

Rikishi of Old

The 33rd Yokozuna - Musashiyama Takeshi (1909 - 1969)

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Photos by Chris Gould*

The year 2009 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth (and 40th anniversary of the death) of former yokozuna Musashiyama, a man who possessed unsurpassed potential and ability, but was forever unable to fulfil his promise.

Lean but muscular, Musashiyama made such a quick ascent to the summit of Ozumo, he was once nicknamed an "airplane", the fastest travelling medium at the time. He literally rewrote the "youngest ever" records one after the other while climbing up the banzuke. However, after his promotion to yokozuna, he decelerated just as quickly, withdrawing from most basho after just a few days or missing them altogether.



Musashiyama tsuna

As a result, he was never able to make any significant - or even

insignificant - marks in his time as a grand champion. Indeed, Musashiyama is often described as a "tragic yokozuna." Prior to his promotion, he had displayed such dominance over others (with the possible exception of Tamanishiki), but once he became a yokozuna he completed a full basho only once, and even that with a worrying score of seven wins and six losses.

Born Takeshi Yokoyama, Musashiyama grew up in what is now known as Hiyoshi, Kohoku Ward in the city of Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture. Today, Yokohama's Kohoku area is populated with stylish condominiums and expensive houses but the area was mostly rural when Musashiyama was growing up. Around his home peasants were eking out their meager existences and Musashiyama's family was no different – in fact, poorer than most.

When Takeshi turned 12, his father deserted the family to pursue adventures in northern Japan, thereby leaving Takeshi's mother and his four siblings to fend for themselves. Despite being dirt poor and famished, young Takeshi grew up big and strong, and was often mistaken for an adult. He was especially devoted to his mother and wanted to help her in any way he could. To support his family, Takeshi entered local sumo tournaments to earn a living by winning the yusho; often food and a small sum of money. Actually Takeshi became quite well known around his home town, and in 1924 he was asked to represent Kanagawa Prefecture at

sumo and shot-put in a national sports tournament held at Tokyo's Meiji Shrine. Tokyo newspapers were quick to spot the 16-year-old with his impressive physique; already 183 cm tall and weighing 86 kg.



Musashiyama kesho-mawashi

The head of Dewanoumi Beya (the sixth Dewanoumi Oyakata, former komusubi Ryogoku Kajinosuke) dispatched one of his junior oyakata, Takenawa, (former sekiwake Ryogoku Kajinosuke - also known as Ryogoku Yujiro) to persuade Takeshi to join his heya. Takeshi himself wanted to try Ozumo but kept wavering as he knew his family was totally depending on him to provide sustenance. In the end, Takenawa Oyakata convinced Takeshi that the best and only way out of poverty was to become successful in Ozumo. Thus, despite his older brother's vehement protests, did Takeshi become a sumotori.

At the 1926 January Basho, Takeshi made his dohyo debut with the only shikona he would ever have - Musashiyama. He initially wanted to take Tamagawa

(Tama River) as his shikona after a local river near his birthplace, formerly known as the land of Musashi. However, the hey'a's oyakata decided upon Musashiyama as they wanted to use 'yama' (mountain) with the land of his birth following the tradition initiated by Dewanoumi Beya's hugely successful yokozuna, Hitachiyama and Tochigiya.

It was quite evident from the start that Musashiyama was not just another ordinary recruit. He was simply heads and shoulders above all others who joined at the same time. After making his dohyo bow, Musashiyama made his jonokuchi debut in May 1926 (there were only two basho in 1926), his jonidan debut in January 1927, his sandanme debut at the 1927 October Basho, and his maiden makushita appearance in January 1928.

During this ascent, Musashiyama won three yusho, and enjoyed two impressive winning streaks of 18 and 17. Musashiyama then joined the ranks of the sekitori as a 19-year-old, making his juryo debut at the 1929 January Basho. Even facing a rather competitive mix of wily veterans and promising youngsters, Musashiyama displayed no hesitation, winning all his 11 bouts and capturing the yusho in his first basho as a sekitori.

