

Greater respect: Asian athletes in American sports

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Nahomi Kawasumi in NWSL, or Asian-Americans Caprice Dydasco in the NWSL and Lee Nguyen in MLS.

Sadly, the National Basketball Association (NBA) has moved in the opposite direction. When I began the column in 2006, Chinese center Yao Ming looked ready to become basketball's Ichiro after three seasons with the NBA's Houston Rockets. Instead, Yao played for only three more seasons, forced into early retirement by chronic foot injuries.

Yao's countryman, Yi Jianlian, tried to follow in his footsteps, but the lanky power forward never got strong or consistent enough to be an NBA star and returned to China after five lackluster seasons. Taiwanese-American Jeremy Lin, on the other hand, ignited "Linsanity" by coming off the bench to lead the New York Knicks to a dramatic finish during the 2011-2012 season. But Lin never could recapture that same magic, spending seven more seasons in the NBA, mostly on the bench, including a stint with the champion Toronto Raptors in 2019.

But there are two NBA bright spots to watch. One is forward Rui Hachimura, who became the first Japan-born player to be drafted in the first round when the Washington Wizards picked him ninth overall in 2019. Named to the NBA's All-Rookie second team after an excellent first season, Hachimura should continue to grow.

The other bright spot, Filipino-American NBA head coach Erik Spoelstra, became the NBA's first Asian-American head coach in 2008 when the Miami Heat promoted him into that role. Since then, Spo and his team won the NBA championship twice in five appearances, four of those with a team led by the Big Three — LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, and Chris Bosh — that is considered one of the best in history. Spo brought a completely different team to the NBA Finals last season, making him one to keep watching.

Outside of the major sports, we've seen two Asian champions come and go. Manny Pacquiao won titles in eight different divisions, a record-setting performance for the Filipino boxer, but he is well past his prime and more focused on his senatorial career. And Japan's Takeru Kobayashi made headlines by winning six straight Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contests, but a dispute with Major League Eating has kept him away from the contest since 2009.

There are many, many more Asian triumphs I have enjoyed writing about, and I hope you've enjoyed reading their stories. There was Team Japan winning the 2011 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Women's World Cup, and then reaching to the



AP Photo/Pat Sullivan



AP Photo/Brian W. Wade

GREATER RESPECT. From 2002 to 2011, the National Basketball Association featured Chinese center Yao Ming (top photo). Since being named head coach at the Naval Academy in 2007, Ken Niumatalolo — the first Samoan head coach in college football history — has become Navy's winningest head coach ever.

championship match again in 2015. Or the Little League World Series, which almost always features an Asian or Asian-American team — or two — in the final game. Or Chinese-American Nathan Chen dominating the world of figure skating.

As sports leagues learn to respect athletes with Asian roots as I do, there will be even more great stories of Asian-American athletes. I hope one day I can tell those stories again.

Court upholds prison terms in LEGO case

Continued from page 2

million yuan (\$14 million)

fine imposed on the entrepreneur, identified only by his surname, Li, according to a court announcement. In addition, the appeals court upheld sentences ranging from 3 to 4.5 years for eight other defendants.

Starting in 2015, Li and the other defendants set up a factory that made copies of LEGO bricks and toys and sold them under the brand name Leping, the court said.

The Shanghai court concluded the offense was an "especially serious" violation of copyright law and rejected their appeal.

Naomi Osaka is AP Female Athlete of Year

By Howard Fendrich
The Associated Press

With tennis, like so much of the world, shut down because of the coronavirus pandemic, Naomi Osaka found herself with time to read and think.

And while she won the U.S. Open for her third Grand Slam title, she also stood out for speaking out about racial injustice and police brutality.

As noteworthy in 2020 for her activism away from the tennis court as her success on it, Osaka was selected by The Associated Press as the Female Athlete of the Year in results revealed after a vote by AP member sports editors and AP beat writers.

