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Remembering the Linsanity: Jeremy Lin returns as Houston Rocket, film star

By Daniel Brown dbrown@mercurynews.com Posted: 03/07/2013 06:14:52 PM PST Updated: 03/12/2013 11:32:05 AM PDT

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT (publ. 3/12/2013, page A2) An earlier version of a story about Jeremy Lin incorrectly reported the championships that were won by Wat Misaka at the University of Utah. Misaka led Utah to the NCAA championship in 1944 and to the National Invitational Tournament championship in 1947.

A little more than a year after the birth of "Linsanity," point guard Jeremy Lin returns to where it almost didn't begin.

He was buried on the Warriors' bench for 29 forgettable games two seasons ago. It was during that stretch when an elderly man with a special place in basketball history sat down and wrote him a fan letter.

"I figured he could use a little bit of encouragement," recalled Wat Misaka, now 89 and living in Salt Lake City. "So I sent him a note that said: 'Hang in there. It's sure to get better.'"

Things got better all right. Lin, now with the Houston Rockets, returns to Oracle Arena on Friday as an internationally known sensation playing on a three-year, \$25 million contract.

A documentary that traces his unlikely rise to fame with the New York Knicks opened to rave reviews at the Sundance Film Festival in January. The 88-minute film, "Linsanity," makes its San Francisco debut next Thursday at the Center for Asian American Media Festival.

Lin's global fame means the world to Misaka, who in 1947 became the first non-Caucasian to play professional basketball in the U.S. The Japanese-American

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Houston Rockets guard Jeremy Lin (7) drives by Dallas Mavericks' Darren... (Tony Gutierrez)



was a 5-foot-7, 150-pound point guard for the Knicks, even if his career only lasted three games.

To Misaka, the rise of another Asian-American wasn't "Linsanity." It was lineage.

"It really made me feel good that he was getting all the attention that he deserved," he said.

The two finally met face to face in January, one night after the documentary about Lin's journey from Palo Alto High to Harvard University and from D-League scrub to Knicks phenomenon was greeted by a standing ovation at Sundance. The Los Angeles Times called the documentary an "uber-inspirational tale."

Misaka was scheduled to attend the Sundance screening but a blizzard disrupted the plan. Instead, he attended the Rockets' game against the Utah Jazz a night later.

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His reaction to finally meeting Lin?

"He was big," Misaka said of the 6-3, 200 pound guard. "Especially since I've shrunk four inches since my playing days."

The two didn't chat for long. "He's not a very talkative person. He's very quiet and he doesn't force himself on you," Misaka said. "We didn't really have much time other than to exchange a few pleasantries."

But Misaka had already heard from others that Lin was grateful to receive his letter of encouragement while languishing on the bench. That was among the part of Lin's experience that Misaka understood: He scored just seven points before the Knicks released him without explanation.

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Misaka grew up in Ogden, Utah. His father moved there in 1903 to escape a life of farming. Misaka went on to become a star at the University of Utah and served in the U.S. Army as part of the occupation of Japan.

He led Utah to tournament titles in 1944 (NCAA) and 1947 (NIT). A New York Times article on March 25, 1947, put it this way after the Utes toppled Kentucky: "Little Wat Misaka, American born of Japanese descent, was a cute fellow intercepting passes and making the night miserable for Kentucky."

The tone of modern media coverage for "Linsanity" could be similarly jarring, as San Francisco-born director Evan Jackson Leong discovered in making his well-received documentary.

Fortunately for him, he had access to Lin long before the cameras began to swarm. Leong began pestering Lin for permission to make a film while the point guard was still at Harvard.

Lin finally consented while with the Warriors, figuring the worst-case scenario would be having some cool footage of his basketball career to look back on later.

"We started it before I had ever gone to New York. That was the coolest part of it. We have the whole journey," Lin told [ESPN.com](#) at the Sundance screening. "We have me being cut, me getting waived, me going to the D-League -- the moments when I basically had to be dragged in front of the camera to be filmed, even though I didn't really want to. Looking back, it was one of the best things ever."

Leong laughs now when he recalls that he and his producers considered wrapping the project after Lin's stay with the Warriors.

"We knew we had this great story of this kid who made the NBA, but was kind of a bittersweet for a 'success story' because his career wasn't that great," Leong said by phone from the South by Southwest Festival in Austin, Texas. "It was kind of a sad ending."

"So we were looking for an ending, right? In February, he gave it to us ... and then he gave us another. And then it just got really crazy."

Linsanity began Feb. 4, 2012. On the verge of being cut for the third time since December, Lin came off the bench for the New York Knicks and promptly delivered 25 points, seven assists and five rebounds to lead a 99-92 comeback victory over the New Jersey Nets. That launched a seven-game winning streak and a brilliant month of play.

In some ways, the new film is a sequel. "Transcending: The Wat Misaka Story" debuted in 2009.

"That was really something because so many of my friends had forgotten that I played basketball or never knew in the first place," Misaka said this week. "It was really gratifying -- and kind of embarrassing -- that after all of these years that they talked about something that was so incidental as far as it's impact on the world."

- For more information about the "Linsanity" screening at CAAMFest, including a trailer, go to [caamedia.org](#). As for "Linsanity" screenings beyond the CAAMFest, Leong said: "We're in advanced, advanced negotiations for distribution. Hopefully, we'll be out next year." For updates, check: [linsanitythemovie.com](#)

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Heather Stewart Dorrell

Thanks for sharing this article. I'm a fan of Wat's, a delightful, self-effacing person. Of course basketball does impact the world, and is our only home-grown sport that is a real joy to watch.

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