

How did everyone miss Jeremy Lin?

Written by Jeff Zillgitt, USA Today



NBA Asian-American sensation Jeremy Lin has become a fixture on U.S. bookshelves. □ (AFP photo/Chris Trotman)

An undrafted Asian-American from Harvard excelling for the storied New York Knicks in the NBA's most famous arena is unlikely enough.

Marry that with a timely confluence of unpredictable events and unique circumstances, and Knicks sensation Jeremy Lin's unprecedented rise from bench warmer to global basketball star

How did everyone miss Jeremy Lin?

Written by Jeff Zillgitt, USA Today

in 14 days begs the perplexing question:

How did Lin go so unnoticed for so long?

Lin's unforeseen performance — hardly an NBA coach, general manager, scout or fan saw this coming — has captivated sports fans throughout the world, including Asia, where Lin has roots.

He is the NBA's first American-born player of Chinese or Taiwanese descent.

“Lin is changing perceptions of Asian-Americans, in ways that both reinforce and deeply challenge existing stereotypes,” said Thad Williamson, a University of Richmond professor of leadership studies.

“On the one hand, he is the prototypical high academic-achieving Asian-American. But on the other hand he is a baller who has shown he can not only compete but excel against the world's best players.”

Said Knicks legend and TV analyst Walt Frazier, “This league is dominated by African-Americans. What are the odds of an Asian guy coming on and having this impact? It's amazing. It's inexplicable.”

It began with a desperate attempt by coach Mike D'Antoni to jump-start the then-struggling Knicks.

The answer turned out to be Lin, a 6-3, 200-pound guard with an economics degree, and faith in God, who just happened to be a perfect fit for D'Antoni's offensive system.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who played basketball at Harvard, has developed a

How did everyone miss Jeremy Lin?

Written by Jeff Zillgitt, USA Today

relationship with Lin and worked out with him on the court.

“Everyone who thinks this an overnight success fundamentally gets this wrong,” Duncan said in an interview with *USA Today*.

“Jeremy has been very good for a long time and just never quite had the opportunity.”

Or as Knicks courtside season ticket-holder Spike Lee told a Sacramento TV station at halftime of last Wednesday’s Kings-Knicks game:

“It’s harder to slip through the cracks now, with the tape, with 900 channels...No one saw this, so how could someone with his talent just be there and no one saw it?”

In his last seven games, Lin has averaged 24.4 points, 9.1 assists and 4.0 rebounds, filling Knicks fans with joy and hope and replacing frustration that existed for the last decade.

Since D’Antoni gave Lin his chance, the Knicks are 7-0, including 6-0 with Lin as a starter. New York (15-15) has moved from 10th to eighth in the Eastern Conference standings, revitalizing its season and re-energizing a Madison Square Garden crowd that has not enjoyed an NBA title since 1973.

“You can feel an energy here that has been missing for a long time,” Frazier said.

Right place, right time

Race played a factor early in Lin’s career, Duncan said.

How did everyone miss Jeremy Lin?

Written by Jeff Zillgitt, USA Today

“This is classic low expectations, and frankly stereotyping,” Duncan said.

“He was underappreciated and under-recognized. The fact that he’s Asian-American, those two things are absolutely linked.”

Lin is aware of the stereotypes, and says he perhaps can open doors to basketball previously unknown to Asian-Americans, similar to how Tiger Woods introduced golf to more people.

“The more we can do to break those down every day, the better we’ll become,” said Lin, who plans to conduct a basketball camp in Taiwan after the season.

“Hopefully, in the near future, we’ll see a lot more Asians and Asian-Americans playing basketball in the NBA.”

But Duncan also pinpoints an important factor in Lin’s ascent: getting an opportunity in the right place at the right time.

It’s much easier for an unheralded player to emerge in football, baseball and hockey, where roster sizes are larger and players develop at different rates.

In basketball, many of the top players are identified in their pre-teen and early teens and as Commissioner David Stern told *USA Today*, “The conventional wisdom is that you know everyone who’s going to be coming into your league by the time of the McDonald’s High School All-American game.”

As a Palo Alto (Calif.) High senior, Lin wasn’t on national recruiting analysts’ or college coaches’ radars.

How did everyone miss Jeremy Lin?

Written by Jeff Zillgitt, USA Today

He wasn't ranked nationally by position or in California.

Rivals.com has a five-star rating for recruits.

Next to Lin's name: zero stars.

Rivals.com recruiting expert Jerry Meyer said he wasn't aware of Lin when Lin played at Palo Alto.

"I couldn't even tell you what AAU team he played for," Meyer said.

"He wasn't considered a major or mid-major prospect. I didn't know about him until he started to play well at Harvard."

In his own backyard, Stanford didn't offer him a scholarship.

"Jeremy Lin was a good basketball player then," said then-Stanford coach Trent Johnson, who is now at LSU.

"We talked about the possibility of having him walk on. He didn't want to walk on.

