



JAPANESE AMERICAN CITIZENS LEAGUE / JAACL

Headquarters: 1765 Sutter Street, San Francisco, CA 94115
DC Office: 1850 M Street NW, Suite 1100 • Washington, DC • 20036
Phone: (202) 223-1240 • Fax: (202) 296-8082 • E-mail: natdir@jaacl.org

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CONTACT: Floyd Mori, JAACL National Executive Director

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natdir@jaacl.org

NATIONAL JAACL GALA TO HONOR WAT MISAKA

Washington, DC – The Japanese American Citizens League (JAACL), the nation's oldest and largest Asian American civil and human rights organization, will be holding its JAACL Gala (A Salute to Champions) in Washington, D.C. on September 29, 2011.

The JAACL will honor Wataru "Wat" Misaka at the 2011 National JAACL Gala. This year's Gala will award Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who have made outstanding contributions to the field of athletics.

As a trailblazing athlete, Wat Misaka became the first person of color drafted to play in the National Basketball Association (NBA), then known as the Basketball Association of America. As a Nisei Japanese American born in Ogden, Utah, Misaka began his basketball career at Weber Junior College and continued to play at the University of Utah. During his college basketball years, he led his school to the 1944 National College Athletic Association Championship. When he returned home from that 1944 NCAA Championship, his mother met him at the train station with a draft notice in hand. Like many Japanese Americans, Wat's life was interrupted by World War II, and he took two years off from college basketball to serve in the United States Army. When he resumed playing basketball with the University of Utah, he helped lead them to the 1947 National Invitation Tournament Championship.

Five-foot seven-inches in stature, Misaka made history by being the first draft pick by the New York Knickerbockers in 1947, the same year Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in professional baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers (janm.org).

Following his time in New York and after passing on an informal invitation to play with the Harlem Globetrotters, he hurried home to Utah and completed his degree in mechanical engineering. The documentary film, "Transcending: The Wat Misaka Story," by Bruce Alan Johnson and 2010 JAACL Awards Gala honoree Christine Toy Johnson, shares Misaka's amazing story.

Misaka's career with the University of Utah led to his induction into the Utah Sports Hall of Fame in 1999, two years after his induction into the Japanese American National Bowling Hall of Fame. (janm.org). Misaka remains a role model and personal hero to many. He currently still resides in Utah with his wife, Katie.

JAACL National Executive Director, Floyd Mori remarked, "Wat Misaka has been my personal hero since I listened on the radio as a young boy to his leadership on the basketball court playing for the University of Utah. There is nobody more humble yet deserving of national recognition for his role in breaking the color barrier in the NBA. Wat has become a close personal friend and golfing partner over the past twenty-five years after I returned to Utah, and he remains the man of high character and great athleticism that I've admired for many years."

In addition to Wat Misaka, the JAACL Gala will be honoring several other outstanding individuals who made a name in sports and athletics. For more information on the JAACL Gala, please visit www.jaaccl.org.

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