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Bright future for Asian NBA players amid virus uncertainty

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

The coronavirus pandemic has stopped the sporting world in its tracks. Some leagues have delayed the start of their season, and others, like the National Basketball Association (NBA), had to halt play midseason. The NBA suspended its season on March 11, but there's still no word about when and how the season will continue, leaving three players and a coach with Asian roots in suspense.

In the most likely scenario, the NBA will skip past the remaining regular-season games straight to the playoffs. If it does, two of those players and the coach will be in the playoffs, while Japan's Rui Hachimura will watch from home.

The son of a Japanese mother and a Beninese father, Hachimura started playing basketball in Japan at age 14. Despite the late start, he soon caught the eye of international scouts, eventually getting recruited by Gonzaga University. There, Hachimura continued to develop his game, winning the 2019 Julius Erving Award as the NCAA's best small forward.

Two months later, the Washington Wizards drafted Hachimura ninth overall, making him the NBA's first Japanese first-round pick. He began his first season with Washington well, averaging 13.9 points and 5.8 rebounds through his first 25 games, with a 48.2% field goal percentage. Then Hachimura suffered a groin injury that knocked him out for almost seven weeks.

He came back just as strong, averaging 12.5 points and 6.4 rebounds, with an equally strong 47.1% field goal percentage. And then the league suspended the season, with Washington sitting in ninth place in the East, 5.5 games behind the Orlando Magic for the final playoff spot.

It would have been hard for the Wizards to catch Orlando over the final 18 games of the season. But getting so close to the playoffs should motivate Hachimura and the Wizards to continue improving and get there in 2021.

In 2014, the Wizards drafted a different player with Asian roots, Filipino-American Jordan Clarkson. But they quickly traded him to the Los Angeles Lakers, where he played alongside Asian-American Jeremy Lin in his first season. Over the three seasons that followed, Clarkson played both guard positions as a starter and



AP Photo/Jeff Chu, File



AP Photo/Winslow Townson, File

substitute, consistently ranking among the team leaders in scoring and minutes played.

Midway through the 2017-2018 season, the Lakers traded him to the Cleveland Cavaliers, and Clarkson joined them in their fourth straight Finals appearance.

UNCERTAIN SEASON. Forward Rui Hachimura (#8), top photo, of the Washington Wizards dribbles the ball up the court in a National Basketball Association (NBA) game against the Golden State Warriors, in San Francisco, on March 1, 2020. In the bottom photo, Jordan Clarkson of the Utah Jazz is seen during an NBA match against the Boston Celtics, in Boston, on March 6, 2020.

Sadly, the Cavs lost for the third time in that span, but he remained a stalwart substitute for Cleveland last season, ranking third on the team in minutes played and second in scoring.

This season, Clarkson again found himself traded, this time to the Utah Jazz. While he remains on the bench, he went from last-place Cleveland to the fourth-best team in the Western Conference. Even though he's just a super substitute, Clarkson's Finals experience and ability to make tough shots off the bench could prove crucial for the Jazz.

Another Western Conference player with Asian roots, Japan's Yuta Watanabe, has also been helping his team off the bench, though in a much smaller role than Clarkson. But Watanabe's already done plenty for his fans in Japan.

As the child of two Japanese professional basketball players, Watanabe always knew he would follow in their footsteps. But he set his sights higher than the Japanese leagues they played in. At ten years old, he watched the debut of Yuta Tabuse, the NBA's first Japanese player, and Watanabe resolved to play in the NBA too.

Watanabe later transferred to a Connecticut prep school, leading their basketball team to the National Prep Championship game. Then he enrolled at George Washington University, quickly becoming a feared defender and sharpshooter.

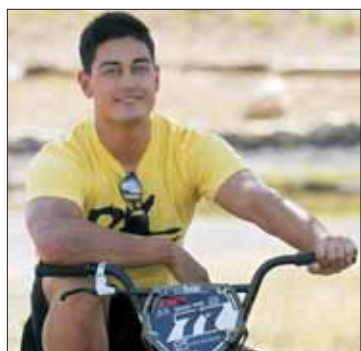
His height and speed enable Watanabe to guard virtually anyone, so he usually stifled the opponent's best player, earning the Atlantic 10 Defensive Player of the Year award in his senior year. In his final year, he also led his team in scoring and three-pointers, and set school records in career blocks and minutes played.

Undrafted, Watanabe signed a two-year contract in 2018 with the Memphis Grizzlies and their developmental G League team, the Memphis Hustle. While Watanabe has only played 31 games over the past two seasons with the Grizzlies, he has anchored the Hustle while also

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BMX rider Sakakibara makes slow recovery, Olympic hopes over

SYDNEY (AP) — Australian BMX rider Kai Sakakibara, who grew up in Japan, was relocated from a hospital to a rehabilitation center last month, but his hopes of qualifying for the Olympics are over and his family was told to expect permanent disability after he suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI).



