

The 45th Yokozuna Wakanohana Kanji

by Joe Kuroda



Yokozuna Wakanohana Kanji - Mark Buckton

On March 16th, 2008, former Yokozuna Wakanohana Kanji celebrated his 80th birthday. In doing so became one of the few yokozuna to live beyond 80 years of age.

His good friend [Kagamisato](#) passed away in 2004 at the age of 80 years and 10 months, and if

Wakanohana stays with us for another three years, he will become the longest living yokozuna in history, surpassing the lifespan of 83 years enjoyed by Umegatani I.

Over his decades in sumo, Wakanohana led such a dramatic life that it might be argued his

experiences were worthy of a movie being produced in his honour – an argument, if made, ignorant of the fact that such a film has already been made – while he was still active.

Nicknamed the “Devil of the Dohyo” Wakanohana was known for his fierce style of sumo and oftentimes ferocious training sessions. Despite his limited size (179cm in height and peaking at 105kg), Wakanohana never shied away from forward moving sumo against much larger opponents. He was not only confident of his own technical ability, but often he was usually able to overwhelm his opponents using a level of brute force that was to become almost legendary.

As the first yokozuna born during the Showa-era, Wakanohana became the first true sumo star in post-WWII Japan, in the process helping to solidify Ozumo's ‘Golden Age’ along with his great rival, Yokozuna Tochinishiki, the 44th man promoted to the sport's uppermost rank.

Wakanohana was born in 1928 in what is now Hirosaki City in Aomori Prefecture; at the northernmost frontier of Japan's main island of Honshu. His father ran an apple orchard in the area but suffered devastating damage to his crop in a typhoon, never fully recovering from the loss. He moved his family to Muroran City in Hokkaido to start a new life and although the family managed to eke out a meagre existence, the young Wakanohana grew strong. Even as a young boy, Katsuji Hanada, as he was born was

renowned locally for his athletic prowess.

After leaving elementary school, Katsuji started working as a longshoreman to support his



*Yokozuna Kagamisato –
Nihon Sumo Kyokai*

financially strapped family; being forced down this road thanks to a war injury suffered by his father. The work was extremely demanding as he had to carry loads in excess of 150kg up single beams of wood linking docked ships with the port. One misstep and he would fall into the water with his load. As hard as this was, however, it did help him to build his balance as well as to increase his endurance and all round strength. Soon Katsuji was carrying loads in excess of three times the amount ferried up and down the planks by his adult co-workers and it was at around this time that Katsuji started to participate in local sumo tournaments. In no time, he was the top competitor in the area.

In the summer of 1946, a group of Nishonoseki Beya rikishi headed by then ozeki Saganohana came to Muroran City to stage a regional exhibition event. Katsuji, being so

strong, decided to test himself against the visiting lower ranked rikishi and joined in the tournament. One of the rikishi, maegashira 3 Onoumi, immediately took a liking to the young Katsuji as he was on the look-out for new recruits with which to staff his own heya post retirement.

Katsuji for his part wanted to escape his mundane life in Hokkaido to join Ozumo, but his parents were vehemently against letting him go as he was the family's main source of income. Onoumi was not easily deterred though and told Katsuji's father that he would return his son if, after three years he had not become a 'meaningful' rikishi (i.e. a sekitori). The elder Hanada knew Katsuji was so determined and may even end up running away from home, so in the end he agreed to his son joining Ozumo.

Katsuji made his first appearance on the dohyo at the 1946, November Basho under the name of Wakanohana; a shikona given to Katsuji by Onoumi – the former 'wearer' of the name prior to adopting the name of Onoumi.

Today, most fans look at Katsuji as the first Wakanohana, but Katsuji viewed himself as the second Wakanohana - after Onoumi - his shisho. Once Katsuji joined the heya, he found a training partner in Ukusa (later Ozeki Kotogahama), his senior by one year. Their training sessions became so long and so brutal that they were referred to in the world of sumo for generations and it was once suggested that the reason Kotogahama never gained much weight was due to his training sessions with Wakanohana.

