



JAPANESE AMERICAN CITIZENS LEAGUE / JACL

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PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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WAT MISAKA HONORED BY NEW YORK KNICKS

New York, NY - Wat Misaka, who was drafted by the New York Knicks in 1947, was recently honored by the Knicks basketball franchise at a presentation during a game at Madison Square Garden. Misaka was the first non-white person to play in the National Basketball Association (NBA which was then known as the Basketball Association of America or BAA).

The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), the nation's oldest and largest Asian American civil and human rights organization, congratulates Misaka for this well deserved honor and recognition. Misaka and his wife Katie, who accompanied her husband to New York and the Knicks game, are long time members of the JACL and belong to the JACL Salt Lake City Chapter.

A Japanese American Nisei (second generation born in the United States of immigrant parents from Japan), Misaka was born in Ogden, Utah, on December 21, 1923. Except for his stint with the Knicks and his military service, he has lived in Utah for his entire life.

After playing basketball in high school, he was a star on the basketball team at Weber College in Ogden, Utah. He credits then president of Weber College, Henry Aldous Dixon, with being kind and supportive of Japanese Americans at a time when they found few friends. Misaka then transferred to the University of Utah, where he continued to play basketball. Upon returning from the 1944 NCAA tournament championship which the University of Utah won, Misaka found that he had been drafted into the United States Army. He served for two years with the army in the occupation of Japan at the end of World War II after which he returned to school and basketball.

Misaka was a point guard on the University of Utah basketball team which won the NIT Championship at Madison Square Garden in 1947. That year, the Knicks drafted Misaka in the first round. It was the year that Jackie Robinson broke into major league baseball. Misaka's professional basketball career soon ended as he was cut from the team after three season games without being given any clear explanation or reason.

Although it was not long after the end of World War II, Misaka said he experienced little intolerance while with the Knicks. He stated that he felt less prejudice against him in New York than he did anywhere else, and he has great admiration for New Yorkers.

After he left the Knicks, he was offered a chance to play for the Harlem Globetrotters. He chose instead to return to the University of Utah to complete his schooling to obtain an engineering degree. He was inducted into the Utah Sports Hall of Fame in 1999.

In 2009 President Barack Obama learned of Misaka's outstanding achievement and invited him to attend a ceremony at the White House. Misaka and his son Henry were in attendance as President Obama mentioned Wat Misaka in his speech. He talked of Misaka's accomplishment of being the first player of color in the NBA.

Floyd Mori, National Executive Director of the JACL and a personal friend of Misaka, attended the White House ceremony and the Knicks honor with Wat Misaka. He stated: "Wat was my idol when I was a child growing up and listening to the University of Utah basketball games on the radio. Later I had the privilege of getting to know Wat when we became friends and golfed together with a group in Utah almost weekly. He remains a gentleman with genuine humility in spite of his great accomplishments and inspiration to others."

As he left Madison Square Garden after the game, Misaka was stopped by many people who wanted to have a photo taken with him as his story had inspired them. An exceptional athlete throughout his life, Misaka is a championship bowler as well as an avid golfer.

The recent honor with the Knicks was due to the efforts of Bruce and Christine Johnson, who became interested in Misaka's story and made a documentary film about him called *Transcending, The Wat Misaka Story*. For more information, visit: www.watmisaka.com.

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