

Rikishi of Old

The 63rd Yokozuna Asahifuji Seiya (1960 ~)

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Photos by Chris Gould

Since the era of Heisei dawned in Japan twenty years ago, seven rikishi have been promoted to the rank of yokozuna. The most recent was Hakuho Sho of Miyagino Beya, which belongs to the Tatsunami Ichimon. The first rikishi promoted to yokozuna in Heisei was another Tatsunami Ichimon rikishi, Asahifuji Seiya of Oshima Beya, the current Isegahama oyakata, the shisho of Ozeki Harumafuji and Aminishiki, his own nephew.

Following the tradition established by Tatsunami yokozuna Haguroyama, Yoshibayama and Futahaguro, Asahifuji adopted the Shiranui style of dohyo-iri – oft considered to be unlucky as it was selected by several sumotori who finished with relatively short yokozuna lifespan. The so-called jinx appears to have been broken by Hakuho, who was coached in the ways of Shiranui by Isegahama oyakata, the last Tatsunami grand champion.

Seiya Asahifuji (real name: Seiya Suginomori) was born in what is now Tsugaru City, Aomori Prefecture, on July 6, 1960. His father was a well-known amateur rikishi active in local tournaments. He even competed as an ozeki locally and worked tirelessly to train and coach regional youth as deputy chairman of the Aomori Prefecture Sumo Association. He even built a dohyo in his backyard so his son, Seiya, could practice sumo from 10 years old.

Seiya gained the skills and techniques to be a competitive amateur rikishi by the time he joined his Junior School's sumo club. In his third year he placed



Oshima Beya

fifth in the prefectural sumo tournament. After graduating from school, he enrolled in Goshogawara Commerce High School, which had a well-known sumo club in Aomori. In his third year, Seiya gained national prominence as he helped the sumo club to earn the top place in its group class at the National Games,

while also placing third in the individual category. Soon after the tournament, sumo club managers from universities and colleges across Japan were calling for him to continue his education in their school. Kinki University was especially eager and, after discussing with his family and others, Seiya decided to

join this university in April 1979. Once arriving there, he quickly showed he was equal to his seniors during club training sessions. In his first year, Seiya won the yusho at Western Japan College Rookie Sumo Tournament and placed second at Western Japan College Sumo Championships.

However coming from a relatively small community and cozy high school atmosphere, he found himself unable to easily get along with others, especially his seniors, during long club training sessions. He never got used to being ordered around and soon stopped going to club practices. He finally quit the club and even the university (eventually acquiring the degree after taking correspondence courses later in life). Coming back to his home he felt more at ease living in a small town helping out his family as a fisherman, utilising his enormous strength.

However, he could not stay away from sumo for long. Despite coming home from a hard day's work, he still loved to go over to his old high school's sumo dojo to work out with the students. This led to Seiya getting scouted by Oshima oyakata (former Ozeki Asahikuni). However Seiya, remembering the bitter experience he went through at Kinki University, felt such strict group life at an Ozumo-beya was not suitable for him and he refused the offer.

Oshima oyakata understood Seiya's hesitation but convinced Seiya that his small heya with no sekitori rikishi entailed no need to worry about traditional senior-junior hierarchy problems. While visiting the heya, Seiya found he was stronger than the heya's head makushita rikishi and realized he could make it professionally. Seiya made his dohyo debut in Mae-zumo at the 1981 January Basho using his real name Suginomori. He quickly showed

he was a rikishi with enormous potential and natural talent, winning all his jonokuchi bouts the following basho and easily winning the yusho.

From the time he entered elementary school, Seiya had lived for sumo and it was evident. Others in his age were no match for his skill and technique. At the 1981 May Basho he changed his shikona to Asahifuji and won six bouts in jonidan. The shikona came from his shisho's active name Asahikuni and then popular rikishi, Chiyonofuji, who became his career- long nemesis. It was selected by Oshima oyakata's wife and also his gyoji, Jonosuke

Kimura. At the following July Basho, Asahifuji won every bout and the sandanme yusho. At the following September Basho he was swiftly promoted to makushita, having spent only one basho in each division. At the 1981 November Basho Asahifuji again won every bout and the makushita yusho.

He achieved his juryo promotion at the 1982 March Basho after recording five wins and two losses in the 1982 January Basho. It only took eight basho for Asahifuji to become a sekitori but once in juryo he faced more opponents equal to his ability, and with more experience. He needed six more



Yokozuna Asahifuji

basho to achieve his promotion to makuuchi in March 2003.