The heya's sekitori at the time, - the maegashira Rikidozan (later a sekiwake) saw potential in Wakanohana and treated him so harshly that during one training session against Rikidozan, the

younger sumotori bit the foot of the man later to become a professional wrestler. As a result, Wakanohana had to quickly escape the training area and jump into the nearby Sumida River to hide from his senior. Wakanohana had no trouble at all passing through the lower ranking divisions as he won the yusho in both the jonidan and sandanme divisions. He then passed through makushita in two basho and in the 1949, May Basho, was promoted to juryo; a phenomenally quick journey up the banzuke in those days. Wakanohana made his makuuchi debut at the 1950, January Basho and proceeded to win 11 bouts - capturing his first Kanto-sho award.

By this time more than three years had passed since Wakanohana first joined Ozumo. Though Onoumi did not keep to the pledge he made to Wakanohana's parents in the promised time frame, his judgement on the potential of Katsuji had not failed him, as Wakanohana had already developed into a rikishi the world of sumo, and indeed the nation were paying attention to.

Wakanohana had a magnificent dohyo presence. He looked fearless when on the dohyo and did not let his relatively small physique affect his style of sumo as he always went after his opponents with an overwhelming sense of power and technique; especially when using a magnificently executed uwatenage throw. He was so confident in his uwatenage ability and he made sure his opponents all knew about it. At the 1953, January Basho, Wakanohana beat three yokozuna in the first week - Chiyonoyama on Day 2, Azumafuji on Day 6 and Haguoyama on Day 8; all by uwatenage. To defeat a yokozuna with a throw at the time was an unimaginable feat requiring super-human effort.

At the time, Wakanohana was

simply unbeatable once he manoeuvred into his favourite hidari (left) yotsu, migi (right) uwate form. Even when his opponents pushed him to the edge of the dohyo, using his rear foot on the straw bales, he often unleashed an utchari move on his opponent; one commentator describing it as “his heels have an eye” when referring to the ring awareness he possessed.

On Day 11 of the 1955, September Basho, Wakanohana was involved in a truly historic bout against fellow yokozuna [Chiyonoyama](#). Chiyonoyama stormed out at the tachiai and started his famed, but vicious tsuppari against Wakanohana. Wakanohana jumped inside Chiyonoyama's reach and firmly entrenched himself in a migi-yotsu position; Chiyonoyama all the time keeping up the pressure by repeatedly attempting uwatenage and shitatenage throws, but each time Wakanohana held on. Soon both competitors stopped moving, and a mizu-iri break was called. After the bout resumed, both exchanged throw attempts, but again appeared to tire and once more became immobile. After mizu-iri breaks were ordered twice more, the bout started from scratch.

During the final ‘chapter’ of the bout, Wakanohana got himself deeper inside Chiyonoyama's grip, again avoiding Chiyonoyama's tsuppari, and once more achieved a migi-yotsu position. Chiyonoyama again attempted an uwatenage while Wakanohana countered with a leg hook, but neither gave in and yet another mizu-iri break was called. After the break Wakanohana appeared to get himself in a more favourable position after a throwing attempt, but again it was not enough to defeat Chiyonoyama. By this time both rikishi looked totally exhausted and there were even calls of “draw, draw” heard from the spectators. When the gyoji finally decided to

call the bout a draw, it had lasted an astonishing 17 minutes and 15 seconds. Spectators all over the stadium were relieved to see both Chiyonoyama and Wakanohana survive this long ordeal, and applauded and cheered both competitors.

The epic fight, many times longer than an average sumo bout must have taken so much out of both rikishi that they were only able to finish the basho with 10 wins 4 losses and 1 draw apiece. For Wakanohana, ranked at west sekiwake with 8 and 10 wins respectively in the previous two basho, this should have been the basho in which his ozeki promotion would be assured, but managing just 10 wins, he thought the second highest rank would be beyond him and so decided to take a break in Hakone; a mountain resort near Tokyo. As he was waiting for the train to arrive to take him to Hakone, he was told of the promotion by a reporter who heard the announcement on his radio. Wakanohana had to rush back to his heya to accept the official notification from the Kyokai messengers.

