

Asian American Athletes: Hidden Past and Marketable Future

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May is Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. I recently asked staff in my office to name 20 white, African American, Latino and Asian American athletes. All are knowledgeable sports fans. They were representative of all the aforementioned groups except Asian Americans. Most had no problem coming up with 20 whites and African Americans. All got at least 16 Latino players. No one had more than 10 Asian Americans. When I asked a Korean professor, he had 20 in each category.

Is Asian American sports history all but hidden? Or does it barely exist? Either way, should there be implications for American sports marketers who face less fans in the seats and less people watching so many games on TV?

Asian Americans have, by far, the nation's largest family income at \$45,249. They also have the highest graduation rates for both high school and college. On top of that, they are the nation's fastest growing ethnic group with growth spurts in the 1980s and 1990s of 96 and 63 percent in each decade! While still small as a total percentage of the population (3.6 percent or 10.2 million), Asian Americans have large population centers in major cities where we have multiple pro franchises. They should be a sports marketer's dream target.

Obviously, there are significant obstacles starting with the small number of prominent Asian athletes. Teams have learned that Asian Americans will come out when a team has a star Asian player. We have seen that in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, San Diego, Sacramento, Houston, Chicago, New York and Washington.

The potential is not lost on NBA talent scouts and marketers. Chinese 7'5" center, Yao Ming, may be the #1 pick in the forthcoming NBA draft. He will join countrymen Wang Zhi Zhi who is with Dallas and Mengke Bateer who ended the season with Denver.

Baseball players are among the top Asian icons in American sport. Perhaps the most popular have been Chan-Ho Park, a native of Korea who pitched for the Dodgers and now is with the Rangers, and Ichiro Suzuki, the Seattle Mariners star outfielder who is a native of Japan. Others include Byung-Hyun Kim, the Arizona Diamondbacks pitcher who comes from Korea; Japanese natives include Hideo Nomo and Kazuhisa Ishii, two of the Dodger's top pitchers, the San Francisco Giants' centerfielder Tsuyoshi Shinjo, and closer Kazuhiro Sasaki of the Mariners.

Asian Americans have identified with two of the best pro golfers in Tiger Woods, whose mother is Thai, and Se-Ri Pak, the great LPGA golfer who is a native of Korea. K.J. Choi recently became the first South Korean to win a PGA Tour event with his victory in the Compaq classic. Michelle Kwan and Kristi Yamaguchi have created great interest in ice skating. Michael Chang did the same in tennis.

There are Asian and Asian American players in both the NHL and the NFL. There are small but growing numbers in college, high school and youth sport programs across America. Asian American parents and their children are beginning to think about a sport career and not just a career in medicine, the law or

other lucrative professions. Asian Americans witnessed the success, fame, and financial rewards of star players who look like them and that has changed their perception of a talented athlete.

This is a rich gold mine for sports marketers to dig into now. In addition to players, fans identify with coaches and top front office staff. This presents a major opportunity for American sports to promote its teams and leagues. Charles B. Whang, who is from China and owns the New York Islanders, is the only person of color who is currently a team majority owner. That is a good start but a small step since there are no Asian American head coaches, team presidents or general managers in the major pro sports in the United States as reported in the 2001 Racial and Gender Report Card.

Major League Baseball and the NHL are the only leagues with an Asian team vice president. Wendell Kim, a Korean American who coaches for the Expos, is the only known Asian American coach in Major League Baseball. In the League offices, baseball seems to be missing an opportunity with no Asian executives or department heads. Three percent of the professionals in the NBA League office are Asian and while the NHL is top at 10 percent.

Marketers need to know that the social impact of more Asian Americans being involved in sports also has resulted in a broader general sense of involvement in the whole society. Asian Americans become fans of hometown teams with Asian stars, thus joining and becoming part of the whole society at the ballpark in ways that have not been possible in too many other aspects of their lives in America.

Chan Ho Park arrived in Los Angeles in the wake of the riots resulting from the Rodney King verdict. Korean Americans saw the tension between themselves and African Americans explode into the destruction of much of Koreatown. Chan Ho Park pulled estranged groups together because so many were Dodgers fans, regardless of skin color. The Korean American community turned out at Dodger Stadium and the game gave people in different racial groups something to talk about and experiences to share.

Hideo Nomo and Ichiro Suzuki have done the same thing for Japanese Americans in their cities. These athletes brought Asian American people living in residentially isolated communities out to the ballparks. Learning to appreciate the game, which started by cheering for Asian players, pulled Asian Americans much closer to the mainstream by making the love of their team a common interest to share with whites, Latinos, and African Americans.

In this perspective, sports have been a great device that helped remove some of the barriers that have kept Asian Americans so isolated in their own communities. Asian Americans now have their own sports pioneers and role models and dreams of their children play big time sports in America. Thus, sports marketers can expand the new fan base, sell more tickets and products to new markets, and building the bottom line while simultaneously breaking social barriers.

Asian Pacific American Heritage Month would be a great time to create a strategic marketing plan to more fully develop the potential of what has already begun.

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