



# Asia's greatest sports heroes

*It's the world's most populous place, so bear with us -- there are a lot of 'em*  
2 December, 2009



*For each country's sports heroes, visit: Japan, Hong Kong, India, Singapore, China and Thailand. Did we overlook anyone? Hey, it's a big continent; if you feel that strongly about it, tell us in the comments below.*

Perhaps more than anywhere else on earth, the full panorama of world sport is represented in the Asian continent. Track, basketball, boxing, cricket, football, cycling -- for pete's sake, snooker! -- nearly every sport is regional in its reach, except here. Asia's a veritable gumbo of earth's many athletic diversions, making any attempt at assembling a list of its most elite athletes foolish at best and masochistic at worst. So without further ado, we present our list of Asia's most elite athletes!\*

**UPDATE:** December 3. *THE PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN!* Not only that -- we listened. As we correctly guestimated, we could rely on our readership to right this ship and chime in with other great sports figures deemed deservant to end up on this list. These include a bunch of terrific stars from Pakistan, former cricketer and now politician Imran Khan and squash doyen Jahangir Khan. Malaysia's squash superstar Nicole David, Chinese table tennis player Ma Lin and Indonesian badminton players Susie Susanti and Taufik Hidayat. You said we should also throw in the Philippines' Efren "Bata" Reyes, Paeng Nepomuceno and Felicisimo Ampon. Naturally, we also expected at least someone to shout out Sachin Tendulkar's name. Thank you. We're glad you were able to point out these and other omissions. But we're keen for more so we can better organize this list. See the comments box at the bottom of this page. Over and out.



Rikidozan

## Rikidozan: Professional Wrestler (Japan)

In the decade after World War II, the Japanese population faced not only material poverty but an almost crippling depression about their defeat. In the early 1950s, however, professional wrestler Rikidozan came to the nation's rescue. He single-handedly worked to lift the nation's spirits by winning victory after victory over American wrestlers in widely-viewed televised matches.

The irony, however, was that the national hero Rikidozan was actually Korean, and like all good pro wrestling, the matches were rigged. No matter, Rikidozan still established pro wrestling as a major sport in Japan and closed the book on Japan's early post-war malaise.

## Liu Xiang: Olympian Hurdler (China)

The 2007 world champion 110m hurdler is the first Asian gold-medalist in any Olympic track and field event. He won his event at the 2004 Athens Games with a world-record time of 12.91 seconds, but was forced to pull out of the Beijing Olympics with an Achilles injury. Liu recently

returned to competition with a second-place finish at the Shanghai Golden Grand Prix and a first-place finish at the 2009 Asian Athletics Championships.

## Li Jiawei: Table tennis queen (Singapore)

This Chinese lass might not have been born or bred in Singapore, but she had Singaporeans cheering during the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. Li Jiawei, with teammates Feng Tianwei and Wang Yuegu, took the silver medal in team table tennis for Singapore. Why is it a huge deal? It was only the second Olympic medal ever won by the city-state (the first goes to weightlifter Tan Howe Liang in 1960). That feat, along with her personal track record as a perennial gold medalist at the Commonwealth Games, ITTF Pro Tour, and Southeast Asia Games since 1999, is enough to land her on our list of sports heroes. Li Jiawei takes the silver against Wang Chen of USA at the 2008 Beijing Olympics Table Tennis Women's Singles. YouTube video from Beanny46.



Kim Yu-na

## Kim Yu-na: Figure Skater (South Korea)

Korean figure skater Kim Yu-na is currently the reigning world champion. She's only 19. With more than nine titles under her belt, including her most recent 2009 World Championship victory, she shows no signs of slowing down. When she isn't busy signing endorsement deals and autographs and wooing audiences around the world, she's training with Canadian coach Brian Orser in Toronto. Kim Yu-na is arguably Korea's proudest star and an inspiration to countless youths looking to follow in her footsteps. Not bad for a girl a few years shy of graduating university.