At the time, Wakanohana's Hanakago Beya was a minor heya located in Tokyo's western neighbourhood of Asagaya, some distance away from Ryogoku. The recruits rarely had training sessions against rikishi from other heya and more often than not went up against college rikishi from the nearby Nihon University Sumo Club; when Ozeki Wakanohana won his first yusho in the 1956, May Basho, they had no-one experienced in preparing for the festivities surrounding such an achievement and so needed their college partners to work as guards along the route of the yusho parade from Kuramae – home of the Kokugikan.

At the basho in question, Wakanohana won 12 and lost 3 of his bouts, but with 11 rikishi

winning over 10 bouts apiece come senshuraku, the outcome was left hanging until the very end when Wakanohana defeated komusubi Ohikari by yorikiri in the yusho deciding bout after having overcome a 50kg handicap to down fellow ozeki Ouchiyaama by katasukashi in his regular senshuraku bout.



Ozeki Ouchiyaama - Mark Buckton

The pressure filled tournament and all the yusho celebrations took their toll on Wakanohana, but duty called and he had to leave immediately for the heya's summer tour. Although the heya was a minor player in sumo at the time, this time things were different. Everywhere they went, people flocked to see Ozeki Wakanohana – a shoe-in for a future yokozuna slot. As a result, the heya was finally able to get together some much needed revenue.

On September 4th the exhausted rikishi finally returned to Tokyo so they could prepare for the heya's dohyo matsuri the next day. The heya building was brimming with activity as fans and heya officials, as well as rikishi, were preparing from early morning. One and all were rushing from one place to another forever glancing towards

the yusho winner. One of the individuals present at the time was Wakanohana's oldest son, Katsuo, just three days shy of his fourth birthday. So happy was he at seeing his father for the first time in several months, his excited jumping up and down in front of a large bowl of boiling chanko soup led to an accident when Katsuo fell backwards into the bowl. He subsequently suffered major burns all over his tiny body, and despite extensive treatment throughout the day and the following night, he died at 2 a.m. the following morning.

Wakanohana was devastated and went into deep shock.

He was exhausted both mentally and physically but at first refused to leave his son's Buddhist altar at his home. Everyone was so concerned about his health that

his supporters advised him to go kyujo.

