

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

# Successful NWSL Challenge Cup featured crop of talented Japanese forwards

By Mike Street  
Special to The Asian Reporter

After a delay due to the coronavirus pandemic, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) kicked off its 2020 season with the Challenge Cup tournament. With the exception of the Orlando Pride, which withdrew before the tournament started because several players and staff tested positive for the virus, all the current NWSL teams participated. The competition came as a welcome antidote to the coronavirus sports drought, and the games featured plenty of Asian talent, especially Japanese forwards.

With a tightly packed schedule, a lot of players on each squad appeared in the Challenge Cup, including several mentioned in my June column. Japanese forward Yuka Momiki, for example, showed why OL Reign was so excited to sign her, but also why she may struggle for quality minutes.

The Reign played five tournament games, and Momiki started just one of them, a 0-2 loss to the Houston Dash. Though she didn't make a difference in that game, she needed only nine minutes to leave her mark in the match that followed. Coming into a scoreless draw, Momiki delivered a beautiful cross to Bethany Balcer, who scored the game-winning goal.

It would be the Reign's only goal of the tournament, as they followed that match with two scoreless draws. The second of those came in the quarterfinal matchup against the Chicago Red Stars, one of three such draws in that round. In the penalty-kick shootout that followed, Momiki converted her chance, but two of her teammates missed, and the Reign were eliminated by Chicago.

Captain Abby Erceg and the defending champion North Carolina Courage also had a disappointing tournament finish. The Courage rolled to four victories in the preliminary round of games, as Erceg anchored a backline that allowed just one



goal over that span. She even scored the game-winning goal against the Chicago Red Stars.

The Courage's quarterfinal match against the winless Portland Thorns should have been an easy victory. Instead, Portland goalkeeper Britt Eckerstrom and the Thorns defense smothered the Courage, and Portland sent Erceg and the Courage home with an upset 1-0 victory.

Japanese forward Nahomi Kawasumi and Sky Blue FC fared better in the Challenge Cup, advancing to the semifinal round. Kawasumi started all six of her club's matches and scored a dramatic second goal in a 2-0 thumping of the Houston Dash. When the Houston keeper left the box to clear a loose ball, it landed near Kawasumi, who lifted a long 40-yard shot over the keeper's head into the net.

**COMPETITIVE CUP.** After a delay due to the coronavirus pandemic, the National Women's Soccer League kicked off its season with the 2020 Challenge Cup tournament. The competition came as a welcome antidote to the coronavirus sports drought in the U.S. Pictured are OL Reign forward Yuka Momiki (top photo, #21) and North Carolina Courage defender Abby Erceg (bottom photo, left, #6). (AP Photos/Rick Bowmer)

Kawasumi contributed to Sky Blue's penalty-kick shootout victory over the Washington Spirit in the quarterfinals, but Chicago bottled her up in the semifinals. The Red Stars scored twice in the first 11 minutes, and Sky Blue couldn't recover, losing 2-3.

Chicago has its own Asian force in Japanese forward Yuki Nagasato, whom we covered last November. In 2019, she scored eight goals and led the NWSL with eight assists, but seven of those assists went to superstar Samantha Kerr, who is now playing with Chelsea's women's side.

The Red Stars are figuring out how Nagasato and the team can play without Kerr's world-class talent. Chicago had a rough start in the tournament, winning just one of its first four preliminary matches, with Nagasato playing in two of them and contributing just one shot on goal.

Then Nagasato suffered a left leg injury that kept her out of the rest of the Challenge Cup. In the quarterfinal match, Chicago edged the OL Reign on penalty kicks, 4-3, then defeated Sky Blue, 3-2, to face the Houston Dash in the championship game. Chicago sorely needed Nagasato, as they didn't get anything going on offense against the Dash, who won 2-0 for the franchise's first ever trophy.

Two other players with Asian roots appeared in the Challenge Cup, one of them making her NWSL debut, the other seeking to expand her role. The Washington Spirit saw the first minutes from Japanese forward Kumi Yokoyama, whom they signed last December.

Just 26 years old, Yokoyama has been a

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## Asian-American girls saw pivotal icon in *Baby-Sitters Club*

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publishers doing the buying "don't seem like they're getting much more diverse."

Kuhn, the *Heroine Complex* author, is optimistic that female editors of color rising in the ranks will change that. They are more likely to think broader.

"The story of rejection a lot of marginalized authors get is someone saying 'I just couldn't connect to it,'" Kuhn said. "What always blows my mind about that is all of us have spent our entire lives connecting with characters who do not look like us."

With the increased national dialogue surrounding white privilege, adult Asian-American "BSC" readers acknowledge the books are lacking in some areas. Claudia talks little about being Asian in an upscale, white community and probably wouldn't know the term "micro aggres-

sion."

The TV version fleshes out some elements like a poignant scene where Claudia, played by Momona Tamada, learns her grandmother was an internment camp survivor. In a nod to the character's newfound cultural awareness, Cucukov had Tamada wear a t-shirt from "Angry Asian Man" blogger and activist Phil Yu — who also appears in the documentary. Designed by artist Irene Koh, it says "Stay Angry."

"Claudia is going to go through that journey and is going to learn about activism," Cucukov said. "God willing, if we get a season two, we've got much more growth for Claudia."

Tang reported from Phoenix and is a member of The Associated Press Race and Ethnicity team.



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