

1 **CONCURRENT RESOLUTION HONORING WATARU MISAKA**

2 2020 GENERAL SESSION

3 STATE OF UTAH

4 **Chief Sponsor: Jani Iwamoto**

5 House Sponsor: Steve Eliason

7 **LONG TITLE**

8 **General Description:**

9 This concurrent resolution honors Wataru Misaka.

10 **Highlighted Provisions:**

11 This resolution:

- 12 ▶ honors the late Wataru "Wat" Misaka, who was the first person of color to play in
- 13 what is now the National Basketball Association; and
- 14 ▶ recognizes Mr. Misaka's athletic abilities and contributions to college and
- 15 professional basketball.

16 **Special Clauses:**

17 None

19 *Be it resolved by the Legislature of the state of Utah, the Governor concurring therein:*

20 WHEREAS, Wataru "Wat" Misaka, who broke the color barrier by being the first

21 person of color to play in what is now the National Basketball Association (NBA), died on

22 November 21, 2019, in Salt Lake City at the age of 95;

23 WHEREAS, born and raised in Ogden, Wat Misaka was a 5-foot-7-inch tall Japanese

24 American whose basketball career began at Ogden High School where he led his team to the

25 1940 state championship and regional championship in 1941;

26 WHEREAS, in 1942, his Weber Junior College basketball team won the Intermountain

27 Collegiate Athletic Conference (ICAC) junior college title and he was named "most valuable

28 player" of that year's junior college post-season tournament;

29 WHEREAS, in 1943, the Weber Junior College team earned another ICAC title and the

30 college named him "athlete of the year";

31 WHEREAS, Mr. Misaka enrolled at the University of Utah and helped lead the
32 basketball team to win the 1944 National Collegiate Athletic Association championship over
33 Dartmouth;

34 WHEREAS, his teammate and close friend Arnie Ferrin said in recognition of Mr.
35 Misaka's humility and kindness in the face of racial taunts and pressures, "We achieved things
36 that a lot of people never will. He made us a better team and made me a better person. I can't
37 say I had anyone I enjoyed being around more than Wat.";

38 WHEREAS, while fellow Japanese Americans were interned in concentration camps,
39 Mr. Misaka took a two-year pause from college and served in the United States Army during
40 World War II;

41 WHEREAS, Mr. Misaka rose to the rank of staff sergeant and was assigned to the U.S.
42 strategic bombing survey where his job was to interview the citizens of Hiroshima about their
43 morale after the bombing;

44 WHEREAS, upon completing his military service, Mr. Misaka returned to the
45 University of Utah basketball team and, by holding the Kentucky Wildcats' All-American and
46 "player of the year" guard Ralph Beard to just one point, the University of Utah won the 1947
47 National Invitation Tournament championship;

48 WHEREAS, through his heart and exciting play, Wat won the support of the Madison
49 Square Garden crowd, so much so that they booed when he was not named MVP for the
50 tournament;

51 WHEREAS, his New York fame and fan base was such that the owner of the New
52 York Knicks, Ned Irish, signed Mr. Misaka as the first ever collegiate draft pick of the New
53 York Knicks for a salary of \$3,000 per year, making him the first person of color to start a
54 game in what is now known as the NBA, preceding the first African American to play in the
55 NBA by three years;

56 WHEREAS, Mr. Misaka was referred to as "Hawaiian American" to make his ethnicity
57 more acceptable;

58 WHEREAS, after the Knicks cut Mr. Misaka, he declined an invitation to join the
59 Harlem Globetrotters and returned to the University of Utah, earning a degree in engineering
60 and subsequently working as a mechanical engineer;

61 WHEREAS, later in life, Mr. Misaka was honored for his athletic achievements
62 through his induction into the Utah Sports Hall of Fame, the Japanese American Sports Hall of
63 Fame, and the Weber State University Hall of Fame;

64 WHEREAS, Mr. Misaka was also included in the diversity display of Hoop Hall, the
65 professional basketball Hall of Fame;

66 WHEREAS, in 2008, Mr. Misaka was the subject of a documentary, "Transcending:
67 The Wat Misaka Story," permanently available at the Library of Congress;

68 WHEREAS, in 2009, President Obama invited Mr. Misaka to the White House to
69 honor him for being the first player of color in the NBA;

70 WHEREAS, in December 2009, the New York Knicks honored Mr. Misaka at a
71 Knicks' game in Madison Square Garden and presented him with an honorary No. 15 jersey;

72 WHEREAS, Mr. Misaka was recognized by the Japanese American Citizens League in
73 2011 for his championship spirit and leadership role in inspiring sports fans to look beyond
74 race during the 1940's when anti-Japanese sentiment was at an all-time high;

75 WHEREAS, in addition to Mr. Misaka's basketball achievements, as an avid golfer he
76 had two hole-in-ones and enjoyed backpacking in the Uinta Mountains and the Wind Rivers,
77 with and without llamas;

78 WHEREAS, Mr. Misaka had a 189 bowling average and a high game of 299 in 2003 at
79 the age of 80;

80 WHEREAS, Mr. Misaka was inducted into the Japanese American National Bowling
81 Association Hall of Fame and the Salt Lake City Bowling Hall of Fame;

82 WHEREAS, Mr. Misaka's contribution to college and professional basketball as a
83 Japanese American during times of racial discrimination merits recognition; and

84 WHEREAS, his accomplishments were covered in obituaries by the New York Times,
85 the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, ESPN, Sports Illustrated, MSN Sports, NPR, and

86 the NBA:

87 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Legislature of the state of Utah, the
88 Governor concurring therein, honors the memory of Wat "Kilowatt" Misaka and his legacy of
89 being the first person of color to play professional basketball.

90 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that a copy of this resolution be sent to Mr. Misaka's
91 family.