

Asian American Athletes: The Past, Current and Future

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Discussions about race and sport in America have almost always been about African Americans and whites. During the final years of the 20th Century the discussion broadened to include Latinos. As we begin Asian American History Month (May, 2002), it is obvious that the fastest growing population group in our nation lags far behind African Americans and Latinos as participants in sport at all levels - from youth sport through college and pro sport.

Asian athletes don't seem to play in significant numbers and certainly are not involved in running our games in any noteworthy way. In this article I will try to examine why this is the case, if it will change, and, if it does, will there be significant consequences.

I think this is important because I think participation in sports is beneficial for a number of reasons from better health, learning about teamwork, about winning and losing, building self-esteem, and building friendships across racial and ethnic lines. The list of positive effects is even larger for females who gain even more health and social benefits from playing sports.

Part of the why there are fewer Asian American athletes stems from the fact that, according to Census 2000, Asian Americans make up only 3.6 % (10.2 million) of the population of the United States. Compared to 12.3 % African Americans and 12.5 % Hispanics, Asian American represent a dramatically smaller percentage. So the numbers tell part of the story. However, if the past two decades are an indication, that equation will change in the future. While the percentage of whites (4 and 5 percent) and African Americans (12 and 15 percent) barely changed in each decade, the percentage Asian American grew 96 and 63 percent in each decade!

Many racial and ethnic groups have historically perceived that sports were a way to break into mainstream America and break out of cycles of poverty. That was most recently true -at least as a perception - for African Americans and now for many Latinos. As the European immigrant groups gained status, education and income, emphasis on using sport for social purposes diminished.

But the social, economic and educational circumstances of Asian Americans are very different. Asian American household income tops all other groups including whites. Family income is \$45,249 for Asian Americans, \$38,972 for whites, \$26,628 for Hispanics, and \$25,050 for African Americans. Among people of color, the rate of poverty is also much lower for Asians with 14 %, living below the poverty level (defined as \$16,400 per household) compared to 26.5% for African Americans and 27.1 % for Latinos. Whites have the lowest rate at 11 percent living in poverty.

Before going deeper into the subject it must be stated that for too many Americans, there is a presumption that people from Asia form a homogeneous society. Asia comprises 27 different countries which have very different cultures, languages, religions and economic systems. This produces wide disparities in the success of Asian immigrants. That poverty line is as high as 14 percent in large part because of the population groups that fled war and oppression, including Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians with poverty rates of 34, 67 and 47 percent, respectively. There is also a disproportionately higher percentage of recent immigrants who live below the poverty line among Asian Pacific Islanders.

However, many Asian immigrants come to the United States already highly educated and from the middle or upper classes. This is true of many Chinese, Japanese, Asian Indians and Koreans, which are four of the six largest Asian American population groups. The desire to play sports to escape poverty or enter main-

stream American life is not part of the fabric of these Asians communities. Nor is using sport to gain an education.

According to Yun-Oh Whang, a professor of marketing at the University of Central Florida's College of Business Administration, "Asian Americans put huge value on education. Becoming a doctor or lawyer is the ultimate goal of many Asian American kids, which is heavily imposed by their parents."

High school graduation rates are higher for Asian Americans (85 %) than for whites, African Americans, and Latinos (84, 77 and 56 percent, respectively). The gap for college graduation rates is even wider. Nearly 43 percent of all Asian-Americans graduate from college versus 26 percent for whites, 15 percent for African Americans, and 11 percent for Latinos.

Whang, like many Asians in American, desires more youth sports participation for his children. Asian Americans may be misjudged by officials and coaches who may hold stereotypes shown in surveys that label Asian Americans as physically inferior to whites, African Americans and Latinos. Smart, yes. Athletic, no.

Whang asserts, "It is common that coaches and teachers at schools presume that an Asian American kid belongs in the science lab, not on the football field. This is why it is so important that Asian American athletes have to rise to the top and show the general public that Asian Americans can also achieve excellence in sports."

This is, of course, an interesting flip from the African American community where activists have worked hard to show that African Americans excel as students as well as athletes.

If you ask knowledgeable sports fans who are not Asian Americans about great Asian American role models in sports, they might be able to name a few recent examples such as golfer Se-Ri Pak, skater Michelle Kwan, baseball stars Chan Ho Park and Ichiro Suzuki and the NBA's Wang Zhizhi.

Very sophisticated fans might add Tiger Woods, whose mother is Thai. However, the list would be short. If you ask knowledgeable sports fans who are Asian Americans, they will often talk about heroes of the past who opened doors. It is easy to cite Jackie Robinson or Roberto Clemente as singular pioneers for African Americans and Latinos, respectively.

There may be no equivalent of Robinson or Clemente for Asian Americans although many suggest Dr. Sammy Lee who was the first American of Asian descent to win an Olympic gold medal for the United States, which he won in diving in 1948 and again in 1952. Only 5-feet tall, Lee overcame discrimination to attain twin goals to be an Olympic champion and a doctor. Lee practiced diving at the Los Angeles Swim Stadium and the Brookside pool where only whites could use the pool every day but Wednesdays. After Lee and other people of color used it, the pool was drained and there was fresh water for whites by Thursday morning.

Dr Lee, the only Asian American to have won the James E. Sullivan Award as America's top amateur athlete, also coached Greg Louganis who is on most lists of top Asian American athletes. Nonetheless, it seems more likely that there were a combination of athletes who together helped create the breakthrough.

Professor Whang said, "When I picked the most influential Asian American athletes, I thought of the ones who opened the door for the next generation. Michael Chang opened the door for tennis, Amy Chow door for gymnastics. Hideo Nomo and Chan-Ho Park proved that an Asian can strike out the sluggers in the majors, and Jim Paek showed the world that Asians can withstand the monstrous body checks of hockey."

