

# The Rise And Fall Of Kitanoumi

by Chris Gould

*Chris Gould chronicles the astonishing downfall of one of sumo's greatest stars, and argues that the seeds of self-destruction were sown long before the marijuana mayhem.*

After a dark beginning to the new millennium which saw Waka retire, Taka crippled, and yaocho revelations galore, the sumo world was provided with some long-overdue optimism in the spring of 2002. In January of that year, the Japan Sumo Association (NSK) elected a Chairman under the age of 50 for the first time in half a century. The 48-year-old Kitanoumi Oyakata seemed a formidable combination of tradition and modernity, old enough so that his career evoked sumo's glory days of the 1970s, and young enough to represent a force for change in a stultifying organisation.

Since the post was freed from the grip of military generals in the 1930s, every NSK Chairman except for the first Musashigawa Rijicho has held the rank of either yokozuna or ozeki. In terms of Rijicho recruitment, popularity, fame and the ability to stir fond memories have forever taken priority over an individual's ability to manage. A Rijicho is a symbol of hope, not expectation; in particular, the hope that a fine wrestler can automatically transfer his skills to the realm of Kyokai leadership.

The hopes for Kitanoumi were far higher than those for his immediate predecessors. Dewanoumi, the former yokozuna Sadanoyama who chaired the NSK from 1992 to 1998, was never the people's choice. In the 1990s, just



*Kitanoumi Rijicho walks around the Kokugikan in January 2008*

as in his wrestling days, he played second fiddle in the popularity stakes to Taiho, whose automatic ascent to the chairmanship was prevented by ill health alone. Dewanoumi's successor, Tokitsukaze (1998-2002), was invariably described as a dour character who failed to inspire the masses. Such was the ex-ozeki's general projection of dullness that even his commendable modernisation measures – appointing the first female Yokozuna Deliberation Council member and revising the

technique book – dipped completely under the public radar. Dewanoumi and Tokitsukaze were born within a year of each other, and a full 15 years before Kitanoumi. The latter became the first NSK Rijicho to be born after the second world war, and thus – in theory – represented a different set of values entirely.

His sumo career, which began at the tender age of 13 in 1967, was genuinely inspirational. A shin-juryo at 18, a shin-nyumaku at 19, a tournament winner and ozeki at

20, Kitanoumi Toshimitsu left hundreds of opponents quivering before his imposing frame. After becoming the youngest yokozuna ever in 1974, he completed a decade of distinguished service at sumo's highest rank, totalling 950 career wins (a record at the time) and 24 makuuchi yusho (the third-highest haul in history). He also topped the banzuke for an unprecedented 63 basho. Kitanoumi himself would have preferred that last record to read '59 basho,' as he wished to retire after his final zensho yusho triumph in May 1984. However, Kyokai executives persuaded him to stay active until January 1985, so that he could perform the first yokozuna dohyo-iri at the grand opening of the Ryogoku Kokugikan. Kitanoumi obliged, but retired after losing his first three encounters, thus never winning a match in the current home of sumo.

Of course, Kitanoumi's legacy was not only the product of the bouts he won, but of the emotions he aroused. Above all, his strength symbolized a Japan proud of itself and proud of its economy, which had bounced back from wartime decimation to become the envy of the world in just 30 years. At times, he was too strong for the general public's liking, and generated incredible amounts of support for certain underdogs whom he faced. At no time was this more evident than in September 1975, when he was defeated in a yusho-playoff for the second time in four basho by the slender ozeki heart-throb Takanohana. Kitanoumi's capitulation spawned frenetic scenes rarely witnessed in a sumo hall, with so many zabuton thrown that the giant yokozuna claimed he could 'barely see the ceiling.' Such classic matches, including several more with the handsome Wajima, helped make sumo fever contagious to the extent that by 1981, half of Japan was tuning in to see Kitanoumi upended by

another lightweight legend, future yokozuna Chiyonofuji. As his strength faded, Kitanoumi gained sympathisers as well as admirers, and his final yusho in 1984 was seen as a fitting tribute to a man of obscene skill and fierce determination.