Even before his promotion to the top division, Asahifuji was already known for his naturally flexible lower body and phenomenal sumo sense. Though it was hard to pinpoint exactly what it was about him, one could not help feel a certain lack of dominating fighting spirit. His sumo was often described as rather indecisive and he was criticized for not having a clear-cut style. On the other hand, displaying a hard-to-grasp sumo form was also his strength as his opponents were unable to formulate a clear strategy to defeat him consistently. This ungraspable nature earned him a nickname of "Sea Cucumber from Tsugaru (a regional name for Aomori)", the name he detested. In some ways his nephew and currently active Aminishiki has a similar sumo style.

His fifth makuuchi appearance at the 1983 November Basho saw Asahifuji make it to komusubi, but he soon settled into up-and-down elevator mode, ranking at a higher maegashira rank one basho, followed by a lower rank in the next basho. Even though he won kanto-sho with an 11-4 record at the 1984 November Basho, and shukun-sho at the 1986 November Basho for defeating Chiyonofuji, it became plainly apparent that his lack of weight was the most prohibiting factor behind his lack of progress.

Asahifuji started eating more late snacks and gained more weight, but this regimen turned out to cause more grief as he developed chronic pancreatitis. His performances deteriorated significantly and he needed to spend the next six months focusing solely on the treatment. His shisho Oshima oyakata had also suffered from the same malaise during his active days. Though he was never able to be rid of the condition, he gradually

recovered sufficiently to win three consecutive gino-sho from the 1987 May Basho, achieving double-digit winning records. At the 1987 September Basho he earned a 12-3 record and was promoted to ozeki.

Due to his chronic illness, he was often criticized for not doing enough training sessions, but by this time he had mastered technical skills unsurpassed by any other rikishi. After his ozeki promotion, Asahifuji began to fulfill his true potential by polishing his skills. His moment of glory came on senshuraku at the 1988 January Basho when he was pitted against Chiyonofuji (12-2), one win behind Asahifuji.

Up to this point Asahifuji had won only one of their previous 21 encounters. However this time Asahifuji looked more confident. In the bout Asahifuji was determined to get to his form quickly. After the tachiai, he put his head down and grabbed the right of the mawashi to get into his favourite left-uwate form. Once in this position he was not easily defeated and he squeezed Chiyonofuji to stop his move and win by yorikiri. It was a truly magnificent victory, and a splendid first makuuchi yusho with a 14-1 record.

Showing more and more self-confidence, Asahifuji continued to exhibit his brand of thinking man's sumo after his first yusho. However, throughout his sumo career, one single theme stood out. After achieving a glorious triumph and deserving higher recognition and merit, he kept suffering from almost unspeakable degree of misfortune or fate. He especially suffered at the hands of the Sumo Kyokai and Yokozuna Deliberation Committee members whose conduct can be only characterized as demeaning and spiteful.

Take an example of the following records Asahifuji accomplished in

five consecutive basho:
1988 September Basho: 12-3 (runner-up)
1988 November Basho: 12-3 (runner-up)
1989 January Basho: 14-1 (losing the yusho kettei-sen against Hokutoumi)
1989 March Basho: 13-2 (runner-up)
1989 May Basho: 13-2 (losing the yusho kettei-sen against Hokutoumi)

Asahifuji was second to the eventual yusho winner of all five basho, having the same record as the yusho winner in two of them. Among all yokozuna in the Showa Era (1926 – 1989), not a single one possessed a higher winning percentage over the five basho prior to yokozuna promotion than the 85.3% that Asahifuji recorded here. His detractors kept raising the same old tired arguments: his loss in the yusho kettei-sen left a bad impression; he was not consistently involved in the yusho race throughout; he needed to prove himself again the following basho.

In fact, the actual reason for their hesitation was their over cautious stand not to make the same mistake after they promoted another Tatsunami Ichimon rikishi, Futahaguro, to yokozuna after the 1987 November Basho. Futahaguro, of course, left sumo with no makuuchi yusho and ugly allegations surrounding an altercation with his stablemaster and wife. Despite not being favoured by the Kyokai, Asahifuji kept focusing on his goal in July 1989 July but unfortunately suffered a setback as he had to battle another bout of pancreatitis. He finished with an 8-7 record, barely getting kachikoshi, which delighted his detractors: "We told you he was not yokozuna material."