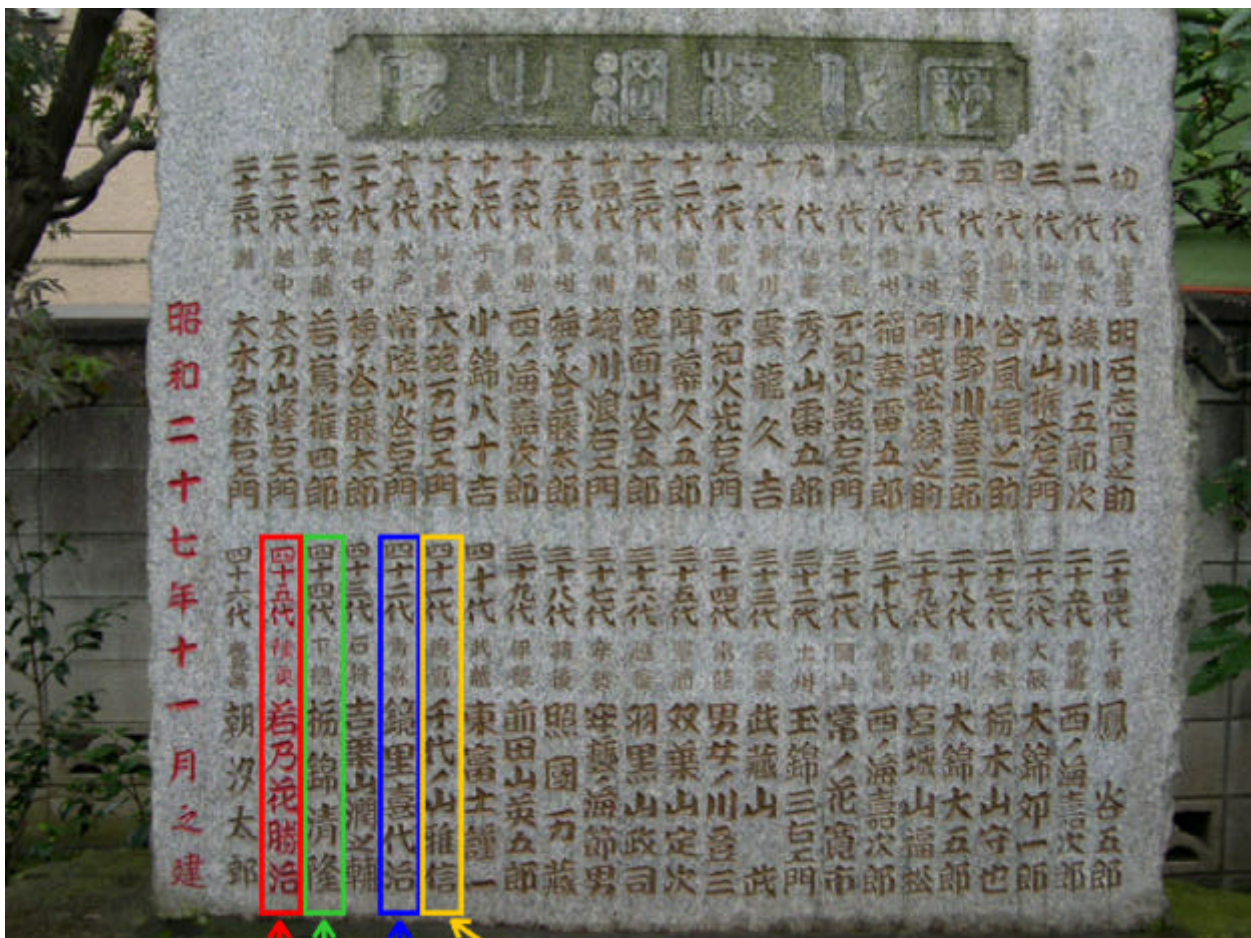
Wakanohana, however, was worried that he was not in the right condition to compete in a full basho, but felt a responsibility to continue and participate. "Wakanohana isn't here just for himself. Every single fan is now watching over Wakanohana, and even if I keep losing, I should participate regardless. For my Katsuo too, I have to be there," he is recorded as saying.

The news of Wakanohana's participation quickly spread and tickets sales sky-rocketed for the ensuing Aki Basho. Wakanohana looked far more resolved and there was even an "out of this world" air about him as he arrived at the venue with a string of prayer beads etched with his son's name around his neck. In the early stages of the

basho, Wakanohana was unbeatable, and it looked as if he would go on to win another yusho and receive his promotion to yokozuna.

Ironically, it was sickness that finally drove him out of the basho. A fever first set in around Day 9 due to inflammation of the tonsils, and on Day 13 he was taken to a hospital as his condition was worsening. The next day his condition improved slightly and he was considering a comeback on senshuraku to face Tochinishiki, but his condition once again deteriorated leading him to confirm his pull out from the tournament.

Had illness not struck, it was believed that Wakanohana would have won the yusho, and subsequent yokozuna promotion, but all knew this was just a matter



Wakanohana Tochinishiki Kagamisato Chiyonoyama

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of time.

That time arrived, after the 1958, January Bashi where he captured his second yusho. Despite objections raised by the Yokozuna Deliberation Committee (YDC) concerning Wakanohana not having achieved the pre-requisite back-to-back yusho, the Sumo Association overruled the YDC and formalized the promotion.

