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Don't Sleep On 'Linsanity' In Aspen

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Say you're Evan Leong, a sixth-generation Chinese-American in search of the perfect subject for a documentary. Maybe you're looking for someone you can identify with, someone of no great interest to anyone but yourself. To say the least, you're looking for a great story, a tale with the possibility of some magic. To make it work you also need some luck or perhaps even divine intervention.

Miracle of miracles: you find a Chinese-American basketball player named Jeremy Lin, a player whose crossover path from Palo Alto High School to Harvard to the National Basketball Association (NBA)--to "Linsanity"-- is absurd beyond recognition.

"It's a miracle," Leong says now. "I witnessed a miracle."

If luck is indeed the residue of design, than Leong is one lucky documentarian. The story he planned to tell could have ended with a cup of coffee for Jeremy Lin with the Golden State Warriors. Instead it culminated in nine games of supernova superhero heroics for the New York Knicks that led to a \$25 million deal for Lin with the Houston Rockets.

Leong's movie, "LINSANITY: The Jeremy Lin story" is playing Thursday at noon at the Isis Theatre in downtown Aspen as part of Aspen Filmfest.

"We started long before Linsanity," Leong remembers, "when he was at Harvard. We were as surprised as anyone else by Linsanity but we were shooting the whole time. The story we wanted to tell was what led up to it from Harvard on. Just making it at Harvard was really exciting. We thought the potential of him making it to NBA, that was a good-enough story. What happened was he got to the NBA, but it was sort of a bittersweet success story. His first year wasn't really a good way to end the documentary. Then it got worse and worse for him. He got traded, he got cut, he got traded. We needed an ending."

That ending turned out to be those nine games of inexorable greatness with the Knicks. Lin had been cut by the Warriors and the Rockets and was shuffling back and forth from the NBA to the Development League when he was claimed on waivers by the Knicks December 27, 2011. In a burst of bodacious streetball, he became the first NBA player to put up 20 points and 7 assists in his first five starts, a streak that included 38 points in a mano-a-mano with Kobe Bryant in a win over the Los Angeles Lakers.

"He definitely didn't expect any of this to happen," Leong says. "The biggest thing, it was a lot more attention than he ever had. It was just tiring, tiring to be around it, and to play basketball games. But what he went through prepared him for this moment. Kept him humble, kept him focused."

With Houston, stat geeks say Lin has reverted to type, a score-first defensive liability, albeit one averaging a solid 13 points and 6 assists. Given the heights of Linsanity, is his career a bust?

"That's all relative," Leong says. "He's a starting point guard in the NBA. Averaging 13/6. It's hard to do that day in and day out. As a third-year player, he's pretty good. I wouldn't sleep on him at all. He'll figure it out. He's smart and he's young. Just making it in the NBA is very difficult, regardless of race. Jeremy happened to be Asian, that's why personally I can relate. I see myself in him. I see a role model in him. I don't think another Jeremy Lin will slip through the cracks again."

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