

Tachi-ai: touchy, aye?

by Chris Gould

Musashigawa Rijicho's recent focus on the initial charge in sumo bouts has pleased some, enraged others and perplexed nearly everyone. SFM's Ed, Chris Gould examines the motives behind the new Rijicho's thinking and asks: what is so important about the tachi-ai?

On the eve of the 2008 Aki Basho, new Sumo Association Chairman Musashigawa decided, against all expectation, that the most important issue facing him was the quality of his wrestlers' initial charges. 'We must be thorough on the issue of both hands needing to touch down before a bout,' Musashigawa declared, before criticising several rikishi for executing a *migi-nomi* ('right hand only') jump-off.



New Rijicho Musashigawa called for a drastic tightening-up of tachi-ai

For staunch traditionalists, it was a welcome statement of intent from an old-style Rijicho determined to bring back the 'good old days.' For more liberal-

thinking older fans, the statement was baffling as it came from a man who, 30 years ago, contributed to the worst initial charges seen in sumo history. For the wider public, the Rijicho's words suggested that he was out-of-touch with the real challenges facing a troubled sport.

Pure fight fans – who now appear to outnumber supporters of holistic sumo (*shikiri-naoshi* et al) – were left bemused and grimly disappointed by the results of Musashigawa's edict, which saw *torikumi* repeatedly restarted and build-ups to matches agonisingly prolonged. However, regardless of its results, Musashigawa's clamp down once again highlights the incredible importance that sumo places on its initial charge, and presents a welcome opportunity to understand the principles of this fascinating discipline a little better.

What does it all mean?

The revered status of sumo's *tachi-ai* stems from the skill with which match day sumo is arranged as a spectacle. The minutes preceding a match focus on establishing the presence of two formidable rivals who, through a series of ritualistic processes, gradually move closer to the all-important confrontation. The rivals begin the pre-bout process some 50 metres apart in opposing *hanamichi*, before striding down the diagonal walkways to sit just seven metres apart at ringside. Having stared at each other from seated positions across the *dohyo*, the wrestlers inch yet closer to one another when called to the combat zone. Once on the *dohyo*, the paths of the behemoths continue to converge, with each ritual (*shiko*

in the corners, *chiri-chozu* at the edges of the ring and *shiko* at the starters' lines) narrowing the distance between them. By the time of the *shikiri* 'crouch' at the starters' lines, the combatants are a mere 80 centimetres apart, their lion-like hearts pounding, their bloated faces close enough to study the eyes of the opponent, and detect crucial traces of nervousness or fear.

It is because of this painstaking artistic build-up that the *tachi-ai*, the first thunderous contact of blubbery flush upon blubbery flesh, assumes such importance.



Ama's false-start against Hakuho was one of too many in the Aki basho

The *tachi-ai* is, quite simply, the explosive culmination of all the rituals, glaring matches, tensions and gradual convergence of warrior-like figures. A vast majority of sumotori and their fans believe the *tachi-ai* to be essential to determining the path of a bout.

Tachi-ai literally means 'stand/

rise and meet.' Its faultless execution demands that both a wrestler's fists clearly touch the starter's line before he flies into action. When impeccably performed, tachi-ai is a beautiful emblem of silent communication between two gloriously powerful men. However, for many years, the 'standing or rising' part has been poorly performed, and has thus caused headaches for a number of Rijicho. Musashigawa is obviously the latest Commander in Chief to conclude that the revered concept must be based on revered technique.



Ama demonstrates the importance of the niramai-ai

A short history of tachi-ai

'You see it in their eyes, and you know it's time to go,' is how generations of sumo greats have described the dying moments before bodily impact. There once was a time when the tachi-ai was exclusively left to the wrestlers' discretion. If they were ready for action after one minute, they hurled themselves into each other without further reflection. If they were still unready after 15 minutes, the officials simply left them to take their time. Sumo's chief tachi-ai concern in days of yore was that the initial collision was 100% natural, instigated only at a time of mutual agreement among combatants, and thus adding to the spontaneity of a

sumo bout.

Unfortunately for purists, the need to popularise sumo through the mass media resulted in a time-limit being placed on shikiri-naoshi for upper-division matches (three minutes for juryo and four minutes for makuuchi – with occasional extensions permitted if the day's schedule progressed too quickly). The measure took much of the sting out of tachi-ai, transforming it from a man-made phenomenon into a TV-manufactured 'ready or not, here I come' product.

From henceforth, many wrestlers would be forced into action when psychologically ill-prepared, or forced to wait for build-up time to elapse when they were willing to tussle long before. The authenticity and quality of tachi-ai were thus understandably reduced.

