

The 43rd Yokozuna Yoshiyama Junnosuke

by Joe Kuroda

On June 1, 2007, the newly crowned and 69th yokozuna Hakuho Sho performed the Shiranui-style yokozuna dohyo-iri for the first time at the Meiji Jingu Shrine in Tokyo, adorned with the yokozuna kesho mawashi of former Miyagino Beya yokozuna Yoshiyama, the last yokozuna produced by the heya.

This kesho mawashi was presented to yokozuna Yoshiyama by Japan's Daiei Film Studio on the occasion of their Akira Kurosawa classic "Rashomon" being awarded the Grand Prix at the Venice International Film Festival in 1951.

The 43rd yokozuna Yoshiyama was born Junnosuke Ikeda in Ishikari City, Hokkaido, on April 3rd, 1920. He was the third son of a wealthy local fisherman and grew-up big and strong just like the rest of his siblings. His family also owned a farm but focused mainly on the harvesting of Pacific herring. By the time Junnosuke was ready to help out with the family business, however, his father could no longer make a living from the sea and declared bankruptcy.

The family's misfortune continued as his mother, two older brothers and two younger sisters all passed away in a quick succession. Despite such hardships and personal tragedies, Junnosuke successfully graduated from junior high school in 1935 and was accepted for employment at a large sugar refining firm, the Hokkaido Seito, located in the nearby city of Obihiro.

During this time, Junnosuke

showed his prowess in local sumo competitions and soon became well known as unbeatable. He received several solicitations to join Ozumo but he steadfastly refused as he did not want to be known just for his physical superiority over others.

Realizing he needed more of an education to make something of himself, he decided to continue his academic studies in Tokyo and so decided to leave Hokkaido Seito in January 1938. While riding a train to Tokyo, he saw another boy just as large as himself sitting on a seat in front of him. The boy told him that he too was going to Tokyo - to join Ozumo by way of a stable called Takashima Beya - but he said he was already feeling homesick. During a stopover in the Hokkaido town of Otaru, the boy didn't rejoin the train and so failed to continue the journey.



*Yoshiyama in a very rare pose
at an outdoor stadium –
Mark Buckton*

When the train finally reached Ueno Station in Tokyo, there were two young rikishi from Takashima Beya waiting for the missing boy on the platform and it was only natural that they would mistake Junnosuke for their missing 'new recruit', given the fact that Junnosuke was much larger than anyone else leaving the train.

Despite Junnosuke's protests, he was promptly taken off to Takashima Beya where they discovered their mistake; that said, Takashima Oyakata and his wife immediately realized what they had in their midst; a possible future superstar. Junnosuke was eventually persuaded to join the heya and in May 1938, Junnosuke passed the new recruit physical. By today's norms, he was not especially large but he was one of the biggest recruits at the time, standing 178cm and weighing 79 kg. He passed through two introductory levels of mae-zumo with ease and picked his own shikona, Hokutoyama, based on the name of his former employer, Hokkaido Seito.

From the very beginning Junnosuke showed great promise but again misfortune struck when, in October 1938, he went down with an acute case of appendicitis and started to suffer the effects of peritonitis. Emergency surgery was performed and he only just pulled through. He thereafter changed his shikona to use his surgeon's name - Dr. Shosaku Yoshiba - in order to express his gratitude. Having recovered sufficiently by May 1939, Junnosuke stepped onto the dohyo with the new shikona of

Yoshihayama.

Ranked in the jonidan division, Yoshihayama finished the basho with 6 wins and 2 losses and followed it with back-to-back 7 win-1 loss basho to pass through to the next level, sandanme. In his makushita debut basho at the 1941 January tournament, he secured a 7 win-1 loss record but unfortunately developed a stomach problem the following basho and went makekoshi.

After finishing with another 7 win-1 loss record at the 1942 May basho at makushita 1, he made his juryo debut the next time out. Sumo fans were beginning to notice the young Yoshihayama as it appeared he had nothing but a bright future ahead. He had a great physique and was as strong as a bull but the good times never lasted long for Yoshihayama.

With Japanese war efforts intensifying, Yoshihayama was recruited to fight for the Japanese Army in (mainland) China. In three years of army service he came close to death three times. Once he accidentally consumed pesticide and survived only because of his physical and mental strength. Twice he was shot in his leg – one bullet passing through completely but the other permanently lodging itself in his foot.

