

SPORTS

Japanese American baseball pioneer to be honored by Asian Hall of Fame

By Jason Cruz
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

Kaname “Wally” Yonamine could have had a pioneering career in the NFL as a running back with the San Francisco 49ers. But his destiny was playing professional baseball in Japan where he took a chance, overcame hate, and was embraced by a country that the United States had gone to war with just 6 years prior. Yonamine will be honored by the Asian Hall of Fame this year for his achievements.

Yonamine, a Nisei-Japanese American, was born and raised in Hawaii. In a family of seven kids, Yonamine tried to emulate his older brother who played sports. According to his daughter, Amy, he told his family that he was going to play pro sports so school was not his priority. He was right.

However, Yonamine was drafted by the Army in June 1945 just days after graduating from high school. While in the Army, he had the opportunity to play for their football team.

After his stint in the Army, Yonamine was recruited by many colleges to play before choosing Ohio State. He was on his way to Columbus when a scout from the San Francisco 49ers persuaded him to skip college football and play professionally. He did.

The signing of a Japanese American player in 1947 was both inspiring and controversial. America was still healing from World War II, as were Japanese Americans, many of which were sent to internment camps. The Bay Area had a close-knit Asian community at the time and the fact that one of their own would be playing American football gave it a sense of pride and distinction.

According to the San Francisco 49ers website, Yonamine first played for the 49ers in a 1947 intrasquad game in Salinas, California, where there were approximately 400 members of the Japanese community in a crowd of 3,000 onlookers to cheer him on. He did not disappoint as he scored two touchdowns. The San Francisco Examiner ran a headline reading, “YONAMINE STAR IN 49ER GRID DEBUT.”

After his rookie season in San Francisco, Yonamine was poised to return. However, he broke his wrist while training in the offseason in Hawaii.

“It was a blessing in disguise,” said Amy. “It was baseball that kept his athletic career going.”

Despite his short-lived career in football, he is a part of the Levi Stadium Museum in Santa Clara, California, the home of the 49ers. The team continues to celebrate his legacy through the Perry/Yonamine Award. It honors Yonamine and Joe Perry, the first Black athlete to play for the 49ers in 1948.

Yonamine hung up his football cleats and decided to put on his baseball glove as he was signed by a minor league baseball team. He found himself playing for the Salt Lake City Bees, managed by former major league baseball player Lefty O’Doul. It was O’Doul that suggested that Yonamine head to Japan

to play. The former major leaguer had introduced the game of baseball in Japan prior to World War II. After the war, O’Doul rekindled his relationships with Japanese professional teams and Yonamine was interested in heading to Japan to play.

The move to Japan was a risk, but according to his daughter, he wanted to play.

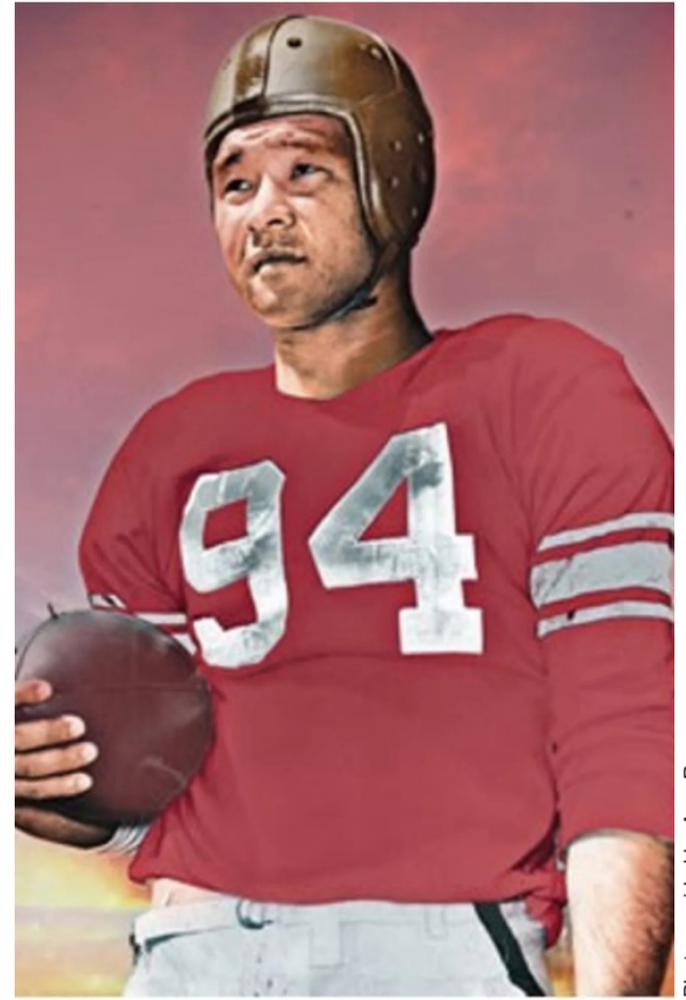
“He wanted to be accepted there because he felt there was a future for American players in Japan.”