## Khaosai Galaxy: "The Thai Tyson"(Thailand)

Khaosai Galaxy, aka "The Thai Tyson," not only boasted a cool name but had a devastating left that kept him undefeated throughout his career. Considered by boxing experts as one of the greatest fighters of all time and a member of the International Boxing Hall of Fame, the former Muay Thai fighter defended his title 19 times, 16 by knockout, earning him the nickname "the Thai Tyson". When his twin brother Khaokor won the title in 1988, they became the first twins to hold international belts. Khao Sai retired in 1991 as arguably Thailand's greatest-ever athlete.

## Lang Ping: Volleyball Olympian (China)

Like Li Ning, the "Iron Hammer" built her international reputation by capturing gold at the 1984 Olympics. A star hitter on the women's volleyball team, her squad was the first Chinese team to win multiple world championships in a major international sport. She eventually retired and turned to coaching, where she's captured Olympic silver twice -- once with China in 1996 and again in 2008 with the United States.



Sunil Gavaskar

## Sunil Gavaskar: Cricket (India)

Gavaskar batted in an era when the dangerous West Indian pace quartet was at peak ferocity. He didn't wear the protective helmets of today, he didn't have modern day umpires ruling a no ball for more than one bouncer per over. His opening partners changed dozens of times throughout his career, but the captain always held up his end. He was the first man to cross the unthinkable milestone of 10,000 runs in test cricket and surpassed Sir Don's record for test centuries. He did it all seemingly without breaking a sweat and smiling, always, all the way to the commentary booth where he now sits. Sachin Tendulkar, by his own admission, grew up idolizing Gavaskar, and would undoubtedly rate him higher than himself.

## Patrick Lam: Equestrian Rider (Hong Kong)

Hong Kong athletes hardly ever cross paths with Olympic gold. Which is why Hong Kong rider Patrick Lam shot to sports stardom when he upstaged the world No. 1 for one night in an Olympic equestrian race in 2008. The 26-year-old Lam outshone world No. 1 stadium jumper Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum of Germany when he flawlessly completed the preliminary round of showjumping. He didn't end up with the gold, but later bagged a HK\$5 million equine scholarship by the Hong Kong Jockey Club.

The Chinese-Austrian Eurasian recently made headlines again by winning Hong Kong's second gold medal at the 11th National Games in men's equestrian jumping. With wind at his back, expect more great things from this talented jockey.



Fandi Ahmad

## Fandi Ahmad: Football (Singapore)

All of Singapore roared at the final whistle of the 1994 Malaysia Cup final. The little red dot had won 4–0, and Fandi Ahmad led the way with a foot in almost every goal made or created. But he was far more. Ahmad was (and still is) the poster boy for soccer success. He was the first Singaporean who signed on with an European soccer club, the first Singaporean to score against soccer powerhouse Inter Milan. But most of all, Ahmad and his teammates succeeded where National Day campaigns failed -- they turned Singaporeans into "One People, One Nation" on match days, 7pm to 9pm.

## Pone Kingpetch: Flyweight Boxer (Thailand)

Pone Kingpetch did what his famous predecessor, the bantamweight boxer Chamroen Songkitrat of the 1950s, could not achieve in several attempts. The flyweight won a world title fight (in 1960), becoming Thailand's first international belt holder. Taking a 15-round split decision over Argentine Pascual Perez in Bangkok, with their majesties the King and Queen of Thailand in attendance, Pone went on to defend his title later in the year in Los Angeles. A statue in Hua Hin commemorates this groundbreaking Thai athlete.



Kim Khan "Zig Zach" Zaki

## Kim Khan "Zig Zach" Zak: Muay Thai (Singapore)

Think Singaporeans are passive folk who would "beahh" our way into submission? Kim Khan "Zig Zach" Zaki says otherwise with his elbows, fists, and knees. The personal trainer's greatest achievement was being made Singapore's entry for Contender Asia 2008 -- a reality TV show that pitted Muay Thai fighters from around the world against each other. While he bowed out early due to a dislocated shoulder, his rematch in the show's final episode showed audiences that this kid could fight. With that experience behind him, Kim is probably the only Singaporean Muay Thai fighter who takes part in international bouts, and has since recorded 13 wins out of 19 fights. That's not too shabby at all.