After a report of being taken hostage, his whereabouts were unknown for so long that by the end of 1945 when he had not returned to Japan, everyone thought him dead – even his oyakata and heya mates assumed him lost in the war. His name was taken off the heya roster.

Despite common belief, however, Yoshihayama miraculously managed to get himself on a boat to Japan and finally arrived back in Ryogoku in June 1946. It has been reported that when he arrived back at the heya, he was

not recognized at all as he had lost so much weight. Some of his heya mates even thought he was a ghost.

Yoshihayama asked to be taken off the 1946 November basho banzuke and went on a rigorous training and eating / filling-out regimen as his weight was down to 65 kg by this time. He was eating so much that he was actually nicknamed “Stomach Yoshiha” by his heya mates. Through his super-human efforts, Yoshihayama succeeded in regaining 30kg in a mere six months and was able to step back up onto the dohyo for the 1947 June basho after five years ranked at the special Juryo 4 ‘tsukedashi’ rank.

He finished with 9 wins and 1 loss that basho, establishing a record equivalent to the juryo yusho. Two days after senshuraku he married a girl he had known since he was a little boy, Takako Tsukamoto, and for Yoshihayama, who had lived through so many near-death experiences and personal tragedies, this was the moment he

cherished most – for as long as he lived.

The next basho he started in makuuchi and was beginning to be seen as a future star of Ozumo along with his two Takashima Beya counterparts, Mitsuneyama (later ozeki) and Terunobori (later sekiwake). He won the Shukunsho award at the 1950 January and May basho and was subsequently promoted to sekiwake for the 1950 September basho.

His progress continued unabated with consecutive 13-2 records at sekiwake and along with west sekiwake Kagamisato, he was promoted to ozeki. Yoshihayama was already 30 years of age, but thanks to hard training he had developed a magnificent physique of hard, thick muscles over a model rikishi body. His good looks reminded many Japanese of a handsome but classical Kabuki actor.

While constantly suffering as a result of his old war wounds and foot injuries, Yoshihayama left a



*Miyagino Beya as it looks today –
Mark Buckton*

string of distinguished records as ozeki but was always one step short of yokozuna promotion. Finally, his luck appeared to turn at the 1953 May basho when he finished with 14 wins and just 1 loss.

This was still not the time for promotion, however, as rank and filer Tokitsuyama finished with a 15-0 record to claim the yusho. Ranked at maegashira 6, the highest ranked rikishi Tokitsuyama faced during the basho was komusubi Dewanishiki. Yoshibayama was not given an opportunity to face Tokitsuyama as he was ranked at ozeki and an ozeki did not compete against a maegashira 6 rikishi.

The following basho, at the 1954 January tournament, he took his 14 win record to senshuraku as he prepared to go against yokozuna Kagamisato – a man with one loss already. This time Yoshibayama left no doubt as to whether or not he was of yokozuna caliber by beating his lifetime rival Kagamisato after an epic battle.

Yoshibayama lost his best years to war and when he returned he was not automatically given back the rank he had achieved prior to going off in the service of his country. He suffered painful injuries related to his war wounds and belonged to the relatively unknown Takashima Beya. As a result, he had to face more powerful opponents than his chief rival Kagamisato who never had to face other formidable rikishi from his own Ichimon. Yoshibayama was not initially promoted to ozeki despite facing Terukuni in a yusho-deciding bout, and he twice lost out on a possible yusho to rank and file makuuchi rikishi against whom he was not given an opportunity to compete. But Yoshibayama overcame all these twists of fate and turned them into the road upon which he trod to achieve his ultimate goal. He never stayed down for long and always

turned his setbacks into new opportunities.

Hours after the final day of the 1954 January Basho, Tokyo was hit by a severe blizzard. Regardless, thousands of sumo fans came onto the streets to witness the birth of a new yokozuna waving his arms through unrelenting snow squalls in what is still remembered in Ozumo history as “the All Win Yusho March (Parade) in the Snow”.

The recently retired yokozuna Haguroyama personally coached Yoshibayama in the Shiranui style of dohyo-iri until it was eventually described as one of the most elegant and graceful dohyo-iri ever witnessed. With his good looks, Yoshibayama was so photogenic that sumo magazines featuring his dohyo-iri on the cover sold out quickly.

