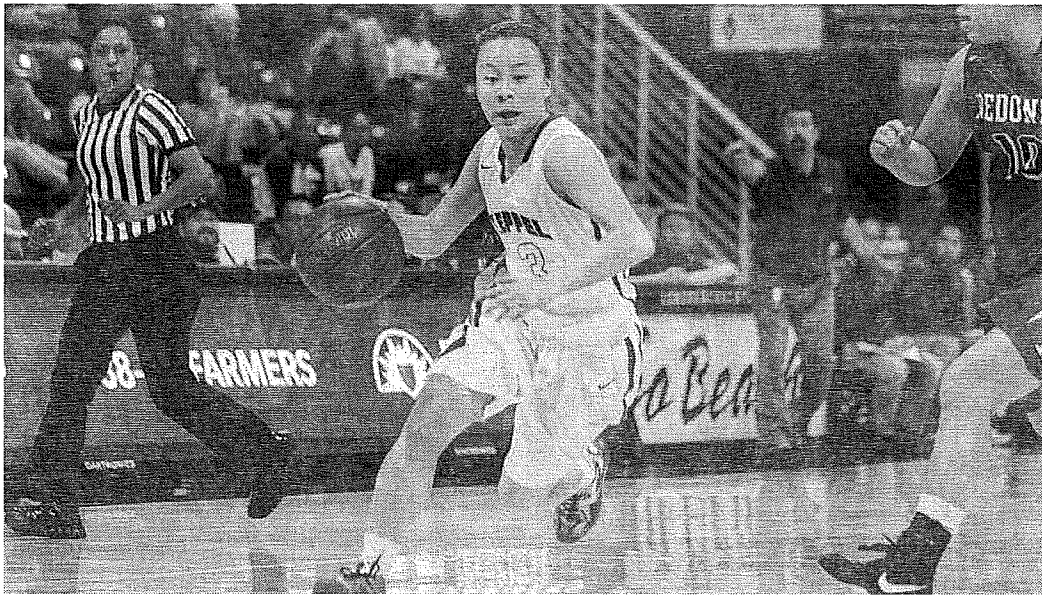


NEWSELA

Japanese-American basketball leagues help girls become shooting stars

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.24.15

Word Count **698** 6



Mark Keppel High School's Lauren Saiki drives to the basket during a game against Redondo Union in Long Beach, California, March 21, 2015. Photo: Cheryl A. Guerrero/Los Angeles Times/TNS

LOS ANGELES, Calif. — At just 5-foot-3, Lauren Saiki was sometimes the smallest player on the basketball court. Yet her powerful playing sent her and her high school teammates to four playoffs in a row.

Also, Saiki, age 18, has earned a basketball scholarship to West Virginia University.

For all this, she can thank the skills she learned in a Japanese-American basketball league.

"That helped build my foundation," Saiki said. "I really fell in love with basketball."

The Asian leagues have been the starting point for many successful high school and college players. It has been especially important for young women.

They May Be Short But They Play Tall

Keppel is a strong team, even though the average height of its players is usually less than 5-foot-5. All but one of the girls on the school's team last season played in a Japanese-American basketball league. Three of Saiki's teammates have played basketball with her since they were 5.

There are several thousand youth and adult players in Asian leagues in California. There are bowling, baseball, volleyball leagues, but none of them are as popular as basketball.

Teams come from a variety of organizations, including clubs, Buddhist temples and community centers. In fact, there are so many young players that a few Japanese-American churches in Los Angeles canceled Sunday school classes.

"Right now, it seems like basketball is the only thing that holds the community together," said George Imamura. He used to be the president of the South Bay F.O.R. Junior Sports Association, the largest Japanese-American basketball organization in Southern California. "That's why I think it's so important that if that's all we have right now, to keep it going."

A Long Line Of Tiger Athletes

On a Sunday morning in the spring, Claire Sugiyama was in the Alhambra High School gym bleachers. She sat with about a dozen parents and grandparents to watch her daughter, Sarah, play with the Tigerettes Pulelehua sixth-grade team.

Sarah comes from a long line of Tigers. Her grandfather was a founder of the Tigers Youth Club, and her father, who coaches the team, also played basketball with the organization.

"He just felt she needed to play with Tigers," Claire Sugiyama said. "She was born with stripes."

The Japanese American Optimist Club girls' league began about 50 years ago. It gave children of Japanese-American families the opportunity to play basketball at a time when they were not allowed to play elsewhere, said Leland Lau, league commissioner. When he became the head of the league about 20 years ago, there were about 50 girls' teams. Today, there are nearly 130.

The leagues' success in getting girls onto high school teams has even attracted non-Asian players, Lau said.

Stiff Competition But Great Rewards

Competition on the Japanese-American teams can be fierce, said Kiki Yang. She is a star player at Pasadena's Polytechnic School and three-time winner of the league's most-valuable-player award.

"It gave me more confidence," she said. "It exposes you to the sport and allows you to make friends from different schools."

Kayla Sato, 17, said the skills she learned in Japanese-American basketball have been important.

"This community is like a family," Sato said. "Through one connection, there were so many doors."

Basketball is a sport that generally attracts tall players. However, the lack of height has not been an obstacle for the Japanese-American girls, Lau said.

Confidence is key, said Monica Hang. She played in the leagues and is now coach of the Los Angeles Valley College women's basketball team.

"It taught me how to be 5-foot-2 and play as if I was 6-foot-2," she said.

Good Foundation For The Future

That confidence will be important for Saiki as she heads 2,500 miles away to West Virginia.

"I'm nervous because it's big-time basketball, but I'm pretty excited because it's a great experience," she said. "I'm going to meet a lot of different people and have different experiences than what I've had growing up on the West Coast."

First she'll have to graduate from high school and say goodbye to her teammates. They grew up together.

"It's going to be a bittersweet moment, of course," Saiki said. "I'll probably stay in touch with them a lot."

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "A Long Line Of Tiger Athletes." What is the MOST likely reason why the author included the information about the Japanese American Optimist Club?
 - (A) It helps explain why Japanese-American leagues were created.
 - (B) It helps explain why girls like to play basketball.
 - (C) It shows that high school teams are not the only option for basketball.
 - (D) It shows that Japanese-Americans have always played basketball.

- 2 Read the section "Stiff Competition But Great Rewards." In this section, Kiki Yang's and Kayla Sato's comments show that they BOTH believe:
 - (A) basketball is fiercely competitive
 - (B) basketball helps players build friendships
 - (C) basketball makes all players more confident
 - (D) basketball is rewarding only for the best players

- 3 What is the connection between the article's introduction and the final section?
 - (A) The introduction gives the history of Asian leagues. Then the final section talks about the future of Asian leagues.
 - (B) The introduction talks about how the Japanese-American league built Saiki's foundation in basketball. Then the final section shows how basketball is helping other kids.
 - (C) The introduction gives the history of Asian leagues. Then the final section talks about one player in an Asian league.
 - (D) The introduction talks about how the Japanese-American league built Saiki's foundation in basketball. Then the final section shows how that foundation is helping her future.

- 4 Which paragraph from the section "They May Be Short But They Play Tall" develops the idea that the Japanese-American league leads to success in high school basketball?