ROAD TO RECOVERY. Australian BMX rider Kai Sakakibara sits on a bike in the suburb of Sydney, Australia, in this November 12, 2019 file photo. (Kyodo News via AP, File)

The 23-year-old Sakakibara needed surgery to relieve pressure on his brain after a crash in February at a World Cup event in Bathurst west of Sydney that left him unconscious and in intensive care.

Sakakibara, ranked among the world's top 10 BMX riders in recent years, spent nearly eight weeks in a Canberra hospital. But with all surgery now completed, he has moved to the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Unit in western Sydney, where he is expected to remain for "many months."

An update from the Sakakibara family had said that in the last 10 days before being moved to the rehabilitation center, he'd progressed from pointing to "yes" or "no" on a piece of paper to speaking when asked simple questions.

But doctors have told the family he will have some permanent disability, with the trauma on the left side of his brain currently impacting his ability to speak and move the right side of his body.

"Kai continues to 'emerge'

from the state of unconsciousness, and we are super excited to start communicating with him," the family statement said. "However, as time progresses it becomes more and more evident that this has been a truly serious injury."

They said Sakakibara has already made "solid improvements" in physiotherapy, occupational, and speech therapy, while the facility had gone to great lengths to protect patients from the coronavirus.

"Kai has his phone and scrolls through social media every day. He 'likes' posts and tries to send text messages to friends, but they are invariably scrambled," the family said. "So, if you get a text from Kai, don't worry, his account has not been hacked, he's just trying to get in touch with people. Sometimes he gets annoyed and sometimes he just puts on that patient Kai smile

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Kauai mayor imposes curfew, then entertains fellow bored residents

By Jennifer Sinco Kelleher
The Associated Press

HONOLULU — When a curfew goes into effect each night for one county in Hawai'i, the mayor gets bored — and posts videos on social media.

And his constituents? They're entertained.

"Our mayor is bettah than yours!!" one woman commented, responding to Kauai mayor Derek Kawakami's stiff but earnest version of the Renegade to the rap song "Lottery," one of the most popular dances on social media.

In other videos, posted to his personal Facebook and Instagram accounts, he creates a mask out of a t-shirt and makes ice cream.

Even before Hawai'i governor David Ige issued a statewide stay-at-home order to curb the spread of the coronavirus, Kawakami set a 9:00pm to 5:00am curfew for his county, which includes the islands of Kauai and Niihau.

The videos, the 42-year-old mayor explains on Facebook, are meant to "break the boredom together as a community." And they seem to have succeeded.

A video he posted April 4 of him dancing generated thousands of shares and hundreds of comments on Facebook.

"And if you're wondering why I'm out of breath and why I'm sweating," he says after his Renegade dance, "because that was like take 1,022."

Kawakami also uses his videos for some serious commentary, including demonstrating the proper way to remove disposable gloves, which he's seen left behind in shopping carts and baskets.

"And please folks throw your *opala* away," he says, using the Hawaiian word for trash.

"We no leave our trash for somebody else pick up," he says in Pidgin, Hawai'i's creole language that he slips in and out of easily, reflecting his island roots.

He's also garnered attention by publicly calling those who defy quarantine orders "covidots."

"I LOVE all your postings!" a woman commented on a video. "So fun, so caring, so empathetic, and a blessing to us all, even us who live on Oahu!!!"

Kauai resident Michael Miranda said the videos show a human side to the mayor. "On the policy side,



CURBING CORONAVIRUS. Kauai mayor Derek Kawakami wears a mask in Lihue, Hawai'i. Kawakami imposed a curfew to curb the spread of the coronavirus. He then entertains residents with nightly videos to "break the boredom." (Sarah Blane/Kauai County)

I appreciate all the hard decisions he's been making," Miranda said.

Miranda said Kawakami seemed to be "a couple steps ahead" of Hawai'i's other counties — discouraging tourists from visiting Kauai, even before a statewide 14-day quarantine for travellers arriving in Hawai'i went into effect.

For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia, and death. The vast majority of people recover.

Popular *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* columnist Lee Cataluna wrote in April that Kawakami "has emerged as one of the most decisive and blunt political leaders in Hawai'i" during the pandemic.

Many comments suggest he should be Hawai'i's next governor. He said he's not thinking about his political future.

"Throughout this whole challenging event, all that it's done for me is further solidified my heart where I belong," he said. "And right now, it's here on Kauai."

To view the video, visit <www.facebook.com/1258603938/videos/10222163546778497>. While nonstop global news about the effects of the coronavirus have become commonplace, so, too, are the stories about the kindness of strangers and individuals who have sacrificed for others. "One Good Thing" is an AP continuing series reflecting these acts of kindness.