It was thus with supreme dignity that the third most prolific yokozuna ever stepped into the role of Rijicho six years ago. His chairmanship began with a honeymoon period which saw Musashimaru blossom in the role of yokozuna, and a sensational return by Takanohana which included a barnstorming defeat of a divisive Mongol named Asashoryu in September 2002. But alas, in retrospect, the match appears a ticking time-bomb, emblematic of the first key problem Kitanoumi faced: the decline of Takanohana, and the

ascendance of Asashoryu, one of the most controversial figures in sumo history. Recent public opinion suggests that the role of the Blue Dragon in Kitanoumi's downfall should not be underestimated.

Kitanoumi Rijicho's honeymoon officially ended on January 19th 2003. On that fateful day, the ailing Takanohana, leader of sumo's popularisation for 14 years, surprisingly succumbed to the (then) little-known Aminishiki and announced his retirement from the ring. Overnight, Japan suddenly found itself bereft of a national hero, and sumo found itself shorn of an invaluable marketing asset who inspired people to queue up early in the morning for emergency tickets. Musashimaru was also in trouble, and failed to complete a single tournament in 2003. In Kyushu that year, the Hawaiian behemoth



*Asashoryu's troubled 2007 hastened Kitanoumi's departure*

also hung up his mawashi, bringing the fairytale of Hawaiian sumo success to an abrupt end. The only person showing adequate form to replace the yokozuna of yore was the feisty Mongolian Asashoryu, who became sumo's first Mongol yokozuna in January 2003. For the next five years, this tempestuous character with a penchant for attracting scandal would assume the role of sumo's highest profile representative. Kitanoumi's headaches understandably began to mount.

Questions over the Rijicho's stewardship first began to surface in 2004, when he bizarrely handed responsibility for sumo's popularisation to Isegahama Oyakata, a man who had endured a trance-like existence since the deaths of his family members in the tragic JAL 123 plane crash of August 1985. Enigmatic Isegahama promptly gave an embarrassing interview to the tabloids in which he lamented the state of modern day sumo and expressed concerns about falling attendances. In being forced to sack him, Kitanoumi was forced to admit to his first major error of judgement.

A second error was arguably made when he called for a tightening of

the kosho public injury system for sumotori. Many fans complained that this would decrease the quality of sumo, as it would encourage wrestlers to battle while injured in a desperate bid to secure their ranks. However, the embarrassment of the resultant U-turn paled into comparison with that of an incident of October 25th 2004, which saw the police called to Kitanoumi's table at a Kinshicho restaurant. No charges were pressed after a waitress complained of harassment, but the affair marked the start of the Rijicho's torried relationship with Kinshicho, which lurks just two kilometres from the Kokugikan. It was, after all, in Kinshicho that the packet of marijuana was discovered in Wakanoho's wallet.

It was in the summer of 2005 that Kitanoumi's luck began to completely run out. The death of Kitanoumi's 1970s rival, Takanohana, spawned a cringeworthy public feud between his two sons: sibling yokozuna pairing Wakanohana and Takanohana. Within days, two legends who had buttressed sumo's image in the eyes of the young were confined to public ridicule as seedy allegations flew back and forth. Kitanoumi not only failed to prevent Takanohana

from making a series of undignified remarks to the press, but made the further mistake of publicly warning him for discussing sumo salary reform on television – a relatively trivial matter compared to the feud. Takanohana's dressing down then set the Rijicho on collision course with Makiko Uchida, the first female representative of the Yokozuna Deliberation Council, who voiced her displeasure to the press. Sumo's high command was beginning to look in disarray.

In January 2007, Kitanoumi took his biggest hit to date when the Shukan Gendai once again alleged that match-fixing had taken place in a number of sumo bouts. The Rijicho showed strength in vowing to vigorously defend his wrestlers against any wrongdoing, but the need to file a lawsuit against the Kodansha Publishing Group provided sumo with much unwanted publicity. The impending court case would hang like a millstone over Kitanoumi's haori for the remainder of his chairmanship.