Unfortunately, yokozuna Yoshibayama could never repay the fever pitch interest he generated. His renowned extreme eating and drinking habits coupled with exhaustion and stress after his promotion and bad kidney functions finally led to a breakdown. He had to withdraw from his yokozuna debut basho in March 1954 and the following basho again disappointed his fans by suddenly announcing his withdrawal on Day 1.

In his third yokozuna basho, Yoshibayama was finally able to come back and finish with a good 11 win and 4 loss record (at the 1954 September basho) but by this time his internal organs were rapidly failing and he was no longer in any condition to continue active sumo. Battling a variety of illnesses and injuries, Yoshibayama valiantly attempted to make his comeback but each time he came up short as his physical condition deteriorated.

Finally on Day 8 of the 1958 January basho, his record

standing at 3 wins and 5 losses, Yoshibayama announced his retirement. Exhausted and ailing, the teary-eyed Yoshibayama announced that he had reached his absolute physical limit.

Meanwhile, his lifelong rival, yokozuna Kagamisato, himself at 5 wins and 3 losses on Day 8, and knowing that their bout was always eagerly waited and often turned into the most exciting bout of each basho, told reporters on hearing of Yoshibayama’s retirement that, if he could not finish with 10 victories, he too would retire - just like Yoshibayama. Kagamisato finished with 9 wins and 6 losses and, true to his word, stepped down. It turned out that two rikishi who had become ozeki at the same time, left Ozumo at the same time. In a way it heralded a turning point as the new dawn of the Tochinishiki-Wakanohana Era was rapidly approaching Ozumo.

Yoshibayama became the one-generation Toshiyori Yoshibayama after his retirement (as all former yokozuna were provided with the honor at the time) and he continued to develop new recruits at his self-titled Yoshibayama Dojo - founded during his active days. He later inherited the 8th Miyagino Toshiyori Myoseki and headed the heya which continues to this day (the current Miyagino Oyakata is the 11th to hold the title).

Yoshibayama was an effective master as he soon developed such quality makuuchi rikishi as sekiwake Myobudani, sekiwake Mutsuarashi, komusubi Hirokawa (the 9th Miyagino oyakata), maegashira 6 Wakayoshiba and maegashira 3 Udagawa.

When Yoshibayama was selected to be the chief dohyo judge, there was concern that no one would understand him when he needed to explain a mono-ii discussion as he usually spoke with a strong

Northern Japanese accent in addition to suffering from enlarged tonsils. However, he realized the problem and he thought this was a good time to have the surgery to correct his voice, and learned to speak with a more recognized Japanese accent; no problems subsequently occurred during his time in power. He was later elected as a Kyokai director.

Yoshibayama later opened a string of chanko restaurants and inns across Japan. Today in the Chanko Yoshiba restaurant located in Ryogoku, patrons can still see the training dohyo used by his recruits in the middle of the restaurant. The restaurant was built atop the site of the former Yoshibayama Dojo. Here you can still experience the sight and touch of a real training dohyo while

enjoying Miyagino Beya Chanko entrée.

Yoshibayama passed away on November 26th 1977 at the age of 57 years. While it was a personal tragedy for Yoshibayama not to have been able to fulfill all of his promise because of the war, it was equally tragic for all of us not to have witnessed his true potential as a great yokozuna.

Yoshibayama Junnosuke

Born:	April 3 1920
Real name:	Junnosuke Ikeda
Place of birth:	Hokkaido Ishikari City (former Atsuta-gun, Atsuta Mura, Yasosuke Mura)
Heya:	Takashima
Shikona:	Hokutoyama => Yoshibayama
Dohyo debut:	May 1938
Juryo debut:	June 1947
Makuuchi debut:	November 1947
Ozeki debut:	May 1951
Yokozuna debut:	March 1954
Final basho:	January 1958
Highest rank:	Yokozuna
Height:	179 cm
Weight:	143 kg
Favorite techniques:	migi-yotsu, yori, uwate-hineri
Died:	November 26, 1977 (57 years old)
Toshiyori:	Yoshibayama => Miyagino (8th)
Makuuchi basho:	37 basho, 304 wins, 151 losses, 1 hold, 85 kyujo
Win ratio:	0.668
Yusho:	1
Sansho award:	Shukun-sho (3)