

## **Representation of Asian American Identity in Contemporary Sports Culture: A Reflection**

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It was 2012. The NBA's New York Knicks were having a rough season. It was looking like another disappointing year out of the playoffs. The fans and players were equally disinterested. On February 4<sup>th</sup>, out of options, Knicks coach Mike D'antoni, threw in third-stringer Jeremy Lin. Little did coach know, Lin would spark a much needed victory on that day, leading the team in points and assists. The performance was an aberration; an outlier. Plenty of random players have the game of their lives and completely fall off the radar right after. But the next game, he did the exact same thing. People started to believe. The Knicks went on a seven-game winning streak led by the man who seeming came out of nowhere. This phenomenon launched Lin into the spotlight and forever changed his life. It was known as Linsanity.

This sounds like a feel-good, underdog sports story. What does this have to do with me? Well, the other side of the story was Lin's race. In a league with extremely little Asian representation, he was the first big Asian NBA star since Yao Ming. When Linsanity blew up, Lin was the inspiration for Asians worldwide to pursue basketball. His upbringing was as average and stereotypical as they come for an Asian American family. Unlike Yao who was born to professional basketball players and trained from birth to play basketball at an elite level, Lin's parents were immigrants who had attended school in the United States, and neither were taller than 5'6". He was raised to be a studious Christian who would go on to attend Harvard. He was taught basketball by his father, who was simply an avid basketball fan and had never played at a competitive level.

For a lot of people, myself included, Lin was someone in the professional scene with whom I could easily identify. He was someone who was raised with the same values and traditions as me, but who overcame the adversity I struggled with, from both inside and outside the Asian community, to achieve success in the NBA. Inside, he faced backlash against pursuit of a non-scholarly career, and outside, he fought the negative perception of Asian athleticism. He was showing the world Asians could play basketball. Yao was passed off due to the circumstances of his birth. Lin was the average Asian kid who was conditioned in the US to be a hardworking office worker. As an avid basketball player and NBA fan, I understood and looked up to him. He often spoke about the racial obstacles he had faced, such as when people were too quick to call him “chink” during his college games. He was described as “deceptively quick” – a phrase that carries harsh undertones as Lin was not in fact “deceptive”. He was respectful and courteous, on and off the court, and a hard worker. When he was called out by former player Kenyon Martin for cultural appropriation for having dreadlocks, Lin pointed out the Chinese tattoos Martin had and said he hoped they could both appreciate each other’s cultures. He easily could have shot back by mocking the hypocrisy of Martin’s statement, but he chose not to.

For non-Asians, he was someone who made people think twice about making fun of or doubting Asians’ athletic abilities. For the Asian community, he was an example of how one could be smart, successful, and a good person without needing to focus exclusively on school to become a doctor, for example (a profession that is often expected to be occupied by the Asian community). He bridged both worlds together in a way only he could have done. The world isn’t perfect, and subtle things like calling the good Asian player at a pickup game “Jeremy Lin” by lumping them together simply because they’re Asian and play basketball, still demonstrates there is more work to do regarding Asian stereotypes in sports.

But for me, for the young fans during the time of Linsanity, and for generations ahead, Jeremy Lin is both a role model and an inspiration. He helped negate the Asian stereotype of being unathletic. There is a noticeable decrease in inherent bias when playing basketball, and a noticeable increase in the number of Asians playing basketball (worldwide, too!). Lin could have been any other NBA player who came out of nowhere, but because of his identity, he helped change so much for the Asian community, and in more ways than just basketball.