Yonamine signed with the Tokyo Giants and drew comparisons to America’s

Jackie Robinson as he broke the barrier of being the first American, and Japanese American at that, to play pro baseball in the country since World War II. Similar to Robinson, he experienced great animosity from fans due to resentment over the war.

Amy recalls an incident when Yonamine was playing left field during a night game and the lights went out due to an outage. Not feeling safe standing in the outfield, Yonamine headed to the pitcher’s mound. After several

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Kaname “Wally” Yonamine

Photo provided by Amy Roper

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as rioters and calling his supporters to counter-protest. Trump's divisiveness inflamed Black voters in Georgia, which pushed Biden's win and the only Democrat president in 36 years to break Republican's red states chain on the map.

Beau, Biden's son who died of brain cancer, had always urged his father to run for president. Before he died, he told his dad, "Promise me you'll run." Beau would now be smiling in heaven and saying, "Dad, I told you so."

ENCOUNTERING A NOBLEMAN

Western culture calls Biden a comeback kid after South Carolina's primary. From the start, Biden looked like an ultimate loser. He lost critical primary elections and his cool after a reporter in Iowa asked him about his son's involvement in a business

venture. On the debate stage, he gave mediocre performances compared to other Democratic candidates.

So many voters including me, who wanted a change, were skeptical about Biden not because of his character, qualifications, and experience, but because of his age. It was awfully hard to pick the best one out of 17 Democratic candidates, who would be strong enough to beat Trump.

Even a few days before Washington's primary, I couldn't decide. The person who convinced me and millions of others to vote for Biden was Congressman Jim Clyburn of South Carolina. He said he knew Biden and his experience, but not other Democrats. That testimony changed Biden's political career, it led him to victory. He won South Carolina and other primaries since then, and became the Democratic presidential nominee. His story fits a Chinese proverb, "encountering a nobleman on the road."

Clyburn was literally the nobleman Biden needed to save him from failure. A Chinese proverb says, "He is bound for good fortune after surviving a great disaster."

Since South Carolina, his opponents, one by one, dropped out of their campaigns, and endorsed him. Not only that, they campaigned for him.

BIDEN'S FACIAL ENERGY

When Biden first announced his run last year, he stumbled badly. He looked terrible, old, and tired. Republicans spread fake news that he suffered from dementia. Only at the Democratic National Convention, we learned the truth—Biden was a stutterer when he was a child. To some extent, he exhibited a slight stuttering in his speech.

In Chinese culture, facial color is a predictable factor not only for a person's health, but fortune as well. We regard the color as "energy color." Biden had none in

the first part of his campaign, while some of his opponents like Elizabeth Warren looked vibrant and tough.

After he won the South Carolina primary, Biden looked like a different candidate. The energy on his face was back. At an ABC network Town Hall meeting in October, he was in great shape. Days later on the CBS program "60 minutes," Biden gave a substantial performance, while Trump who had recovered from COVID, was temperamental, frail, and tired.

I could go on and on about Trump's misgivings in Chinese cultural perspectives. By now, you understand why former Vice President Joe Biden will be the 46th President of the United States and Kamala Harris, the first woman of color as the Vice President. ■

Assunta can be reached at assunta@nwasianweekly.com.

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minutes, the lights went back on and he recognized that fans had thrown trash and bottles in the area where he would have been standing.

According to Amy, many people had issues with him at the beginning.

"They regarded him as a traitor," she said. He was subject to people calling him to "go home" or "go back," in reference to him being Japanese American. In addition to the taunts, he was ridiculed for introducing an aggressive style of play, notably sliding into second base to break up a double play by obstructing the second baseman to throw to first.

However, over the years, Yonamine endeared himself to the fans and his teammates. Although he could ride up front on trains, he stayed back in third class with the other players. He slept on the floors of the train instead of the

sleeping cars that he could have been given.

