

Amateur Angles #17

The Junior Sumo World Championships as a breeding ground of rikishi (I)

by Howard Gilbert

A serendipitous convergence in the past fortnight has prompted me to look at the Junior Sumo World Championships for this instalment of Amateur Angles. News of a new Mongolian recruit to Takanohana-beya (Takanoiwa), the back-to-back juryo yusho by a Mongolian (Shotenro) who not long before had been mired in makushita, and reaching a point in my PhD thesis that considers the moves to help make international amateur sumo grow all aligned to highlight a tournament that will be held for the tenth time later this year.

As someone who likes to think he has a decent handle on the international amateur sumo scene, the emergence of these two Mongolians got me thinking about how little attention I had given to the Junior Sumo World Championships (JSWC). The Junior Sumo World Championships was begun in 1999 and was open to males under 18 years of age.¹ It sought to develop the next generation of sumo athletes, mostly so that the international amateur sumo scene would have greater depth.

Upon a little investigation, I was a little surprised at how many current and recent sekitori got their start after competing in this under-18 grade. The open weight "Class of 2004" springs to mind, as all the medallists have gone on to ozumo. However, a quick head count reveals more than twenty rikishi who have passed through this tournament on their way to the big show. More than half are, or have been, sekitori and all but two (new recruit Takanoiwa

included) have yet to make it to makushita. This is certainly impressive, and adds further weight to the assertion that international amateur sumo is of a quality that would correspond to mid-makushita. I'll look at these rikishi over the next two instalments of this column. Here I focus on half of this group of rikishi, all of whom emerged from the first two tournaments held in 1999 and 2000.

1999

The first tournament was a little peculiar in that each weight class had two Japanese representatives, one on either side of the draw. As such, this tournament has seen a number of its athletes move into ozumo. The middleweight champion was Sugita Yoshiaki, who had been a junior high school yokozuna and then went on to an amateur career at Kinki Daigaku before joining ozumo in May 2004. His shikona is the same as his given name, and although reaching high makushita, he is now in the middle of the division.

Japanese athletes came first and second in the heavyweight division, and the two athletes now sit close to one another on the banzuke. The champion, and older of the two, Shiraishi Nobuhiro went on to Nihon Daigaku where he was runner up in the national College Championships before entering Mihogaseki-beya in March 2004. He now resides at Onoe-beya after the split and we know him as Shirononami. His runner up all those years ago was a 15 year old named Mori Tomoki, who went on to have a stellar

career at Tottori Johoku High School and then Nichidai. He was crowned gakusei yokozuna in 2006 and entered Oitekaze-beya in March of the following year using his makushita tsukedashi status. However, in his first basho he went make-koshi and spent the next year and a half in makushita before becoming a sekitori in Kyushu 2008 under the name Daishoumi.

The open weight division was actually won by Hawaiian Harrington Wa'a, of whom there was some talk at the time that he might be suitable for ozumo. Nothing came of that and he was last seen in the ill-fated World Sumo League a couple of years ago. The runner up, 15 year old Ichihara Takayuki has gone on to achieve almost everything possible in amateur sumo before making the leap to ozumo several years later. Now known as Kiyoseumi, he was the junior high yokozuna in 1999, the high school yokozuna in 2001 while a student at Saitama Sakae High School, in 2002 he went one better and won the open weight division of the Junior Sumo World Championships, and in 2003 he entered Nihon Daigaku. While there he won individual and teams titles, and was the heavyweight champion at the 2004 and 2005 Sumo World Championships. In 2006 he won the sumo competition at the national Athletic Meet, giving him makushita tsukedashi status, before following that up with the amateur yokozuna title later that year. This made him the first person to enter ozumo at makushita 10 since the tsukedashi

eligibility had changed in 2001. He joined Kise-beya in January 2007 and crawled his way to juryo by the end of the year. He had a kachi-koshi in his first basho in makunouchi but then sustained a leg injury in the second basho that caused him to withdraw and drop back down to juryo where he has been since.

Bronze medalist, Isobe Hiroyuki, was a high school yokozuna before heading to Toyo University. He joined ozumo in March 2004 and spent three and a half years working his way from maezumo to juryo, which he entered under the new shikona of Sagatsukasa. The Irumagawa-beya man has recently slipped back into makushita, but with a kachi-koshi is once again knocking on the door to juryo.

2000

The five "Class of 2000" were all foreign athletes and, because the previous year's standouts were all Japanese and went on to university careers, it produced the first JSWC alumni to turn professional. In March 2001 three athletes, Mongolian Shotenro and two Tongans, took the leap into ozumo.

