

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

Greater respect: Asian athletes in American sports

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

After 14 years and more than 150 Asian-American Sports Digests, I'll be pausing these columns to pursue a doctoral degree. In my time writing for *The Asian Reporter*, I've seen major changes in the role of Asian and Asian-American athletes across the sporting world. So now let's take a look back at some of the most significant changes since my first column in 2006, which all show a growing respect for athletes with eastern roots.

Golf has transformed the most. On the men's side, players like South Korea's K.J. Choi or Filipino-Australian Jason Day continued to shine, and Japan's Hideki Matsuyama put together several good seasons. We've seen brief surges from players like Japan's Ryo Ishikawa, or Asian-Americans Kevin Na, Tony Finau, and Michael Kim. And I'm sure we'll see more in the future from Japanese-American Collin Morikawa, the 2020 Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) Championship winner.

But the women's side has been absolutely dominated by Asian golfers, nearly all of them from South Korea. The most successful since 2006 has been Inbee Park, who has 20 wins and 7 major victories under her belt since her 2007 breakthrough, though her best years might be behind her.

Following in her footsteps, all nine Ladies Professional Golf Association Rookies of the Year since 2010 have been Asian, seven of them from South Korea. Those seven include players like Sei Young Kim, So Yeon Ryu, Sung Hyun Park, and Jin Young Ko, who among them have 31 wins and 7 major victories.

My favorite sport, Major League Baseball (MLB), has also seen an explosion of Asian talent. In 2006, only a handful of MLB players came from Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB), including the incomparable Ichiro Suzuki. I watched Ichiro set historic records, collect his 3,000th MLB hit, and play for Don Wakamatsu, MLB's first manager with Asian heritage.

Ichiro's success and other significant events have dramatically shifted the market in NPB players. Pitcher Daisuke Matsuzaka was a \$100-million MLB failure, and pitcher Junichi Tazawa



AP Photo/Eric Christian Smith



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ASIAN INROADS. The role of Asian and Asian-American athletes in American sports has changed during the past 14 years. Some of the prominent athletes have included (clockwise from top left) Jason Day of the Professional Golfers' Association, Ichiro Suzuki of Major League Baseball, and Nahomi Kawasumi (left, dark jersey) of the National Women's Soccer League.

2015. The 2018 national championship game was where quarterback Tua Tagovailoa of Hawai'i surged into prominence, leading Alabama to a second-half comeback win against Georgia. Tagovailoa was a Heisman finalist and, along with Mariota, is now playing in the National Football League.

As both Major League Soccer (MLS) and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) have grown, they have also increased their eastern talent. Some Asian players see the two leagues as a stepping stone. South Korean Kim Kee-hee recently did this with the Seattle Sounders, while NWSL legend and two-time MVP Samantha Kerr, who has Indian roots, set scoring records in the NWSL before leaving for Chelsea in the English FA Women's Super League.

Others come to the leagues to play long-term, or to end their careers. Legendary South Korean defender Young-Pyo Lee retired with the Vancouver Whitecaps, while Maori defender Abby Erceg has led her teams to three NWSL championships since 2014. Both leagues are packed with regulars with Asian roots, like Japan's Tsubasa Endoh in MLS and

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skipped the NPB amateur draft to play in MLB. So the two leagues reached a new agreement, making it easier to acquire NPB players, and every year brings more Japanese talent to MLB.

South Korea has also become a big market for MLB players, ever since pitcher Hyun-jin Ryu came over from the Korean Baseball Organization (KBO) and became an all-star. Both South Korea's and Japan's baseball reputations have been bolstered by their country's performances in the World Baseball Classic (WBC). Japan medalled in all four WBC tournaments, winning twice, including against South Korea in the 2009 all-Asian final; South Korea earned a bronze medal

in 2006.

Football has also increased Asian representation, starting at the very top. At the end of the 2007 campaign, the Naval Academy made Ken Niumatalolo the first Samoan head coach in college football history. Since then, he has become Navy's winningest head coach ever, leading them to 10 bowl games and 10 winning seasons.

On the field, Asian football players have typically been linemen or linebackers, but now we see some top-flight Asian quarterbacks. Samoan sensation Marcus Mariota won the Heisman Trophy after leading the Oregon Ducks to 36 wins in three seasons and the very first College Football Playoff Championship game in

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- Many of these trials are much larger than normal, with 30,000 to 60,000 volunteers.
- COVID-19 vaccines will only be approved if they meet safety standards and make it much less likely you'll get COVID-19.



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COVID-19 Vaccine Myths



Myth: mRNA vaccines can alter your DNA.



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