## Nirajan Malla: Footballer (Nepal)

Eighteen-year-old Nirajan Malla is a football star on the rise in Nepal, portrayed by local media as a player whose life is consumed by the sport. Having lead his country's team to victory in major regional tournaments in the under-19 category, he is noted by teammates and competitors alike as a fierce striker who experiments with a variety of moves. And he's also a teen heartthrob.





Yao Ming

## Yao Ming: Basketball Star (China)

We have to start with the obvious. China's most recognizable export has recently been plagued by injury, but the 2.29m (7ft 6in) giant is still widely regarded as one of the NBA's elite centers when healthy. A three-time Olympian, seven-time NBA All-Star and the first-ever foreign-born top pick in the NBA, Yao made US\$51 million in 2008 and has led Forbes' Chinese celebrities list in income and popularity for six straight years.

## Wong Kam-po: Cyclist (Hong Kong)

Wong Kam-po is possibly Hong Kong's most evergreen champion athlete. Apart from Olympic gold, the cyclist has won practically every top title within the cycling scene and he has never returned home from the China's National Games without a prize. This year, the permanently Lycra-clad sporting hero won his third gold medal at the 11th National Games -- at the ripe "old" age of 36.

Wong's coach of 15 years, Shen JinKang, stills remembers when he found out that Hong Kong had no professional cyclists on the official team, and that Wong was the only person who signed up for professional training. Wong has since inspired a whole generation of professional cyclists.

## Wong Fei Hong: Wushu Grandmaster (China)

A noted physician, Wushu grandmaster and Chinese folk hero, Wong's exploits are the stuff of legend and the subject of countless films over the years, including Jackie Chan's *Drunken Master* and Jet Li's *Once Upon a Time in China*. Wong himself was an expert in the Hung Gar style of martial arts, and was so lethal that he once reputedly defeated 30 gangsters using only a staff.



Bruce Lee

## Bruce Lee: Martial Arts Legend (Hong Kong)

Bruce Lee is the obvious choice, but we'll explain it anyway: the silver screen fighter made martial arts the most glorified sport to come out of China, founded his own kung fu style, and put Hong Kong on the world map.

As a teen, the belligerent Lee trained under kung fu master Ip Man and quickly displayed a talent for Wing Chun, a popular branch of martial arts. Reckoning that traditional martial art rituals were too ornamental for street fighting, he developed his own system of flexible blows he called 'Jeet Kune Do' in 1965.

At 31 the hunk moved his talents to the Hollywood big screen and unleashed a global kung fu phenomenon.

In an age when fight films were unaided by special effects, Lee's ability to perform superhuman feats, such as a two-fingered push up and the lethal one-inch punch, was jaw-dropping for Western audiences. It still wows us now.

## James Wattana: Snooker phenom (Thailand)

In 1986, the snooker world was turned upside-down when a skinny 16-year-old defeated all comers to win a major tournament. This teen phenom, James Wattana -- aka the Thai Tornado -- excelled at a sport that was not particularly popular in his native land. However, Wattana's virtuosity on the felt was significant internationally as he broke the British's dominance of the game, rising to number three in the world rankings.

## Sadaharu Oh: The "King" of baseball (Japan)



Matsui, Dice-K and Ichiro have reached the top echelons of America's Major Leagues, but back in Japan, they still bow to the altar of Japanese baseball's best player of all-time -- Sadaharu Oh. Originally a star high school pitcher, Oh switched to first base in the majors and later became the world home run king, with 868 over the fence during his long career. After retiring at age 40 in 1980, Oh became a legendary coach for the Yomiuri Giants and the Fukuoka Hawks.

Born to a Taiwanese father and Japanese mother, Oh -- spelled with the Chinese character for "king" (王) -- has also become a powerful symbol of Japan's often ignored cultural diversity.



Yip Pin Xiu

## Yip Pin Xiu: Paralympian swimmer (Singapore)

In the 2008 Paralympics, Yip Pin Xiu and equestrienne Laurentia Tan won the first Paralympic medals for the republic. Yip, winner of silver in the 50m freestyle and gold in 50m backstroke, struggled with muscular dystrophy from birth. But under the tutelage of Ang Peng Siong (also known as Singapore's "flying fish"), she developed into a competitive swimmer who regularly leaves opponents sputtering in her wake. More importantly, their success at the Paralympics sparked a debate on the recognition of disabled athletes and general attitudes towards the disabled.