"It was difficult to be isolated from my family for large parts of the year, but that's nothing compared to others. It was sad to watch and read the news of people suffering from COVID-19, and the economic and social effect on so many — losing jobs, mental health. It was such a tough year for so many people," Osaka wrote in an e-mail interview. "And then watching the police injustices like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Jacob Blake (to name just a few) in the summer broke my heart. I am proud of my U.S. Open victory, but more so that I got people talking about the real issues."

Osaka collected 18 of 35 first-place votes and a total of 71 points.

Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) Finals MVP Breanna Stewart was next with nine first-place votes and 60 points, followed by Sarah Fuller, the Vanderbilt soccer player who kicked for the school's football team, with one first-place vote and 24 points.

LeBron James was announced as the AP Male Athlete of the Year.

Billie Jean King, a 12-time Grand Slam singles title winner and a pioneering advocate for decades, praised Osaka for positioning "herself as a leader not only in women's tennis but in all of sports and a force for change in our society."

"She successfully completed the difficult task of taking excellence in sports performance and using that platform to succeed outside of sports on a much bigger stage," King told The AP. "She ignited a conversation on social justice, the results of which were bigger than tennis, larger than sports, and in doing so raised the bar for all those who want to leverage the gifts and talents we have to make a difference in our world."

Osaka went 16-3 during the coronavirus-truncated tennis calendar — the professional tours took about a five-month hiatus; Wimbledon was cancelled for the first time since 1945 — and ended the year ranked No. 3.

The defining stretch of Osaka's season came in August and September, when she compiled an 11-match winning streak that included the U.S. Open.

It was during a tuneup tournament in New York that Osaka — whose father is Haitian and mother is Japanese — declared she would not play her semifinal, joining athletes from the National



ATHLETE & ACTIVIST. In this combination of 2020 file photos, Naomi Osaka of Japan wears face masks bearing the names of Black victims of police violence and racial profiling, during the U.S. Open tennis tournament in New York. Osaka has been selected by The Associated Press as the Female Athlete of the Year. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II, top, Seth Wenig, File)

Basketball Association (NBA) and elsewhere in protesting the police shooting of Blake.

"There are clearly so many worthy issues. This one especially resonated with me because of my own personal up-bringing; and also while the tennis tour was paused, I was able to watch and read news at length for the first time in my life. This summer in the U.S., tensions were high and reached a boiling point," Osaka said. "It was the right time for me to speak up."

Taking her lead, that tournament shut down completely for a day.

"Her activism has shone a light on how we as individuals and sports leagues can collectively make an impact," Women's Tennis Association (WTA) chairman and CEO Steve Simon said. "Not only is she a phenomenal tennis player, but she also demonstrates how athletes have an opportunity to use their platform for something bigger than the game or themselves. Her actions are nothing short of inspiring and she is so very deserving of this recognition."

During the U.S. Open, Osaka brought attention to Black victims of violence by arriving for matches wearing face masks bearing the names of Floyd, Taylor, Tamir Rice, Elijah McClain, Trayvon Martin, Ahmaud Arbery, and Philando Castile.

"To be honest, I really didn't stop to think about what others would think of my actions. Other people's opinions weren't going to stop me from doing what I know in my heart was the right thing to do," Osaka said. "The strong voices of Colin (Kaepernick) and LeBron were certainly positive influences for me and gave me strength in my own convictions."

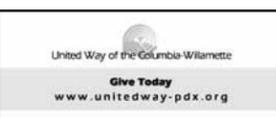
Turning to 2021, the 23-year-old Osaka listed these goals: "work hard, do better, speak up, be kind."

Japan, where she was born, is slated to host the postponed Olympics next year.

"I am looking forward most to being with the athletes that had waited and trained for over 10 years, for celebrating a very hard year (2020), and having that happen in Japan makes it that much more special," Osaka said. "It's a special and beautiful country filled with culture, history, and beauty. I cannot be more excited."

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