Yonamine's staying power in Japan along with his exceptional play eventually made him a fan favorite. He became a well-respected member of the team. He was known for inviting members of his team over to the house for meals and gave out advice to younger players.

"I think people were impressed with how king a man he was."

After his playing days were over, Yonamine coached the Chunichi Dragons and took the championship of the Japanese league for the first time in 20 years. He then went back to the Tokyo Giants to become a coach. With his accomplishments, he was inducted into the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame.

Off the field, his wife developed a successful pearl business in Japan in 1964. Yonamine helped out and secured some notable celebrity customers. As the business gained momentum, Presidents George H.W. Bush, Reagan,

and Clinton became customers.

Amy said that baseball was the center of their household growing up, but Yonamine always tried to make time to spend with his children. Even if he played a night game, he'd try to make sure he woke up in time to spend time with his kids and walk them to school. After retiring from managing and coaching baseball, he returned to Hawaii. He was inducted to Farrington High School Hall of Fame and the state of Hawaii's Sports Hall of Fame.

He passed away at the age of 85 in February 2011 after a battle with prostate cancer.

Yonamine, along with others, will be honored by the Asian Hall of Fame in a virtual induction ceremony on Nov. 21. Visit asianhalloffame.org for more information about the program. ■

Jason can be reached at info@nwasianweekly.com

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literally into the Oval Office and she's going to put an intersectional lens on everything this administration does from a gender or race lens," said Glynda Carr, the president and CEO of Higher Heights, which focuses on electing Black women into political offices.

Harris, a 56-year-old California senator who is the first Black woman and the first person of South Asian descent elected to the vice presidency, has long credited civil rights legends like Shirley Chisholm, Mary McLeod Bethune and Fannie Lou Hamer as sources of inspiration, as well as her Indian mother, Shyamala Gopalan.

On Nov. 7, she paid tribute to the women, particularly Black women, who paved the way for her.

"While I may be the first woman in this office, I will not be the last," Harris said in her first post-election address to the nation.

Los Angeles mother Kim Rincon sat with her arm around her 9-year-old daughter, Jordan, to watch the speech.

A year ago, Rincon and Jordan had met Harris backstage at a rally during her bid for president in the 2020 Democratic primaries. Jordan gave Harris the "Kamala for President" button she was wearing before Harris crouched to the ground to thank her at eye level.

"Harris was being celebrated as this superstar at that rally and now on stage accepting the vice presidency," said Rincon, whose daughter is Mexican and Vietnamese American. "My biggest hope is that Jordan grows up thinking this is normal."

A similar scene played out in Phoenix, Arizona in Nicol Russell's home.

As Harris stepped onto the stage,

Russell's 5-year-old daughter Makena and her best friend immediately sprang up and ran to the TV. For minutes, they stood transfixed.

"She's brown like my mom," Makena told her friend.

For Russell, a Black and Native Hawaiian woman, Harris' election has profound meaning not just as it relates to her daughter but to herself as well.

"In watching her, I see my sisters, I see my mother. I see every hard-working Black or brown woman," Russell said. "I see Stacey Abrams. I see Queen Liliuokalani. I see all the women who endured so many terrible things to help clear a pathway for us to have this moment. She symbolizes everything we've been working for."

Flint, Michigan resident Egypt Otis and her 9-year-old daughter Eva Allen met Harris in September when she stopped by Otis' bookstore, Comma Bookstore & Social Hub, during a campaign trip focused on Black communities across the battleground state.

So when Allen and Otis watched Harris' historic speech, it was a full circle moment for the Black mother and daughter.

"My daughter is going to be a part of history because she had the opportunity to have a conversation with our first Black woman vice president," Otis said. "It just shows you how important representation is."

In Fairbanks, Alaska, Trina Bailey and her 13-year-old daughter, Leilah, sat arm-in-arm on the couch watching Harris' speech. It was

a moment of hope and mourning as Bailey reflected on the Black women she loves who never had the chance to step on a stage like that.

"I believe Black women belong in all places where decisions are being made," said Bailey, who is Black herself. "Today, that's Senator Kamala Harris. Tomorrow, it's my daughter, Leilah Bailey."

Leilah, who wants to be president one day, said Harris' speech made her confident her dream is possible.

"Young girls are feeling like they are able to do more than they thought they were able to," Leilah said. "I felt amazing because it made me feel like I had a chance to do things that mostly men have done." ■

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