

## Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

## NWSL Challenge Cup to spotlight smaller Asian talent pool

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

Thanks to COVID-19, most sports leagues worldwide are either frozen in time or slowly thawing out. The National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) hopes to join the latter group by possibly becoming one of the first American professional sports leagues to return to action with a Challenge Cup in late June. When it begins, Asian-American sports fans will have fewer Asian NWSL players to watch, but the ones who remain are sure to help their teams succeed.

As I wrote last November, Asian and Asian-American players are getting harder to find in the NWSL, and this past offseason made matters worse. The biggest loss occurred when Samantha Kerr, the league's best player, signed with Chelsea FC.

Born to Indian and Australian parents, Kerr won the NWSL Golden Boot three years in a row, the league MVP twice, and set NWSL records in both career goals and goals per season. She never won a NWSL title, but joining Chelsea gave the club an excellent shot at capturing the Women's Super League championship.

Other teams lost eastern players, too, like the Houston Dash, who waived forward Kyah Simon. Simon became the first player with aboriginal roots to score in a World Cup when she scored twice in the 2011 Women's World Cup. But she was beset by injuries and had a hard time establishing herself in the NWSL.

Instead, Simon returned to Australia's W-League, where she plays for Melbourne City FC alongside Lydia Williams, another former NWSL player with aboriginal heritage. Williams was a great goalkeeper for several NWSL teams, including Reign FC last season (the club is now called OL Reign after an ownership change between seasons). But when she was injured, Casey Murphy slid into the starting role, leaving Williams to seek a contract elsewhere.

OL Reign lost another Asian player when they chose not to re-sign defensive midfielder Rumi Utsugi, who had lost her starting role. The Reign, however, announced a recent acquisition that will raise the spirits of all their fans, including those of us following players from the east.

In May, the club signed Japanese-American forward Yuka Momiki, who led Nippon TV Beleza to five titles in Japan's Nadeshiko League. Since joining the club in 2011, they also won four Empress's Cups, three Nadeshiko League Cups, and the first-ever Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Women's Club Championship in 2019. Momiki herself was in Nadeshiko's Best XI in 2016 and 2017 and also starts for Team Japan.

Momiki is known as a playmaker with laser-precise passing and impeccable timing. Not dazzling or showy,



**CHALLENGE CUP.** The National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) hopes to become one of the first American professional sports leagues to return to action with a Challenge Cup set to begin June 27, 2020. In the left photo, North Carolina Courage fullback Abby Erceg plays in a NWSL match against the Portland Thorns at Providence Park in Portland, Oregon. In the right photo, forward Yuka Momiki plays for Japan against Brazil during a SheBelieves Cup soccer match on March 2, 2019 in Nashville, Tennessee.

the left-footed Momiki makes those around her better, and she has plenty of Reign talent surrounding her. In fact, her signing creates a glut of seven forwards, including Momiki, Megan Rapinoe, Sofia Huerta, and others.

As the best fit on the right side with an unmatched skillset, Momiki should get plenty of minutes, but she may struggle for consistency unless the team commits to her or trades away her competition. However the situation shakes out, the Reign will have an excellent opportunity to shine at the proposed summer tournament.

Another favorite in the tournament, the North Carolina Courage, has fullback Abby Erceg, who has captained two teams to NWSL championships. Erceg, who has Croatian and Maori roots, is also the captain for the New Zealand national team.

The defensive leader began her NWSL career with Chicago in 2013, helping the squad to rise from fifth to



second place in the league. Traded to the Western New York Flash in November of 2015, Erceg became team captain and led the Flash to its first and only NWSL championship in 2016.

When the Flash became the North Carolina Courage, their winning ways continued. With Erceg as captain, the Courage have reached the NWSL championship match the past three seasons, winning the last two. With Erceg anchoring the back line and a roster largely unchanged from last season, the Courage have a great chance to win the Challenge Cup.

At the other end of the NWSL table, two Asian players should bolster the hopes of the league's perennial cellar-dwellers, Sky Blue FC. The club has never improved on its fourth-place finish in 2013, the league's inaugural season. The worst season was 2018, when they set a team record for futility, winning a single game against 17 losses. They weren't much better in 2019, winning five games and losing 14.

But the club is looking up this season, thanks to improved practice facilities, a larger stadium, and new

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## NWSL season will be played in Utah without fans

The National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) announced last week that the 2020 NWSL Challenge Cup will mark the return to action of its nine clubs.

The cup will include a 25-game tournament scheduled to kick off June 27, 2020 at Zions Bank Stadium in Herriman, Utah. While spectators will not be in attendance, fans in the U.S. and Canada will be able to watch all the action via the CBS All Access subscription service, with replays aired on CBS Sports Network. The opening match and the championship game will air live on CBS. Fans outside the U.S. and Canada will be able to stream the full tournament on Twitch.

The tournament, presented by P&G and Secret, marks the league's first compe-

tition since the 2019 championship game that saw the North Carolina Courage defeat the Chicago Red Stars to become back-to-back NWSL champs.

The format of the tournament will feature the league's nine clubs each playing four games in the preliminary rounds to determine seeding. The top eight teams will advance to the quarterfinals, when the tournament becomes a knockout competition. The semifinals and final will be played at Rio Tinto Stadium in Sandy, Utah, with the championship game slated for July 26.

A full tournament schedule, including game times and broadcast details, will be published soon.

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## Filipino prospect Kai Sotto signs with G League

ATLANTA (AP) — Kai Zachary Sotto, a 7'2" center from the Philippines, has become the fourth player to sign with the new G League select team for next season.

Sotto's signing was announced in mid-May. He joins five-star high school recruits Jalen Green, Isaiah Todd, and Daishen Nix on the new team, one that will be unaffiliated with any National Basketball Association (NBA) club or any existing G League



Photo: Instagram/ksotto

franchise.

Sotto spent this past season at a development academy in Atlanta.

He recently turned 18 years old and had received attention during the recruiting process from several Southeastern Conference (SEC) schools but decided the G League's path toward preparing for the 2021 NBA draft was his best choice.

Sotto took part in the Basketball Without Borders camp in Chicago this past February during the NBA's All-Star weekend.