He followed this up by winning nine bouts while losing two on his makuuchi debut. Then, at the following 1930 January Basho, he finished with a 9-2 record once more, winning a jun-yusho. This was followed by promotion to komusubi in May 1930. His climb was considered to be nothing short of miraculous at a time when it was far more common to see a new recruit taking several years to reach jonidan.

After becoming komusubi, Musashiyama had to wait for his turn to climb into the crowded

sekiwake and ozeki spots as there were already seniors, Ozeki Onosato and Sekiwake Tenryu, waiting to make the leap. In his first komusubi basho, Musashiyama barely got kachikoshi, but then, in the following 1930 October Basho he had a 9-2 record, equivalent to the yusho winner. Then, at the 1931 March Basho he was undefeated until his final-day loss to Tamanishiki. Since Tamanishiki had a higher rank, he was awarded the yusho, as at the time there were no kettei-sen used as deciders.

At the 1931, May Basho, Musashiyama made no mistakes when up against his nemesis Tamanishiki and, finishing with a record of ten wins and one loss, won his first yusho. Almost everyone, himself included, assumed it was the first of many. Who then could have guessed that it would turn out to be his last?

Winning the yusho catapulted Musashiyama into the spotlight, where he naturally assumed the role of sumo poster boy. Young and virile, Musashiyama immediately captured the public's imagination, not only with his meteoric rise but also for his

movie star good looks. He sported a muscular build with a chiseled face and powerful limbs. If he could extend his right arm into his opponent's mawashi, the bout was over instantly; Yokozuna Miyagiyama suffering two consecutive losses to Musashiyama when he was still a maegashira rikishi.

By now, Musashiyama was becoming so popular that his pictures sold consistently more than any other rikishi. It was no wonder that many oyakata and the Sumo Kyokai officials were contemplating the next golden age of Ozumo and were ready to milk the cash cow for all it was worth. Along with Musashiyama, other exciting new rikishi were arriving on the scene as well. Tamanishiki (later the 32nd yokozuna), Asashio (later the 34th yokozuna Minanogawa) and Tenryu (later sekiwake) were all vying for the top position and building up interesting rivalries. On the day Musashiyama was due to face another giant, the 1.91 meter tall Minanogawa, fans started lining up hours before the opening of the gates to secure one of a very small number of available tickets. It really was as if the good times would never end for Ozumo. Or,



Dewanoumi Beya

so the executives thought.

But alas, what actually awaited them was the biggest period of turmoil the world of Ozumo would experience in its history, with, possibly Musashiyama as its triggerman. The Shunju-en Incident forever changed Musashiyama's active sumo career as much as the elbow injury that sapped all his power later. A mass exodus of makuuchi and juryo rikishi led by Dewanoumi Beya and Ichimon rikishi forced the Kyokai to abandon their official banzuke for the first time in their history, as insufficient numbers remained to stage a basho!

All active rikishi were forced to live under harsh conditions while Kyokai executives were enjoying the fruits of their labors. This led Sekiwake Tenryu and his Dewanoumi Beya colleagues to demand a series of reforms providing them with more equitable compensation and pensions.

In the early days of January 1932, a group of rikishi led by Tenryu locked themselves in a Chinese restaurant named Shunju-en in the Oimachi area of Tokyo. (See SFM: [The strike of 1933](#)). They

refused to budge until the Kyokai executives accepted their list of demands, while the Kyokai brain trust indicated no intention of seriously dealing with the rebel group. Well-read and intelligent, Tenryu was a born leader. While most believed his intentions to be quite sincere, some suspected his motivation to initiate the protest at this time may have been somewhat self-serving. Tenryu always had a strong feeling of rivalry with Musashiyama. He was more senior and had been a sekiwake prior to the January 1932, Basho while Musashiyama was only a komusubi, a rank below.