With the magic of the tachi-ai stifled by regulation, wrestlers began to lose respect for it, and instead focussed on gaining the craftiest advantages. In the early 1960s, certain individuals began launching into battle without grounding their fists against their starter's mark, in a bid to reach a dominant standing position while their opponent was still crouching. By the 1970s, far more sumotori had cottoned on to the practice, and fists were rarely below 30 centimetres above the markers before the initial charge. By the early 1980s, the tachi-ai had become laughable, with most wrestlers barely crouching at all before impacting, instead merely running into each other. Interestingly, both former Rijicho Kitanoumi and current Rijicho Mienoumi were active during this era, as were most shimpan currently asked to enforce Musashigawa's stricter rules.

In 1984, the then Rijicho Futagoyama, who – as the former yokozuna Wakanohana I – grew

up in a 1950s environment of impeccable tachi-ai, expressed his disgust at the decline of a treasured institution and desperately sort to restore its credibility. He thus issued a decree which re-stated that both a wrestler's fists had to touch the ground before the jump-off. In 1991, Futagoyama further increased his focus on tachi-ai by introducing fines for rikishi who false-started prior to the tachi-ai although a source in sumo has indicated these fines were never really imposed.



Tachi-ai master Kitazakura looks for another early jump-off

However, the 1980s and 1990s were blessed by Mainoumi, Tomonohana, Masurao, Terao, Chiyonofuji, Kirishima and Kyokudozan, legendary lightweights whose lightning hand speed made it difficult to tell whether they had false-started or not. Thus, during the reign of Tokitsukaze Rijicho (1998 - 2002) was a further rule brought in: that a sumotori's right fist must be grounded as an indicator of intent to begin. Only when the left fist is also grounded can battle commence. The rule has remained intact to this day, and is thus the source of the 'migi-nomi' phenomenon, which Musashigawa's new edict seeks to eradicate.

Teething troubles with Musashigawa's 'thoroughness'

The inevitable problems stemming from Musashigawa's decree took little time to surface, with an extraordinary number of shonichi bouts re-started in September 2008. The end result was surely far below the new Chairman's expectations. On all available evidence, the quality of sumo actually decreased during the last basho, with several sumotori clearly unsettled by increased meddling from officials.

The Musashigawa Doctrine hit a low point on Day Five during the makuuchi contest between battered veteran Wakanosato and lively upstart Goeido. The latter, boasting superior agility and hand speed, beat Wakanosato at the jump-off three times – only to be pulled back on every occasion. The aim of the officials was clearly to make Goeido slow his jump-off in order to achieve harmony with Wakanosato, and inexplicably penalise the fine condition of his young frame. However, Goeido refused to compromise his gung-ho style and at the fourth attempt performed a worse tachi-ai than any of his previous three.

Wakanosato, expecting another re-start, took an age to react, and was easily bundled out of the ring. To the astonishment of the crowd, the victory was allowed to stand. As SFM's basho reviewer saliently noted, officials simply tired of restarting the match, and thus permitted a faulty tachi-ai for the sake of speeding up proceedings. Wakanosato was thus shamefully punished for failing to read the minds of judges who were bored of correcting Goeido.

The Doctrine plummeted to even murkier depths on Nakabi, when Kitazakura – arguably the finest tachi-ai artist currently active – was brutally berated by chief judge Hanaregoma oyakata prior to his contest with Shimotori. Kitazakura

is one of the elite few rikishi who piously worship the original spirit of the initial charge, and seek to divorce the tachi-ai from the constraints of a time-limit. The 36-year-old juryo veteran is a master of the 'jikan mae no tachi-ai (early initial charge),' forever begging his opponent to collide with him long before a judge has signalled 'time

planned meetings.

So, where to next?

At present, Musashigawa Rijicho can appeal to traditionalists by blaming the failure of his tachi-ai edict on the rikishi themselves. He might point out that they have learned bad habits which this rule will hammer out over time. But the



Tachi-ai: The moment where all a wrestler's pent up energy is released

up.' It seemed patently absurd that the best executor of the tachi-ai should have been publicly dressed down more than any other wrestler in the basho. Sure enough, Hanaregoma made the balding juryo giant lose his focus, and Kitazakura crashed to a most-unwanted defeat.

A further problem with the Doctrine was encapsulated by the oft-heard refrain: 'Hanaregoma oyakata kibishii, ne? (Isn't Hanaregoma strict?)' The phrase arose precisely because different chief judges enacted Musashigawa's orders with different degrees of stringency. Instead of asking for a coordinated tachi-ai effort from rikishi in the hanamichi, the new Rijicho might be better advised to ask for a coordinated effort from his shimpan in several carefully-

problem with such an argument is that sumotori seem to perform perfectly adequate tachi-ai in training.

Significantly, these impeccable tachi-ai are exhibited when there are no basho-style tie constraints, with each behemoth catching the mood of the other before settling the affair. It is the tachi-ai of the keikoba that produce the exciting sumo worthy of packing the currently empty seats of sumo arena, and the goal of any regulation should be to ensure the perfect replication of these aggressive tachi-ai during the basho. Thus far, Musashigawa's decree appears incapable of doing this. But as so many gyoji have said when re-setting wrestlers, 'mada mada.....'