Americans of all backgrounds cheered when Kristi Yamaguchi performed so brilliantly in the Olympics seeing this young Japanese American woman as our own.

These pioneers also initiated another important change in Asian American communities by making athletic talent part of the value system. Now not everyone has to become a doctor or lawyer. Asian Americans witnessed the success, fame, and financial rewards, which changed the perception of the potential for athletes. There is no hard data for youth sports participation but in cities where there are larger Asian American populations, such as Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Honolulu and Chicago, anecdotal evidence says that Asian American children are now much more interested in sports since they see adults who look like them on ESPN.

This will potentially change the numbers on the Division I college level where Asians are virtually unseen. In the 1999-2000 academic year, 1.4 percent of all male student-athletes and 1.6 percent of the females were Asian/Pacific Islanders. This compared to 64.4 percent of all male student-athletes and 72.6 percent of the females who were white and 22.9 percent of all male student-athletes and 13.8 percent of the females who were African American.

Only half of one percent of all Asian/Pacific Islander students were student-athletes according to the 2001 NCAA Graduation Rates Report. In dramatic contrast, nearly 6 percent of all African American students were student-athletes. That is 12 times as many! Among white students, 2.6 percent were student-athletes.

After Se-Ri Pak began to win so often on the LPGA tour, a lot more Asian American girls picked up golf; there are many Asian American girls skating on the local rinks after Kristi Yamaguchi and Michele Kwan; young Asian American tennis players are smashing more balls after Michael Chang and we will wait to see if young golfers follow the Tiger. As they do integrate the games, I have no doubt that will lead to more integration of Asian Americans in other aspects of American society.

Is there any down side to increased involvement of Asian Americans in sport? There are at least two areas which call for further research. The first is parental pressure. Professor Whang believes that "the push from the parents in the training process sometimes goes too far and it interacts with the cultural differences." While I do not think that other ethnic and racial groups are immune from parental pressure, many argue that parental pressure to succeed among Asian Americans is higher than among other groups.

In an article in the Korean American Journal, Corina Knoll wrote about how this as an issue among some Korean parents. "Perhaps in their effort to fulfill their own deferred dreams, some of these parents push their children too much and too far, as if they can will their brethren to succeed. That attitude could have some costly consequences, say their children and sports psychology experts."

She focuses her article on two talented Korean American athletes. Both had extensive parental pressure. Based on his experiences, Andrew Kwon told her that he knew Korean American athletes who were abused physically and verbally by their parents. "No doubt it's definitely happening," he says. "I guess it's just kind of known that they get it at home. You hear about it on the course the next day." Kwon dropped golf in college. Alex Kim, the tennis player, is now an ATP top 40 player. But both said the pressure caused family stress and strains.

B. Rock Choe, a Korean American psychiatrist, has worked with many Korean families who experience conflict arising from their child's involvement in sports. Choe said that Korean parents tend to place higher expectations on their children than American parents.

"Korean parents hardly ask questions to find out how the children feel," says Choe. "The way the parents talk to their children, some of them are condescending, demanding, ordering what to do, what not to do. Parents expect them to be a lot better than their neighbors, expect them to be winning. That's all right, but the method of communicating these wishes and desires are troubled."

In their own frustration, the children "sometimes hurt the parents' pride and provoke anger ... Slight

pressure is helpful, but everything has to do with balance." Choe is careful to note that such intense parental pressure emanates from the deep love that Korean parents have for their children and that they want to give them the best. He counsels parents how to treat their children playing sports saying, "Enjoy them. Love them. Have fun with them."

What effect will increased play have on the academic success of Asian American student-athletes? The numbers are too small to tell long term but they are worth noting. And they are disturbing. In the 2001 NCAA Graduation Rates Report, based on a four year average, Native American, African American, Latino and white student-athletes all graduate at higher rates than non-athlete students from their same group by 3 to 8 percent margins.

The only group in which student-athletes graduate at lower rates is Asian/Pacific Islanders where non-athlete Asian students graduate at higher rates than Asian student-athletes by 2 percent! There is a 14 percent gap between the graduation rate of all Asian students (66 percent) and Asian American male student-athletes (52 percent). This is the largest disparity in college sports today. Now that this has been noted, more attention to it will hopefully result in improvement for Asian student-athletes.

I have no doubt that sports helps people and groups in so many ways. Dealing with parental pressure has been part of sports for whites, African American and Latinos for generations. Academic performance for those groups has also improved. As Asian Americans emerge in sport, it will now be part of their playing experience as well. Asian Americans now have their own sports pioneers and role models, the hope for many more great athletes and a blueprint of how to deal with problems.

I interviewed quite a few Asian Americans and read extensively in preparation for this article. I was struck by the sense that so many Asian Americans feel isolated from mainstream American society. Here is where the social impact of more Asian Americans being involved in sports may have its greatest benefit. We are witnessing a profound change in the general sense of Asian American involvement in our whole society.

Now many Asian Americans root for the home team in the same way as other Americans have. That has historically been easier for African Americans and Latinos as they began to see more players who looked like them. Now Asian Americans see players who look like them.

As we all begin to cheer for the team, we realize it is just that: a team made up of people from America's diverse society. Now Asian American athletes are part of that team. I am convinced that Asian American communities have drawn much closer to other Americans with this common interest they now share with the mainstream society.

Thus, sports have been a great vehicle to eliminate at least part of the barrier that has historically alienated Asian Americans from the larger American society. Bringing people together has always been sports greatest gift and now that is shared with our Asian American extended family.

The journey has just begun.

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