Then, on the January 1932 Banzuke, despite having a good enough record, Tenryu was not only denied ozeki promotion but saw Musashiyama skip over him to the second highest rank. It was clear that Tenryu had been upset over the rather arbitrary backroom ways the Kyokai heads operated for so long, and this may have been the last straw.

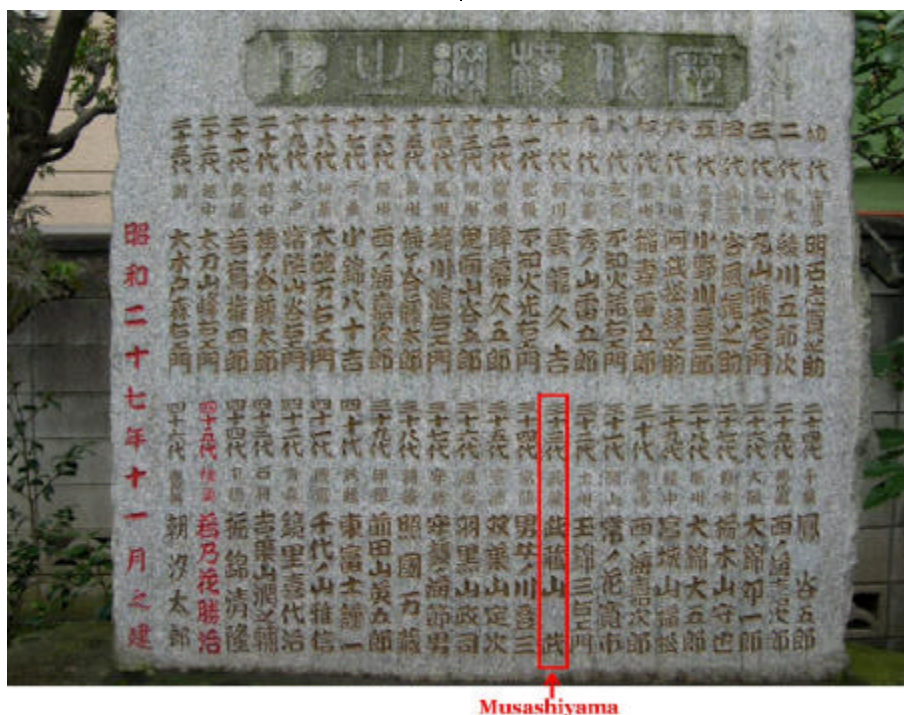
Unlike Tenryu, Musashiyama remained indecisive and even looked aloof. As a Dewanoumi Beya rikishi, he was naturally expected to join his heya mates, especially when the heya's ozeki

Onosato joined the movement taking not only every sekitori belonging to the heya, but also sekitori belonging to other heya such as Minanogawa. But, Musashiyama kept wavering, unwilling to be seen as betraying his heya mates but also unable to go against his shisho (stable master) either.

Eventually, rather than favoring one side over the other, Musashiyama sensationally announced he would go into boxing. His personal supporters and friends were aghast and stopped him right away from committing such a foolhardy act as it was nothing more than a gesture to evade his responsibility. In the end Musashiyama returned to the Kyokai, abandoning his heya mates who left to go to Osaka to start a new sumo tournament after their demands were formally rejected by the Kyokai.

By rejoining the Kyokai quickly, he escaped the penalty other rikishi eventually saw imposed. Failing in their new venture, most rikishi, including Minanogawa returned to the Kyokai within two years. However, those rikishi never really forgave Musashiyama. Since Musashiyama did not really side with the Kyokai initially, and did not endorse them with his full fledged support, he was not really warmly embraced by the Kyokai officials either.

This schism left a permanent scar on his rikishi career even though he did display a brief sign of brilliance after his return. He suffered another major setback when, at the 1931 October Basho he went undefeated until Day Nine when he faced Okitsuumi. In this bout, Okitsuumi dived into Musashiyama with his head first, hitting Musashiyama's right elbow, his all-powerful weapon. The elbow structures were crushed to pieces and the injury looked so serious that some even deemed it career- ending.



