

Heya Peek - Kasugano-beya

by Chris Gould

Chris Gould checks to see how his childhood hero is faring as coach of several white-belted sekitori.

For the past sixteen years, I have held a lasting fondness for Kasugano-beya, which nestles some ten minutes from the Kokugikan in the Ryogoku backstreets. When my fondness began, Kasugano's star rikishi was sekiwake Tochinowaka, a man whose perfect sumo build was undermined by a fast-tracking from college sumo and a consequent unwillingness to be roughed up. During the London basho of 1991, Tochinowaka became the first sumotori to have his photograph taken with me; an experience I shall understandably never forget. Since that momentous day, despite the hundreds of Japanese people who have cooed over the photograph, Tochi has never seen it himself.

Tochi is 44 now, and has long since purchased the Kasugano elder stock. Although he takes a while to digest his morning paper, he goes on to pay more attention to mid-tournament keiko than most oyakata, never shy to offer stern coaching tips in-between sips of coffee and countless cigarettes. A small bald patch is developing in the area previously covered by his mage, while the sideburns which graced his photograph with yours truly have since presumably been leant to his star deshi, Tochiozan. His white T-shirt and red shorts misleadingly suggest a casual air; an image which is dispelled as keiko progresses.

Tochi does not enter training until the session is 20 minutes old,



Kasugano-beya

poking his thick head and bulging lips through a sliding door at 6.45am. He notices the gaijin onlooker immediately, but not in the way which suggests that he recalls our previous meeting. (I am three times as old now, after all!) Nevertheless, he looks pleased that I greet his entrance with a bow before shuffling towards his treasured newspaper – seemingly a bible for the oyakata.

The entrance to the heya would very much resemble that of a Shinto shrine but for the Starship-Enterprise-style sliding doors which are activated at the push of a button. Upon removing shoes in the marble-panelled genkan, a carpeted step – replete with green and red flower designs – leads you to the unusually spacious viewing area, fenced off from the genkan via an ornate bamboo gate. The viewing area is divided into two right-angled chunks: the genkan-side for visitors, and the main

platform for the oyakata. To the left of the visitors' platform, three portraits of the stable's most famous wrestler, former yokozuna [Tochinishiki](#), hang in slanted fashion from the wall. On the wall to the right of the visitors' platform is pinned the stable's banzuke's progress chart, with maegashira 3 Tochinonada currently the highest-ranked rikishi. Behind the oyakata's seat lies a mini shrine, bordered by two tree-shaped wooden pillars, and adorned with the very gohei which hang from all four corners of the ceiling above the dohyo. Behind the shrine lies some bizarre abstract art dominated by pink and white paint.

It is a lazy morning in the Ryogoku backstreets. The thwacks of heavy hands on blubbery thighs easily drown out the isolated car and motorcycle which passes by the open front doors. The rumblings of the motorway are distant in tone

and, unlike at nearby Michinoku Beya, the clangs and screeches of subway trains are impossible to hear.

When I arrive at 6.30am, the sumotori are deep into their shiko warm-up. A brief cessation in note-taking reveals that the shiko stamp is already at 70; eventually, after 27 gruelling minutes, the count stops at 200. Shiko is supervised not by Kasugano Oyakata but by a junior oyakata, whose portly frame threatens to burst out of his tight-fitting white shirt. His short sleeves are soon pointing in my direction as his hands firstly beckon me in and then direct me to a suitable seating position, safely behind the collection of rikishi towels strewn about the nearby tatami mats. The rikishi are divided into five rows of four for their warm-up; with each row emitting lengthy and deep exhalations (and frighteningly unhealthy coughs) as the count nears its end.