## Kapil Dev: Cricket (India)

It's probably the most widely circulated image in Indian cricket history. Kapil Dev, at Lords, that overcast English evening in 1983, holding the World Cup aloft. He was India's first true pace bowler. He bowled injury free, when bowlers today have a tough time lasting a series without a niggle. As national team captain Dev codified the phrase "Kapil's Devils" in sporting lore. And he did it when no one gave a lanky lad from Haryana a chance, retiring as the highest wicket taker ever, anywhere and one of the best cricketing all rounders of all time.



Prakash Padukone

## Prakash Padukone: Badminton (India)

They called him ‘The Gentle Tiger,’ though his opposition post-1971 would likely object to the moniker; it was at about that time that Padukone dramatically augmented the aggressiveness of his game. But he always moved with a ballerina's grace on the court, and when he lifted the All England Championships cup in 1980, he put India in the same league with the game's superpowers. Mild mannered, dignified, focused and still actively paying back the sport he loves, Padukone can still be seen gliding gingerly on the court at his Bangalore sports academy, playing against youngsters who look on in awe and admiration.

## Li Ning: Olympian Gymnast (China)

Li burst into the international spotlight by winning six medals including three golds (in floor exercise, pommel horse and rings) and topping the individual medal count at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics -- China's first appearance at a Summer Games after a 32-year boycott. However, he's now probably best known as the founder of China's biggest sportswear company (Li Ning) and for his high-flying, cauldron-lighting appearance at the Opening Ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

## Shizuka Arakawa: Olympian Figure Skater (Japan)

Figure skating has a long history in Japan, with the All-Japan Figure Skating Championships held since 1929. No Japanese figure skater, however, had ever taken the highest honor -- an Olympic gold -- until Shizuka Arakawa pulled it off at Turin in 2006.

Arakawa had been a highly-ranked Japanese skater, but going into Turin, enjoyed none of the media hype that her rivals like Miki Ando spun into product endorsement deals. Yet with a flawless execution of an Ina Bauer and a triple jump combination, Arakawa beat expectations

and became Olympic champion. Arakawa not only became one of the top female Japanese athletes of all time but also showed the true modest Japanese sports spirit: all walk, no talk.



Manny Pacquiao

## Manny 'Pacman' Pacquaio: Boxer (Philippines)

Emmanuel Dapidran Pacquiao has won welterweight, lightweight, flyweight, featherweight and super featherweight, and bantam weight championships. He is the first boxer to win championships in seven different weight classes. The Pacman is revered in the Philippines. How revered? Check out this post from a fan on his website: "Manny's life is so likely with Jesus Christ coming from the poorest of the poor but became famous, adore, love, praise, betroth and idolize. Manny was a chosen one from the Far East. He was called to be redeemer in a modern way. He was as popular as He was. Jesus Christ was the King of Kings and Manny is the King of the ring. Is Manny the chosen one to lead us..."

## Prince Birabongse Bhanudej: Race-car Driver (Thailand)

Prince Birabongse Bhanudej is an iconic figure in Thai history. An international jet-setter and high-ranking royal who liked to fly his own planes and married six times, he was most famous as a race-car driver in the 1930s, '40s and '50s. Racing with Maserati, among other teams, he placed as high as second in Grand Prix races in the 1930s under the admiring gaze of a young prince (and now king), His Royal Highness Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand.

## Vishwanathan Anand: Chess (India)

Anand doesn't just look like a scientist, he prepares for his game like one. He has decimated former champions with the precision of a physicist dismantling an atomic bomb, blowing the likes of Kasparov, Karpov and Kramnik out of the water. World champion, grandmaster, Arjuna awardee, Chess Oscar winner, padma shri, padma bhushan, padma vibhushan and a global

ambassador to the brainy sport. He may live his life in black and white, but Anand's achievements are a brilliant rainbow on India's sports horizon.



