this season. His club finished as a fourth seed in the Eastern Conference, facing a tough road through the playoffs.

Toronto began that road with an improbable 5-1 victory against DC United in which they scored four goals in extra time. Unintimidated, they knocked off the top seed, the New York City FC, as well as defending champ Atlanta en route to the MLS Cup Final.

Endoh and Toronto were disappointed in their third championship matchup against Seattle in the past four years. Despite outplaying the Sounders in the first half, Toronto could not score. Then Seattle came out firing in the second half, pouring in three goals, while Toronto could only muster a meaningless tally in the game's closing moments.

Toronto hopes Endoh continues to develop and leads them back to the finals, while Asian sports fans wonder how future players might carve a path from the east to America. One player found a path in between the youthful Endoh and the

SAVVY SKILL. Pictured are Kim Kee-hee (top left photo) of the Seattle Sounders, Tsubasa Endoh (bottom left photo) of Toronto FC, and In-beom Hwang (right photo) of the Vancouver Whitecaps. Kim, Endoh, and Hwang illustrate different paths Asian players can take to Major League Soccer.

veteran Kim: South Korea's In-beom Hwang, who signed with the Vancouver Whitecaps before this season.

Just 23 years old, Hwang is neither a proven veteran nor a raw young talent. He's played for four seasons with his hometown club, Daejeon Citizen FC, mostly with their second-division team. After being a part of South Korean national youth teams for years, he earned his first cap with the senior club last September.

In his first season with Vancouver, the midfielder struggled to adjust to American culture, the punishing MLS travel schedule, and the higher level of play. Still, Hwang scored three goals and gave five assists, earning his team's Most Promising Male Player award.

Hwang logged the franchise's second-most minutes ever for a midfielder and led the team in recoveries, chances created, and passes completed into the final third of the field. With continued improvement, Hwang could become one of the best MLS midfielders around — or he could grow too big for MLS and depart for the greener pitches of Europe.

While it's never clear which eastern talent might emerge from the collegiate ranks or arrive via a gaudy transfer, we can now watch for more in-between players like In-beom Hwang, talented but not yet polished enough for European leagues. If MLS becomes a proving ground for them, expect to see more Asian players on their way to becoming superstars, instead of aging superstars on their way back to earth.

Revising American exceptionalism

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