



Asian Heritage Month Stories – Academy Players

Takanobu Hiraga and Yoshin Takahara are a long way from home. Both have made their way from their homes in Japan to attend Hockey Academies in Canada to try and develop their skills and become the best players they can be. They boys competed in the U15AAA league in Hockey Eastern Ontario during the 2021-22 season - Hiraga playing for the Ontario Hockey Academy (OHA), and Takahara for the Canadian International Hockey Academy (CIHA). Hockey Eastern Ontario asked both players what it's been like adjusting to life in Canada and where they hope hockey will take them. Read about them below.

1. How did you begin playing hockey?

Takanobu Hiraga (OHA): Because my father played hockey, he took me to one of the youth team practices when I was little. I was amazed by the speed of the game, and the excitement it brings when the goal is scored, which led me to start playing hockey myself.

Yoshin Takahara (CIHA): My father plays ice hockey, so I became interested in playing too.

2. How did you hear about the Ontario Hockey Academy/Canadian International Hockey Academy and what made you decide to come?

Takanobu Hiraga (OHA): I participated in an international tournament in New York, hosted by the New York Islanders when I was 11 years old. It was my first time playing hockey in North America and I was impressed by the level of play. I was introduced to OHA by my hockey advisor LeadOff Sports, and I also had a friend from Tokyo playing at OHA which made me want to attend the school. I thought it would be a great environment to improve my game.

Yoshin Takahara (CIHA): I heard about the program through Tak Mihara at LeadOff Sports. There were not many Japanese players at CIHA, and I thought it would be a great place for me to improve my game. I also thought I could adjust to English quickly here.



3. What has your experience been like playing hockey in Canada?

Takanobu Hiraga (OHA): I felt that the game was very speedy. Everyone is quick on forechecks and backchecks, and I can't keep the puck for a long time like I can in Japan. The shooting skill is much higher compared to Japan as well. I realized that the defenseman especially has good shots and generates rebounds, which makes it easier for forwards to score. Physical strength is another factor. I'm not tall and I'm not strong, so it is tough for me to win the physical battles. But it made me think about how to perform my best in that situation. I feel that this is important, and I need to have this mindset off the ice as well.

Yoshin Takahara (CIHA): It was very tough at first, because individual skills are much higher than it is in Japan. The physical part of the game was also much different than it is in Japan.

4. What lessons have you learned from hockey?

Takanobu Hiraga (OHA): The biggest thing I learned is having a good relationship with your coaches and teammates. If you don't, you may miss out on opportunities.

Yoshin Takahara (CIHA): I learned the importance of communication and decision-making skills.

5. What are your goals in hockey?

Takanobu Hiraga (OHA): My goals in hockey are to be a top scorer in the NHL, be famous in Japan, and make hockey more famous in Japan. I hope to take Team Japan to the Olympics one day and spread the game of hockey to everyone in Japan.

Yoshin Takahara (CIHA): I want to become a professional hockey player one day and use the money I earn from ice hockey to help others.

6. How do you think hockey could become a more inclusive sport?

Takanobu Hiraga (OHA): It would be great if we had more NHL players from Asia, so that it can be featured in the media. The Japanese media focuses a lot on the Olympics, so I want to become a professional hockey player one day and be able to bring Team Japan to the Olympics.



Lastly, I would like to thank my parents and people who supported me to play hockey in Canada. I will continue to work hard to achieve my goal!

Yoshin Takahara (CIHA): We need to spread the game of hockey more to other countries. I hope that by NHL hosting games in various countries including Asia, kids will get to know and hopefully experience hockey. Also, the players from these countries must do well in North America, so that it would be recognized by the media. I would like to do my best to become a good hockey player.