Although many of the rikishi share the build and soft-skinned appearance of their stable master, a notable exception is the precocious Georgian talent of Tochinoshin. Ranked at makushita 2, Tochinoshin has high hopes of progressing to the salaried ranks with the requisite score in this tournament. Alas, the number of kachikoshi in the lower-ranks of juryo suggests he will be disappointed but he ploughs on with the utmost motivation nonetheless. Like his makunouchi compatriot Kokkai, the black-belted Tochinoshin appears shy of razors, and trains with a healthy amount of stubble which can presumably be used to scratch opponent's shoulders in a belt tussle. His belt-tussling skills are formidable, not least his rapid hand movements which allow him to change grip before his opponent can react. When wrestling on the belt, the muscular Tochinoshin resembles Kotooshu; using his considerable height to keep his

own mawashi out of reach while driving his shoulders into the bodily folds of his foe. His foot movement seems decidedly more stiff and laboured than that of Japanese sumotori during the exercises which involve skirting the tawara, but suddenly explodes into life during torikumi. A succession of impressive wins in training, coupled with the fact that he was praised in a rival heya the following day, suggests that his progress will not stop at juryo.

As Tochinoshin rises, so the old stalwart Tochisakae stalls. My laptop contains videos of the stocky Tochisakae briefly holding his own with the legendary yokozuna Takanohana. Those days are sadly long gone. Although he spent the earlier part of 2007 in juryo, like too many rikishi before him, he will find demotion to the unsalaried ranks at a late age too difficult to overcome. Gone now is his white training belt; or at least confined to the realms of misty-eyed reflections. The only white upon him takes the form of two unpromising knee bandages. His belt is as black as his future prospects, and his mournful face suggests he knows it.

The shining light of the heya is undoubtedly Tochiozan, the handsome lower maegashira whose tender skin gleams in the morning sun. His physique is awesomely developed for that of a 20-year-old, and his beefy wrists leave no doubt as to the source of his thrusting power. When Tochiozan practiced shiko before me, it was reassuring to have his formidable frame between me and the falling rikishi. He was very affable when warming down in the street afterwards, responding to questions about his physical wellbeing and readily posing for a close-range photograph. However, my comment about his 'possibly being a future yokozuna' seemed ill-advised come the end of the basho. On the morning of the



Tochiozan

comment, his score stood at 7-4. Four days later, he was make-koshi. I should either be flattered at his becoming complacent because of something I said, or petrified that he now views me as a bringer of misfortune.

Tochiozan shared his post-keiko warm-down with Tochinonada, the veteran maegashira who had found himself rather higher up the banzuke than he wanted to be, consequently posting only two wins in 11 days. His seniority was marked by a personal greeting from the oyakata when entering the training room. Ominously, though, his first act upon entering was to dump a mountain of tape on the tatami before me. The tape was ultimately used to tightly restrain both his elbows, which he later informed me were 'useless.' He had spent several minutes of the training session specifically trying to strengthen them, stamping on one end of a black piece of elastic and pulling on the other with first the right hand and then the left. (Despite such concern over his arms, he was able to win his day's bout with a spectacular scoop throw). When asked – in preparation for another

article I penned in this issue – about the ideal qualities of a yokozuna, Tochinonada guardedly replied that: ‘all the opponents are so difficult once you reach the higher levels.’ When pressed a little further, he added that a variety of techniques was important for success. He himself had certainly perfected *sukuinage*.



Tochinonada

Tochinonada has a surprisingly high voice for someone of his vast size, a voice which is frequently used to chastise underperforming *deshi* and to inform lower-rankers of where the *dohyo* should be swept. At one stage, after a hapless *deshi* had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory via a careless lunge towards the *tawara*, Tochinonada informed him that unless such forward lunges were avoided, his nose would continue to crash against the surrounding walls.

While Tochiozan threatened his own handsomeness by occasionally head-butting the rear wall, Kasugano Oyakata began to offer more advice than his senior *rikishi*. His first comic intervention was to criticise a *deshi* whose *nodowa* had sent an opponent rather too close to the *oyakata*'s newspaper. (A subsequent *nodowa* from the same wrestler spurred the arrogant-looking *juryo rikishi* Tochinohana into criticising the victim for

shying his head away from blows). Kasugano's second notable interjection was to growl encouragement at a mage-less *deshi* who was perhaps not thrusting to his full potential. The growls had the intended effect, with the *deshi* dramatically hammering his opponent into the oak-panelled wall, as if in a feel-good movie of the *Rocky* genre. However, belated victory was not enough to save the *deshi* from a lecture. His opponent was criticised even more severely. ‘What are your hands doing clasped behind your body?’ Kasugano growled, with illustrative hand gestures.