Interestingly, at this time, Wakanohana himself was reportedly considering declining the promotion as he was worried that if his health deteriorated further, as a yokozuna he would have to leave his active career

behind him – no longer able to financially support his own family. When he did finally opt to accept the promotion, nobody within the Nishonoseki Ichimon could instruct the sport's latest grand champion on the yokozuna dohyo-iri. The last yokozuna the ichimon had seen had been active 20 years ago, and so the ichimon didn't even have a set of three matching kesho mawashi necessary for the yokozuna dohyo-iri.

Hearing of their plight, the chairman of the Sumo Association, Tokitsukaze Oyakata stepped in and lent his own set that had miraculously survived the March 1945, air raids over Tokyo. As a

result the new yokozuna performed his first ever yokozuna dohyo-iri sporting the kesho mawashi of the famed Futabayama.

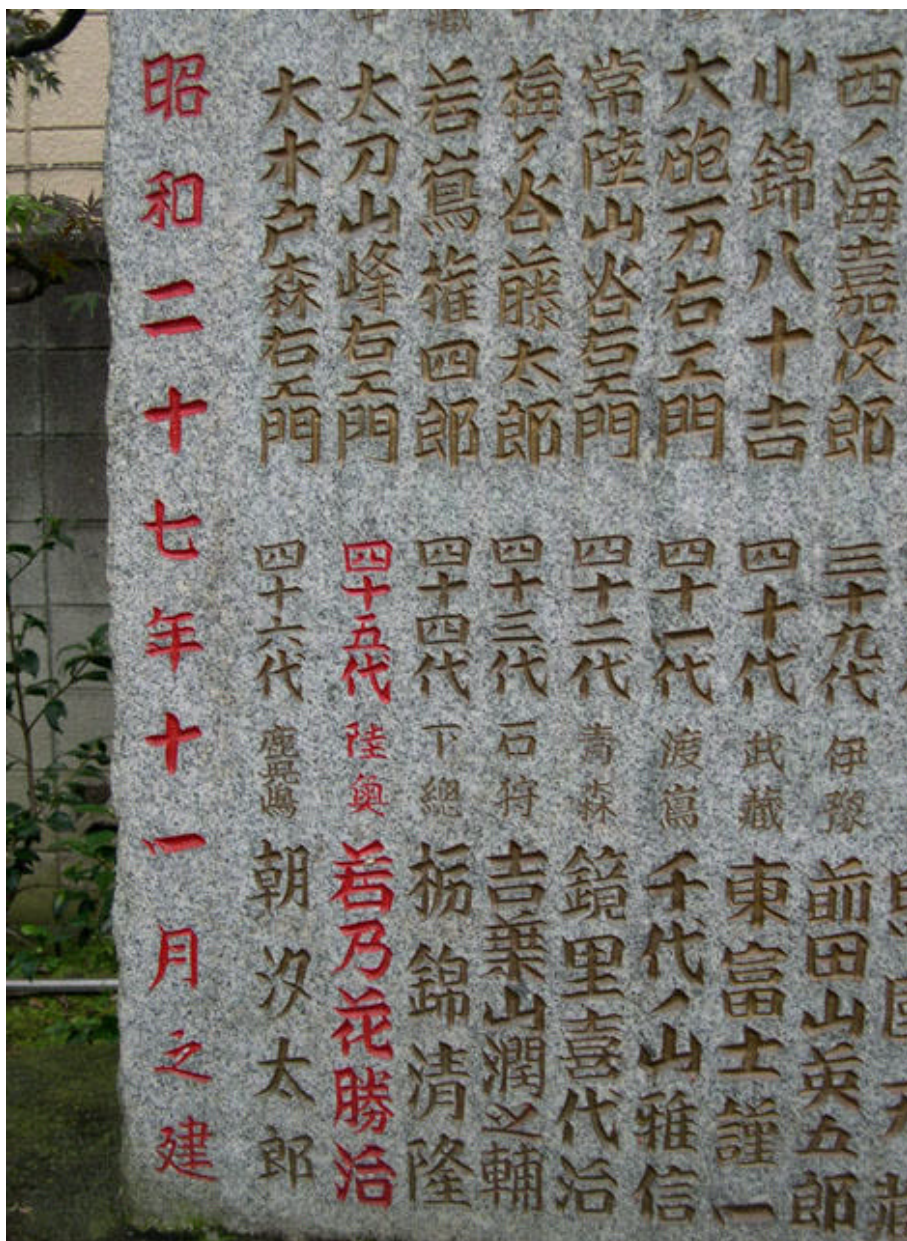
Around the time of Wakanohana's promotion, Japan's Nikkatsu Movie Studio released a motion picture titled "Devil of the Dohyo" in theatres across Japan, just in time for the New Year holiday season.