Kobayashi

## Takeru Kobayashi: World Champion Eater (Japan)

Back in the old days, competitive eating was essentially a gag competition for giant Americans. Everything changed, however, with the professional debut of 173cm, 58kg Japanese eater Takeru Kobayashi. No one has done more to make the grotesque culinary event a "sport."

Thanks to his special "Solomon" hot dog eating technique of dipping the buns in water and snapping the wiener in half, Kobayashi racked up six consecutive wins at Nathan's Coney Island hot-dog eating contest. Even new champions such as Joey Chestnut have used Kobayashi's innovations to beat the Japanese master at his own game.

Kobayashi has lost his hot-dog title, but don't worry, he is still reigning champ of the hamburger-based Krystal Square Off. Eat that, Chestnut.

## Marco Fu: Snooker (Hong Kong)

Marco Fu started playing snooker when he was nine years old and turned professional when he was 20 years old in 1998. His rookie year, he reached the final of the Grand Prix, beating Ronnie "The Rocket" O'Sullivan and then Peter Ebdon.

For the rest of the season, Fu qualified for four more ranking tournaments including the World Championship. He was voted by World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association as Newcomer of the Year and World Snooker Association Young Player of the Year in 1999.

It seems that Fu rose too fast too soon -- after being tipped as the Hong Kong wunderkind to take over the future world of international snooker, Fu's subsequent performance was less than impressive and he slid in ranking.



George Lee

## George Lee: The Survivor (Singapore)

The Subaru Impreza Challenge is Singapore's version of Survivor, except that it's literally the last man standing who wins it all. The grueling competition pits contestants against rain, shine, mosquitoes, and gut-busting, infrequent toilet breaks in an effort to keep their palms on a brand new car. Sound impossible and sadistic? Well, army officer George Lee outlasted all other contenders with a record time of 81 hours, 32 minutes. That's three-and-a-half days spent weathering the elements. He's not spilling his secret, but we're guessing that his Ironman training helped. After all, triathletes are suckers for punishment.

## Milkha Singh: Runner (India)

He was called 'the flying Sikh.' Pride of Punjab. Pride of the Sikhs. Pride of India. He did what no Indian did at the time. He ran -- as a profession. Singh is on this list for gold medals won in the Asian Games in 1958 and 1962. But he's also here for the medal he narrowly missed in the 1960 Rome Olympics, a race in which he finished faster than the standing world record. At a time without byzantine 25th-century shoe technology, Singh ran barefoot for most of his career.

## Udomporn Polsak: Olympian Weightlifter (Thailand)

Thailand's first female Olympic champion, the powerful little lady from northeast Thailand defied traditional stereotypes of Thai women by taking a gold in, of all sports, weightlifting. Taking gold in the 53kg category and looking graceful all the while, she immediately became a national hero. Days later Pavina Thongsuk also took gold in weightlifting, showing that when it comes to sport, Thai athletes can be tough as nails.





San San

## San San: Windsurfer (Hong Kong)

Lee Lai Shan, known affectionately as "San San," won Hong Kong's first-ever Olympic gold medal in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. The female windsurfer's achievement was monumental for Hong Kong -- in the media frenzy that followed, San San famously proclaimed, "Hong Kong athletes are not rubbish!" Shortly thereafter Hong Kong was gripped by a city-wide optimism that's been unmatched since, save perhaps when the Hang Seng Index hit 30,000 points in late 2007. The Cheung Chau native has since started a family with former teammate Wong Tak-sum and was the first to run the Hong Kong leg of the 2008 Olympic torch relay.

## Futabayama: Sumo Legend (Japan)

Taiho and Chiyonofuji are the post-war legends of the ancient sport, but Futabayama may be the greatest sumo wrestler who ever lived. Born in 1912, the Kyushu-born wrestler won 69 consecutive titles -- something no one has ever come close to replicating in our modern age. He only lost in 1935 due to suffering from dysentery, which can be a real downer in athletic competition. Futabayama was also blind in one eye, which makes his technical innovations on the sport that much more impressive.

Futabayama eventually founded his own stable and became chairman of the Japanese Sumo Association, assuring the modern continuation of this sacred Japanese tradition.

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