Tochinonada

I was amazed at how Tochinowaka had transformed himself from shy *sumotori* to overbearing *oyakata*, so confident of his authority that he allowed a smirk to frequently creep over his face (which was rarely 20 centimetres away from a cigarette, the smoke from which billowed rightwards, poisoning the entire atmosphere of the room). The smirk grew into a hearty laugh when the mage-less *rikishi* collapsed to his knees while attempting a charge during *butskarigeiko*, and then sorrowfully nursed his big toe. As the breakfast crockery began to rattle at 8.30am, I concluded that since the photograph,

Tochinowaka and I had both become our own men now. Shortly after lighting the candles of the shrine to his rear, Tochi retired to the *oyakata* quarters, leaving his white-belted *deshi* to complete their winner-stays-on *torikumi* after an unusually long mid-tournament practice.

The *torikumi* were dominated by Tochiozan and Tochinonada, who relished tackling each other and finished their bouts with even records. Before each match, the *tsukebito* provided towels for their *makunouchi* masters, and the rub-down process served as a mini *shikirinaoshi*, with both *sumotori*

possibly imagining *Kokugikan* crowd members chanting their name. The early *torikumi* were easily won by Tochiozan, often with the aid of a *nodowa*. However, Tochinonada subsequently rallied by more actively seeking to dictate the fight on his terms, neutralising Tochiozan's thrusts before latching onto his belt and destabilising him from under the arm-pit. Tochinonada followed this commendable feat with the first ever false-start I had seen made by a white-belter in *asageiko*. Pleasingly, both he and Tochiozan made short work of the cocksure Tochinohana, who laughed at the

irony of his quick defeat to the former. There once was a time when Tochiozan was the naïve novice ripe for bullying at the hands of experienced pros like Tochinohana. That time is now firmly in the past.



Tochiozan

Besides the torikumi and butsugarigeiko (in which Tochinoshin, in the role of chest-lender, performed particularly impressively), the training session was filled with push-ups, alternate thigh-stretches, the drumming of thighs, matawari, gentle knee-bends and tsuriashi. As the exercises were carried out, more senior wrestlers practiced teppo and shiko, the junior oyakata briefly exited and re-emerged with a cup of coffee for Kasugano, and a kitbag-carrying jonokuchi deshi greeted the oyakata in his kimono before heading to the Kokugikan for his morning match. It was a busy day at the heya, in stark contrast to the relaxed atmosphere of the street outside, which saw early rain give way to strength-

sapping sunshine of the intensity which made bicycle wheels gleam through the stable entrance.

As Tochinonada and Tochiozan seated themselves in the tarmacked street outside, seemingly unnerved by the thought of cars driving towards them, and several juniors lingered by the side entrance to the training room, towels in hand, dirt being swept off exhausted bodies, a sturdy deshi politely told me to leave the heya as training had finished. Within a flash, I relinquished my camera in favour of the trusted photograph.

'Look! This is me when I was eight years old!' I cried. The rikishi dropped his broom, took the photo in his grimy, stubby fingers and gradually shared my enthusiasm.

'Hey!' he called to Tochinoshin. 'This guy has a photograph of the oyakata from sixteen years ago!'

Tochinoshin's unshaven face promptly peeked round the right-hand-side wall, surprisingly full of innocence.

'Where are you from?' the sturdy deshi asked, doubtless hoping that I might be from Georgia.

'England,' I said to his presumed disappointment.

'Tochinoshin from Georgia,' the rikishi continued. 'He is very good makushita.'

'I know,' I said. The evidence was incontrovertible.

'You'd probably like to show this to



One former Kasugano yokozuna - Tochinoumi

the oyakata,' the sturdy deshi continued, after I had threatened to strike up a broken Russian conversation with Tochinoshin.

I was silent in an instant. Was the sixteen year wait about to end?

'Misetai (I'd like to show it to him),' I murmured.

'Ho, ho. Misetai,' the rikishi chuckled, remaining stationary.

'He's probably busy though,' I added.

'Probably busy,' the response.

My long-awaited reunion with Tochi was destined to be further delayed. With a sigh and utterances of 'farewell' and 'good luck' to the black-belters encircling me, I turned towards the sekitori on the pavement outside, seeking new Kasugano friends like the one I made sixteen years ago.