The film depicted Wakanohana's life story and starred Wakanohana playing himself. An instant hit, Wakanohana is likely the first and last rikishi to be promoted to yokozuna, and at the same time having a film of his life shown across Japan.

Throughout the latter part of his career, Wakanohana enjoyed some of his most memorable bouts with his greatest rival and supreme sumo technician, Yokozuna [Tochinishiki](#) – a classic case in point being the six basho senshuraku run in 1959, that saw Wakanohana claim victory in the January, May and September tournaments, while Tochinishiki won the remainder. In each case, the winner of the bout was also the person walking away with the yusho.

Remembered by history, the senshuraku bouts the pair shared are still considered to be examples of some of the best sumo ever displayed, and although Wakanohana's lifetime record against Tochinishiki was a less than 50%, 15 wins to 19 losses, each bout was tremendously competitive and thrilling for all concerned.

The following 1960, January Bashi, Wakanohana went kyujou from Day 3 but came back strong at the March tourney. On senshuraku both Wakanohana and Tochinishiki were tied at 14 wins apiece making it the first time in sumo history that two undefeated



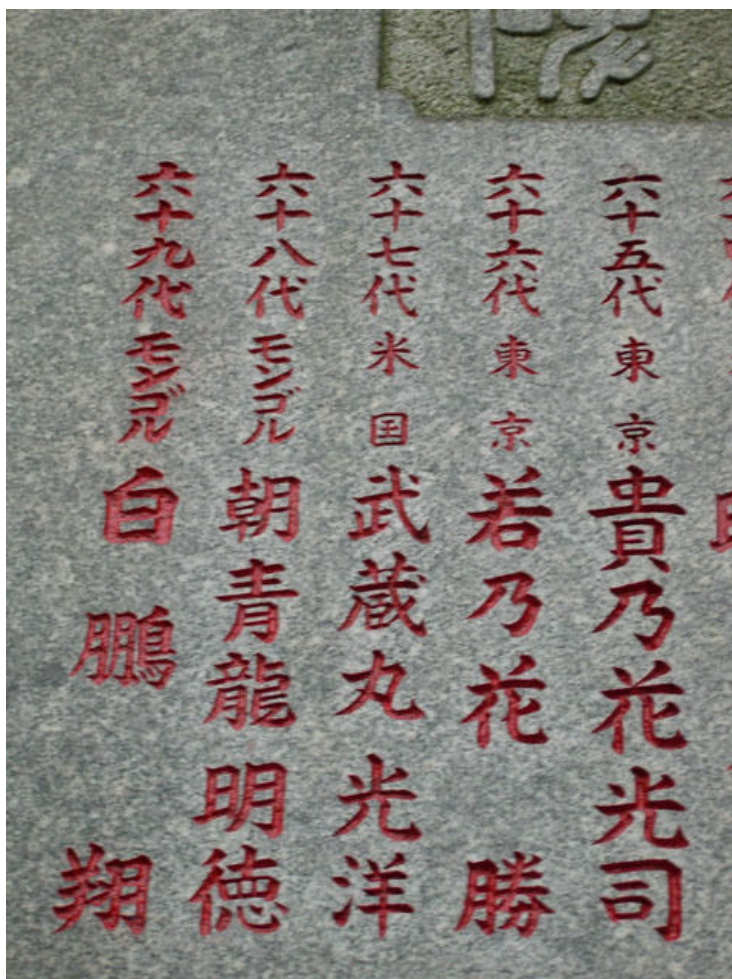
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yokozuna had faced-off on the final day. After two minutes and 21 seconds of fierce struggles, Wakanohana finally defeated Tochinishiki with a yorikiri move to give him his eighth yusho. Sadly though, it turned out to be their last bout; a fact set in stone when Tochinishiki retired the following basho.

