



Chatham goaltender Michael Park stays focused against Mendham in the third period during the Essex County Holiday Tournament at Codey Arena in West Orange in December. PHOTOS BY MITSU YASUKAWA/NORTHJERSEY.COM

‘Odd one out’

Asian hockey players diversifying the ice in NJ

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When Lucas Krzanowski was called an anti-Asian slur by an opponent during a high school hockey game, he wasn't sure it had actually happened. The other player skated by and tossed the insult at the Morristown Beard freshman.

Krzanowski, whose father is Polish and mother is Taiwanese, didn't know what to do next. He told an older, larger teammate he'd been insulted, and the other player promised to "make sure it wouldn't happen again."

After the game, he shared the incident with Morristown Beard head coach Scott Greene. Krzanowski identifies as mixed race and jokingly said, "I was only half offended."

But even though Krzanowski "used it as fuel to push back even harder," the insult still stung.

"I was just taken aback by it," he said. "Really? Did that really just happen? ... It's definitely not cool. You can judge me by anything else, if I made a bad play. But don't bring that into it."

Krzanowski is one of a small but growing number of New Jersey hockey players with Asian ancestry — part of a proliferation of winter sports athletes who are on full display at the Olympics in Beijing.

But while Asian men swept the medals in men's figure skating, and Korean-American snowboarder Chloe Kim won her second gold medal, there has typically been less representation on the hockey rink.

According to USA Hockey data, roughly



Henry Park, the father of Chatham goaltender Michael Park, watches the game against Mendham with his younger son, Gabriel.

2% of registered youth and amateur hockey players in the United States identify as Asian. In the NHL-NHLPA "Learn to Play" program in New Jersey, about 10% of the players are Asian.

Karen Tom and Henry Park are trying to boost those numbers.

Tom grew up in Canada playing ringette. But many of her college friends transitioned to hockey and represented Canada on its first women's Olympic team at the 1998 Games in Nagano, Japan.

A third-generation Canadian, Tom relocated first to California, and then to Madison in Morris County in 2008. Both her sons, Jett and Keaton, were part of multiple championship teams at Madison High School. She helped launch the Chatham-Madison girls hockey team in the 2016-17 season, and se-

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cured funding for Madison to be independent. She's also a coach for the Harding-Madison youth girls program, and coach of the Madison High boys junior varsity team.

Tom believes she's the only Asian and almost certainly the only Asian female Level 4 USA Hockey coach. She believes her gender, not ancestry, attracts attention when she's behind the bench.

"My kids are not immune to it, but they're not maybe as sensitive to it," said Tom, 50, a physical therapist and certified strength and conditioning specialist.

"They didn't grow up with a bunch of racial tension, nor did I. My eldest brother, he's five years older than me, and he had quite a bit of stuff in high school, but I really haven't. I have feelings about stuff like that, but I was never really a victim of any of it."

Park got both his sons, Gabriel and Michael, on skates when they were 4 or 5 years old. He even coached them both early on.

The Chatham resident acknowledges that hockey — and lacrosse, which Michael also plays — are "very Caucasian sports."

Gabriel, 20, was a defenseman, and Henry Park has seen him get taunted on the ice. Not so for Michael, now a Chatham senior goaltender.

But that doesn't mean he hasn't heard unwelcome comments.

More than 60% of the 10,370 anti-Asian incidents reported between March 2020 and September 2021 involved verbal harassment, according to the national coalition Stop AAPI Hate.

"Physically, you are the odd one out of the group," Michael Park said. "Especially in a new environment or a new team, you're the only one who is quote-unquote different. In my experience, there's always going to be jokes that get thrown around, but it comes more from people not resonating with what it's like. ... I don't think it comes out of animosity or being racist. Most kids don't really understand what it's like not to be part of the majority."

Henry Park has also seen more players and coaches with Asian surnames as Michael has continued his hockey career. Both Park and Tom say athletics are not usually emphasized in Asian households, particularly in the immigrant generation.

But as the transplants have become more established and successful in the United States, they are more able to ex-



Goalie Keaton Tom of Madison with the Halvorsen Cup after the team defeated Roxbury, 5-0, at Mennen Arena in Morristown last March. CHRIS PEDOTA/NORTHJERSEY.COM

pose their children to expensive sports such as hockey.

Athletics have also become another route to achieve what Henry Park described as "the Asian American dream": getting into a better-quality college.

"When it came to first-generation, the way my parents were, they deemphasized sports," said Park, who emigrated from Korea when he was a few months old.

"For them, doing well in high school in order to achieve and get into a good college and get a good job was the most important thing. Sports, in general, wasn't very important," he said. Now, "you're seeing a lot more of those kids, the third-generation kids, playing sports, whether it's hockey or lacrosse or what you would think of as historically very white sports."

Whether at Morristown Beard or on his New Jersey Devils travel team, Krzanowski isn't the only Asian player on the roster. Michael Chang of St. Joseph Regional says he's the only player of Asian ancestry on the varsity team, but that there are three on the New York Saints, his club team.

"I haven't given much thought to being Asian and playing hockey. It's something that has always been, for me," said Chang, a junior forward from Montville whose mother was born in China and father in Korea. "I enjoy playing the game. When I'm on the ice, I feel like nothing

matters, and I have fun playing."

History of representation

On March 13, 1948, Larry Kwong became the first player of Asian descent to skate in a National Hockey League game. Born in British Columbia, Kwong played one shift for the New York Rangers on the road in Montreal.

Jim Paek, who was born in Seoul, South Korea, and grew up in Toronto, was the first Asian player to have his name etched on the Stanley Cup, winning back-to-back NHL championships in 1991 and 1992 with Pittsburgh.

Thirty-one Asian players have appeared in at least one NHL game, including 10 this season. New Jersey Devils defenseman Jonas Siegenthaler is believed to be the first NHL player of Thai descent, through his mother.

Current players such as Minnesota defenseman Matt Dumba, who is part Filipino, co-founded the Hockey Diversity Alliance. It was formed in June 2020 "to eradicate systemic racism and intolerance" and promote diversity in the game.

In a nationally televised address before the 2020 playoffs, Dumba said the NHL and HDA want kids to feel "safe, comfortable and free-minded every time they enter an arena."

Krzanowski has noticed Montreal Canadiens center Nick Suzuki, who is Japanese and Scottish, and Edmonton Oilers right wing Kailer Yamamoto, who is part Japanese and native Hawaiian.

The NHL will celebrate Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in May for the second consecutive year, part of the league's "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign. Some teams will engage with specific demographic groups in their markets. The league is also conducting an employee demographic study, which will include race and ethnicity.

"It's definitely an inspiration to see guys out there, especially some of these guys who are putting up pretty good points. It's representation I can see," Krzanowski said. "That's pretty awesome for people who happen to be Asian, too, to say, 'If this guy can do it, so can I.'"

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