However Asahifuji never let such comments bother him. Instead, he was convinced that he would be

yokozuna if not for the ailment. He knew he only had to bide his time, and that time came at the 1990 May Basho as he finished with a 14-1 record and won his second yusho. Then at the following 1990 July Basho he remained with one loss as he entered his senshuraku bout once again against his nemesis Chiyonofuji. In this bout Asahifuji displayed well-executed strategic sumo to beat Chiyonofuji to win the second consecutive yusho with a 14-1 record. No-one could deny Asahifuji his ardent life-long wish to become a yokozuna any longer.

Asahifuji displayed his first Shiranui style yokozuna dohyo-iri at the following 1990 September Basho. He faced Hokutoumi having a one-loss record on Senshuraku, the same record as him but again Asahifuji lost and missed the yusho in his yokozuna debut basho.

Then at the 1991 May Basho Asahifuji faced Ozeki Konishiki who was without a loss on the Senshuraku. Asahifuji had one loss but was in physically great condition and equally great spirits. In the Senshuraku regulation bout, Asahifuji squarely went against Konishiki with Moro-zashi and won by "Gaburi" yori. The spectators went wild as the two rikishi finishing with 14-1 on senshuraku went back to their respective dressing rooms to prepare for the yusho kettei sen. By this stage Asahifuji was more experienced and had mastered all

essential sumo techniques. He knew exactly what he wanted to do on the dohyo based on his opponent. He already showed his straightforward move to Konishiki and he was not about to repeat the same sumo technique.

In the kettei-sen Asahifuji stepped to his left and got himself in a "left uwate" position while putting his head into Konishiki. The giant could not generate nor utilize his power with Asahifuji attaching himself so close to him and lost by kata-sukashi. Defeating mammoth Konishiki twice in one day, Asahifuji won his fourth yusho in truly magnificent fashion.

This yusho turned out to be his final triumph, however. As his chronic pancreatitis came back with a vengeance, he could no longer compete well against top tier rikishi. At the 1992 January Basho he lost three straight from day 1 to Komusubi Akebono, Maegashira 5 Akinoshima and Maegashira 1 Wakahanada (later Yokozuna Wakanohana). After facing three young up- and-comers, Asahifuji realized he had indeed reached his physical limit and promptly announced his retirement.

It was only his ninth basho since his yokozuna promotion. He was still 31 years old and some felt he could still go on as he did not appear to be physically broken down. His number of yokozuna basho is the fewest recorded, next to Kotozakura, Mienoumi and

Futahaguro. Among this group all except Mienoumi performed Shiranui style of dohyo-iri.

After his retirement from active sumo, he stayed with the Kyokai taking his shikona of Asashifuji to coach younger rikishi at Oshima Beya. Then he inherited Ajigawa Beya after the oyakata, former Sekiwake Mutsuarashi, decided to leave Ozumo due to health reasons.

During his active yokozuna days he became a target of vicious media reports accusing him of not doing enough training sessions. He always felt it was unjust and unfair. After becoming an oyakata, he was often seen putting on his mawashi and helping young recruits in training sessions. On November 30 2007, the Kyokai approved his transfer to Isegahama Toshiyori from Ajigawa as he acquired the prestigious myoseki and revived the heya taking all of his Heya's rikishi after folding Ajigawa Beya. After the 2008 November Basho his recruit from Mongolia, Harumafuji was promoted to ozeki and his dream of restoring Isegahama Beya to its former glory is looking very promising. It is rather interesting to read media reports of Harumafuji managing more training sessions than all other ozeki, yokozuna and top tier rikishi, a reputation Asahifuji was never blessed to acquire during his active days.

Asahifuji Seiya

Born in:	Town of Kizukuri now Hirosaki City Aomori Prefecture
Born on:	July 6, 1960
Real name:	Seiya Suginomori
Shikona:	Suginomori => Asahifuji
Heya:	Oshima
Dohyo debut:	January Basho, 1981
Juryo debut:	March Basho, 1982
Makuuchi debut:	March Basho, 1983
Final basho:	January Basho, 1992
Highest rank:	Yokozuna
Number of makuuchi basho:	54
Makuuchi record:	487 wins, 277 losses, 35 kyujo
Winning percentage:	63.70%
Number of makuuchi yusho:	4
Awards:	shukun-sho (2), kanto-sho (2), gino-sho (3)
Height:	189 cm
Weight:	143 kg
Favorite techniques:	Migi-yotsu, yori, uwatedashinage
Toshiyori name:	Asahifuji, Ajigawa, Isegahama