"It's a good story. It's a great story. But right now, everybody seems to think he was playing as well then as he is now. It's comical. Well, who drafted Jeremy Lin? No NBA team."

At Harvard, Lin had supporters and believers, especially then-Crimson assistant coach Kenny Blakeney.

How did everyone miss Jeremy Lin?

Written by Jeff Zillgitt, USA Today

Blakeney said he told Lin that he could be an NBA player, saying that he told Lin he was “more athletic than what people give you credit for...and physically tougher than a lot of people will give you credit for.”

So what took so long for the NBA to discover Lin?

The Golden State Warriors cut him.

They were deep at the guard position and couldn't give him playing time.

The Houston Rockets picked him up but Lin ran into the same closed door: too many guards, no minutes and an offense that didn't suit his style.

They cut him, too.

But the Knicks needed a point guard who could direct D'Antoni's offense, a style suited to Lin's abilities.

If the Warriors hadn't cut him, if the Rockets hadn't cut him, if Knicks guard Baron Davis hadn't been out with an injury, if Lin hadn't been equipped to run this offense, if D'Antoni hadn't taken a chance...Lin's story might have never played out.

“I feel like a lot of teams have that ‘Jeremy Lin,’” Sacramento Kings rookie guard Isaiah Thomas said.

“For whatever reason, it's not the right situation.”

How did everyone miss Jeremy Lin?

Written by Jeff Zillgitt, USA Today

“This league is all about opportunity and what you do with it. It’s all about being put in the right situation to succeed. That’s life in general.”

‘He is the first of his kind’

In two weeks, Lin not only became a trending topic on social media (from virtually no Twitter followers to more than 380,000) and a star for the NBA and the Knicks, he also became an overnight role model for Asians throughout the world.

“This seems like an important development in the way Asian-Americans are likely to be perceived and portrayed,” Williamson said.

Fans attending the Knicks-Raptors game last Tuesday in Toronto said the buzz about Lin rivaled the first visit of Yao Ming, the Chinese-born former Houston Rockets center.

“We’re here for Jeremy Lin,” said Samuel Li, 21, a Chinese-Canadian from Markham, Ontario, who attended the game.

“He is the first of his kind. We’re Yao Ming fans, but he’s 7 feet and from China. Jeremy is my size and from America. We can identify with him.”

Lin’s story is especially appealing to Asian basketball players, who say his success is an inspiration.

“He speaks like us. He’s heard all of the same stereotypes we’ve heard,” said Asian-Canadian Darren Liu, 25, a former high school basketball player.

How did everyone miss Jeremy Lin?

Written by Jeff Zillgitt, USA Today

“To see a guy go through all those things, to get cut by teams, it’s something we can look up to and be proud of.”

Lin’s story is one NBA executives, including Stern, have enjoyed immensely, in part because it has helped eliminate residual bitterness over the league’s 149-day lockout and in part because of the league’s commitment to marketing itself in China.

The NBA is paying close attention to the impact there as the league tries to increase its popularity after Ming’s retirement last summer.

According to the NBA:

- From Feb. 4 to Feb. 12, Lin had the top-selling jersey at nbastore.com, which has shipped Lin merchandise to 22 countries — Taiwan and Hong Kong were third and fourth behind the USA and Canada.
- On Sina, China’s version of Twitter, Lin went from 190,000 followers on Feb. 2 to 916,747 on Feb. 14. Lin is the No. 1-searched term on Baidu, China’s equivalent of Google.

In two decades of reporting on U.S. and Chinese basketball, Su Qun has never seen anything like Lin.

“There is no precedent for this,” says Su, 43, editor-in-chief of *Basketball Pioneers*, a twice-weekly Chinese-language newspaper.

For each of the past four editions, Lin has been the cover star.

“That never happened before, with Yao Ming, Kobe Bryant or LeBron James. The first two

How did everyone miss Jeremy Lin?

Written by Jeff Zillgitt, USA Today

editions, I chose him as I wanted to commemorate his feats, and make him better known to Chinese fans," Su says.

"Then he exceeded expectations, and we had no choice but to use him."

On Rivals.com's list of the top 150 high school seniors, not one is primarily of Asian descent, Meyer said.

"You just don't see that many good Asian-American players," he said.

"That doesn't mean they're not out there. That had a lot to do with Jeremy being such a sleeper. People don't expect Asian-Americans to be that good at basketball. We just have to be honest about that...That's crass, and that's stereotypical. Obviously, he's breaking that. He might open the door for more Asian-American players."

Lin's agent, Roger Montgomery, is impressed with the way Lin has handled the pressure of playing for the Knicks and his demeanor off the court in the face of growing multimedia requests.

"He's holding up pretty good," Montgomery said.

"I'm proud of how well he is doing.

"What right now people are forgetting is the engine," Montgomery added, "and the most important endorsement we have right now is that he is the starting point guard for the New York Knicks."