If ever a turning point came in Kitanoumi's quest to hold onto his job, it came in July 2007, when yokozuna Asashoryu – a resident of cursed Kinshicho! – was caught



*Roho enters the Kokugikan in May 2008*



*Hakurozan during his final Kokugikan basho in May 2008*



*Kitanoumi's tough action on Wakanoho turned into an elephant trap*

on camera playing in a charity football match despite having exempted himself from summer jungyo on medical grounds. Kitanoumi was criticized for his delayed response, and seemed to suspend Asashoryu for two tournaments in a knee-jerk reaction. When the shocked yokozuna refused to train, eat or apologise, Kitanoumi was heavily lambasted for 'going soft' on him, especially when bizarrely stating to the press that: 'Asashoryu is a yokozuna, but first and foremost he is a human being.'

Such a comment appeared to contradict the basic sumo principle that no individual is bigger than the sport, and the resultant failure to enforce Asashoryu's house arrest (after acceding to his demands to be examined by a psychiatrist and flown back to Mongolia) puzzled the Japanese public further. Much of the anger should have been directed at Asashoryu's oyakata and koenkai, who were best placed to resolve the issue, but as the figurehead of sumo in a collectivist culture, the Rijicho's broad shoulders were forced to take the blame. With most Japanese holding a sceptical attitude to mental illness, Kitanoumi was accused – most unfairly – of having bought an Asashoryu 'con.'

Failure to sack Asashoryu meant that Kitanoumi was fair game for the press, who next sought to press him on the issue of Tokitaizan, the young Tokitsukaze-beya novice who died after morning practice in June 2007. When the story first broke, all eyes were upon the conduct of Tokitsukaze oyakata and certain of his deshi, but as the police took longer and longer to press charges, the eyes of despair turned towards Kitanoumi. Having failed to take Asashoryu's scalp, the tabloid media were determined to take Tokitsukaze's, and Kitanoumi found himself under increasing pressure to sack the disgraced stablemaster. Three

months after Tokitaizan's demise, Kitanoumi showed great courage in taking personal responsibility for the tragic incident, and met Japan's Education Minister (his boss) to publicly apologise on behalf of his entire association. By then, though, the public had already passed judgement on his leadership, and the exercise was one of pure damage limitation.

The eventual dismissal of Tokitsukaze, and arrest of Tokitsukaze-beya rikishi, provided Kitanoumi's embattled frame with some much-needed breathing space – but only for so much time. A muttering campaign had certainly begun against him, with Kitanoumi's management skills unfavourably compared to those of other oyakata who had trained up far more sekitori. Failure to deal with another crisis was destined to increase calls for one of these oyakata to replace him – in particular his number two,

his oyakata. But alas, Kitanoumi's tough stance merely laid an elephant trap for himself. Within days, his own rikishi, balding beanpole Hakurozan, would also be accused of using the drug. The Japanese public, most of whom deem oyakata to have parental responsibilities to their deshi, clamoured for Kitanoumi himself to be punished. The beginning of the end was nigh.

The Kokugikan consensus appears to be that had the marijuana accusation not involved his own deshi, Kitanoumi could have survived as Rijicho after an agonising mono-ii. It also seems that had he dismissed Asashoryu, his position would have been even more secure. In contrast, the majority of people outside the Kokugikan clearly feel that the Rijicho should take full responsibility for anything bad that happens inside his organisation – no matter how far



*Kitanoumi's final basho opening address: Nagoya, 13th July 2008*

Musashigawa. Sure enough, that crisis materialised with the discovery of a marijuana packet in Wakanoho's wallet. In line with Japan's zero-tolerance attitude towards drugs, the burly Rijicho wasted little time in firing the Russian novice and disciplining

removed from the event he is, and no matter how solid his record before it.

The precise act that sealed Kitanoumi's fate was that of backing his own deshi (who tested positive for the drug) after having

sacked another stable's deshi (who never tested positive for anything). Allegations of double-standards and favouritism combined with searching questions over stable management skills to trigger a revolt among NSK board members. As had been the case in the ring 24 years before, Kitanoumi felt powerless to

continue. At the board meeting of September 8th 2008, a great yokozuna and long-serving chairman followed the lead of Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda a week earlier, and stepped down from his post. In being banished to the low-profile role of Osaka Basho planning, the formidable man who once

represented the booming Japanese economy of the 1970s now represented the ailing economy of the 21st century. Never had the stock of a sumo superstar fallen quite so hard, quite so quickly. Rarely had the scent of injustice smelt yet stronger than bintzuke oil.