Musashiyama immediately withdrew from the basho and tried to rest the injury, but was unable to regain his former prowess as the injury never healed properly. He could still dominate others when the injured elbow did not bother him and at the 1934 May Basho Musashiyama finished with 9-2 record, followed by a record of eight wins, two losses and one draw in January 1935 and another 9-2 record in May.

The House of Yoshida Tsukasa, purveyor of yokozuna licenses at the time, recognized his three above-average records and officially granted the yokozuna license to Musashiyama after the 1935 May Basho. It is rather remarkable that Musashiyama never even had one losing basho prior to his yokozuna promotion. However, while he tried his best to rest and kept seeking a variety of medical treatments at home and even abroad, it was apparent that the injury would never heal completely, and he had to live with it.

In fact it was becoming even more serious, flaring up on his yokozuna debut, forcing him to withdraw with a record of three wins, five losses and three kyujo - his first makekoshi basho ever. He was not able to appear for three consecutive basho following this

withdrawal. As much as he wanted to take a proper rest and focus on the treatment, it was never possible as he was still a popular figure and every jungyo promoter wanted him to at least perform the yokozuna dohyo-iri. Often months went by without being able to go into any type of treatment facility. At the 1938 January Basho, it looked good for a change as he started the basho by winning the first four days. But then, the injury resurfaced again and he had to withdraw with a record of five wins, four losses and four kyujo. Despite his pitiful performances, fans were still with him, but only in sympathy rather than through optimism.

At the 1938 May Basho, Musashiyama finally lasted the full 13 days, struggling all the way to six wins and six losses by Day 12. On senshuraku he was pitted against his old rival Minanogawa who was also on his own downward spiral with six wins and six losses. Once their encounter was called the battle of titans, but by this time the two rikishi, ravaged by years of turmoil and physical abuse, were reduced to fighting for their kachikoshi. On this day Musashiyama somehow managed to down Minanogawa to gain his own kachikoshi and this turned out to be his only kachikoshi basho as yokozuna. It

also became his final victory, as, after two more kyujo basho, at 29, Musashiyama announced his retirement. It was truly a sad ending to what had promised to be a great career. It was not only a personal tragedy for Musashiyama - unable to fulfill all of his potential, but it robbed Ozumo of a golden age that could have lasted well into Futabayama's remarkable yokozuna runs. After the retirement Musashiyama stayed with the Kyokai, becoming Dekiyama Oyakata first and then working as its director as Shiranui Oyakata.

Shortly after World War II, he quietly left the Kyokai and Ozumo altogether. He attempted several ventures after leaving Ozumo, such as selling farm equipment, operating a restaurant and even a Pachinko parlor in Tokyo, but nothing worked out for him. He eventually returned to his home town and settled in the real estate business, managing apartment buildings later in his life. His oldest son Masahiro showed a desire to follow his father's footsteps and joined Dewanoumi Beya to try to become a second generation sekitori but unfortunately was not as gifted as his father, leaving Ozumo with a highest ranking still in makushita.

Musashiyama Takeshi

Born in:	Hiyoshi, Kohoku-ward, Yokohama City, Kanagawa
Born on:	December 5th, 1909
Real name:	Takeshi Yokoyama
Shikona:	Musashiyama
Heya:	Dewanoumi
Dohyo debut:	January Basho, 1926
Juryo debut:	January Basho, 1929
Makuuchi debut:	May Basho, 1929
Final basho:	May Basho, 1939
Highest rank:	Yokozuna
Number of makuuchi basho:	28
Makuuchi record:	174 wins, 69 losses, 2 draws, 71 kyujo
Winning percentage:	71.60%
Number of makuuchi yusho:	1
Height:	185 cm
Weight:	116 kg
Favorite techniques:	Migi-yotsu, yori, shitatenage
Toshiyori name:	Dekiyama, Shiranui (left Ozumo in Nov 1945)
Date of death:	March 15th, 1969