In the past two basho Shotenro has emerged as a new sekitori talent. Given that he has spent seven and a half years bouncing around sandanme and makushita, it is surprising to then to see the Mongolian shoot through juryo with two consecutive yusho in the 2008 Kyushu Basho and the 2009 Hatsu Basho! As he was unknown to me, I did a little investigating and found that under his given name of Nyamasuren Dagdandorj, he had taken third place in the heavyweight division at the 2nd Junior Sumo World Championships in August 2000. He entered ozumo in March 2001 as a 19 year old and was quickly in sandanme by the end of that year. Musashiryu, as he was then, spent the next year working his way through sandanme, and then

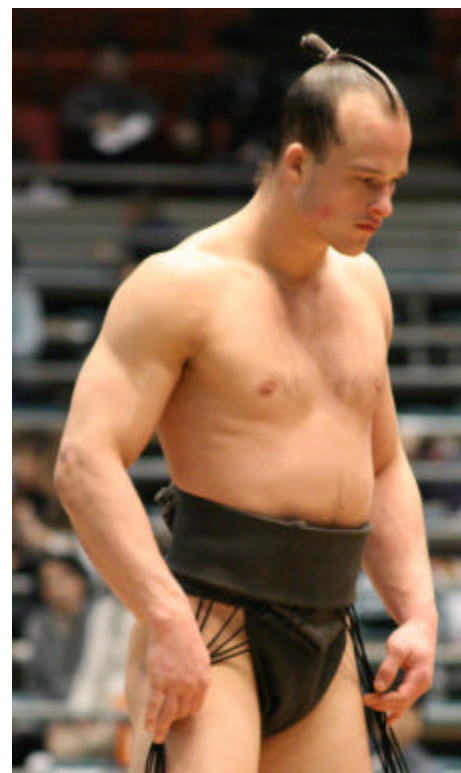
another injury hit year bouncing around between low makushita and sandanme. In 2004 he began what was to be four years of edging his way through makushita, until three consecutive kachi-koshi in high makushita resulted in promotion to juryo for Kyushu Basho 2008.

While the previous two years had mostly been filled with solid performances in makushita, it was certainly not the background to suggest what a performer Shotenro, who had changed his shikona back in May 2007, would be. Now some 30 kilograms heavier and seven and a half years wiser than when he had his debut, Shotenro used all of that weight and experience to reel off nine consecutive wins in Fukuoka. Despite finishing only 3-3 over the last six days, he had done enough to capture his first ever yusho in any division. This earned him a promotion to lead juryo for the first basho of 2009. He was solid, losing only four times (of which one was to maegashira Toyohibiki) and booking a place in the juryo playoff against countryman Hakuba. Shotenro had won their bout on Day 14 and prevailed once again in the playoff, winning with a kimedashi arm lock. So, from a career seemed to have reached a plateau in makushita, Shotenro has breezed through his first two basho as a sekitori and will now test himself in the top flight.

Also joining ozumo as one of the first JSWC alumni was Tevita Taufa. Originally known as Hisanoumi, he had been a lightweight at the Junior Sumo World Championships and just missed out on a bronze medal. He joined Tagonoura-beya having put on about 10 kilograms in the months since his international competition, and began a slow journey through jonidan and sandanme. He has had the least success of all the JSWC alumni, never having made it to makushita. However, he has had

the equivalent of two careers, given that he had a serious injury after his first four and a half years that caused him to slip from sandanme to off the banzuke while he was inactive for a complete year. Returning to maezumo in November 2006, acquiring Japanese citizenship around the same time, and having a name change to Aotsurugi a year ago, he is now back in sandanme and looking to climb into makushita.

Fellow lightweight Pavel Bojar from the Czech Republic captured a bronze medal and joined Naruto-beya in November of 2001. Better known as Takanoyama, he has reached high makushita but has often struggled with his slight but muscular frame. Tipping the scales in the low 90 kilogram range means that he is always likely to be disadvantaged when meeting makushita opponents, despite his skill.



Takanoyama - Carolyn Todd

Two athletes who joined ozumo from this tournament have now retired. The middleweight bronze medal went to Taufa's team-mate Minaminoshima Falevai. His unusual name came from his



Hakurozan - Mark Buckton

father, who had used that shikona during a two year stint at Asahiyama-beya in the mid-1970s. His son joined Musashigawa-beya and carved out a career that oscillated between sandanme and low makushita. In September last year he called it quits, possibly due to his career going nowhere and through rumours that his mother told him to “move up or move out”. The second “retiree” is by far more (in)famous than any of the rest of the JSWC alumni. Batraz Baradzov did not set the tournament alight in the heavyweight division, but is better known for setting something else

alight when based at Kitanoumi-beya. He had originally joined Hatachiyama-beya in February 2002 and is better known as former Hakurozan.

Join me next time to read about the remaining athletes who have moved from the Junior Sumo World championships into professional sumo. They include the famous “Class of 2004” and the new exciting Mongolian prospect Takanoiwa.

ⁱ Since 2008 it has also had under-18 female divisions.