Losing his ultimate rival, Wakanohana may have lost his edge but still had the second best 13 win, 2 loss record at the 1960, May Basho when fellow Hanakago Beya sekitori, maegashira 4 Wakamisugi won his first yusho with 14 wins and 1 loss; the two heya-mates prohibited from fighting.

Wakanohana stayed on after Tochinishiki's retirement winning two more yusho, but it was apparent that his best days were behind him as he went kyujo more frequently. At the 1962, March Basho he lost to Tochihihikari on Day 1 and went kyujo citing a liver ailment. Then, just prior to the following 1962, May Basho, Wakanohana formally announced his retirement. With the announcement, one of the greatest eras in modern Ozumo history, the Golden Age of Tochi-Waka came to an end just as a new golden age appeared to be spear headed by an up and coming rikishi named Taiho.

After leaving active sumo, Wakanohana inherited the Futagoyama toshiyori and founded a new heya. As Futagoyama Oyakata, he developed a succession of solid, attractive rikishi, starting with (later komusubi) Futagodake and his own brother (later ozeki) Takanohana, two yokozuna in the shapes of Takanosato and the second Wakanohana, as the still popular ozeki - Wakashimazu.



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As director of the Sumo Association's Operations Division, he also helped his one time rival Tochinishiki, Kasugano Oyakata at this time, to become the chairman of the Sumo Association.

Wakanohana succeeded Tochinishiki, taking over the job of Association Chairman himself, and during his tenure Chairman Futagoyama endeavoured to have rikishi follow proper tachiai procedures; evidence of which survives today in that we can still hear a gyoji saying, "Teo-tsuite" (touch your hands), to both rikishi.

After retiring from Ozumo, Futagoyama Oyakata handed the reigns of his heya to his brother, former Ozeki Takanohana who subsequently brought his own two sons, Takanohana and

Wakanohana III into the sport and up to the rank of yokozuna – in addition to (former) Ozeki Takanonami and (former) Sekiwake(s) Akinoshima and Takatoriki.

The legacy of the first Wakanohana continues today in Ozumo with his nephew, former Yokozuna Takanohana heading what used to be his own Futagoyama Beya under the new name of Takanohana Beya.

Takanohana Oyakata, at just 35 years-of age was appointed to the post of Assistant Manager of the influential Judges Division in the Sumo Association this February. The oyakata may one day be elected a 'director' and in turn, become Association Chairman – just like his uncle.

Wakanohana Kanji

Born:	March 16th, 1928
Real name:	Katsuji Hanada
Place of birth:	Hirosaki City, Aomori Prefecture (upon joining Ozumo - Muroran City, Hokkaido)
Heya:	Nishonoseki - Shibatayama - Hanakago
Shikona:	Wakanohana (changed from Wakanohana Katsuji to Wakanohana Kanji, and the NO of WakaNOhana changed from ノ to 乃 . 若ノ花 => 若乃花)
Dohyo debut:	November 1946
Juryo debut:	May 1949
Makuuchi debut:	January 1950
Final basho:	May 1962
Retired:	March 1993
Highest rank:	Yokozuna
Height:	179 cm
Weight:	105 kg
Favorite techniques:	Hidari-yotsu, uwate-nage
Toshiyori Myoseki:	Futagoyama- Fujishima
Makuuchi basho:	57 (546 wins, 235 losses, 4 draws, 70 kyujo)
Win ratio:	0.699
Yusho:	10
Sansho awards:	Shukun-sho - 2, Kanto-sho - 2, Gino-sho - 1