

# Heya Peek 2007

## Azumazeki-beya

by Chris Gould

*To commemorate the retirement of Azumazeki Oyakata, Chris Gould releases an unpublished piece from September 2007, designed to provide a final snapshot of a unique era soon to be departed.*

As the sun beat down unrelentingly on Day 12 of the basho, prompting Ryogoku dwellers to hoist their black parasols, I observed Azumazeki Oyakata from the shaded safety of the Kokugikan entrance. I wanted to explore where he lived, where he once housed my fellow countryman Nathan Strange, and where he once trained up sumo's first gaijin yokozuna.

'Hey! You've come again from England!' the grey-haired Hawaiian croaked, recognising me instantly from our previous meeting. 'We've had incredibly strange weather this week. Too hot. Next week will be cooler. More predictable.' At the time, one wondered if the 'incredibly strange' weather had caused the incredibly strange behaviour of recent weeks, which had seen Asashoryu spiral into depression and an incoherent woman invade the sumo dohyo.

'What time do you start?' I asked.

'Around 7am,' came the distinctive deep-throated reply.

'Do I need to bring anything? A present or something?'

The oyakata's bloated face looked amused. 'You don't need to bring anything but yourself,' came the gruff reply.



Thus at 6.45am the following day did I embark upon the long, winding, sun-drenched walk to the backstreets of Higashi-Komagata, the neighbouring district to Ryogoku. Hidden away in these backstreets – perhaps too well hidden – is a small plot of land that is forever Hawaii. Until June 2009, this land belonged to Jesse Kuhaulua, and was developed into Azumazeki-beya two years after his retirement in 1984.

Within seven years, the heya itself would develop into a prestigious sumo entity. Throughout the 1990s, thanks to the towering ambassadorship of Hawaiian yokozuna Akebono, Azumazeki became a sumo powerhouse, attracting high-quality recruits such as Takamisakari and Ushiomaru, and increasing stock value beyond belief. The phrase he had uttered to the media after the opening ceremony: 'I rikishi o sagashitai (I want to search for good wrestlers)' seemed incredibly modest in retrospect.

There was a grandeur about the stable's hallway and genkan which was spectacularly missing from the outer façade and training room. Luxury exhibits such as a giant Takamiyama painting and the first angelic white roped-belt worn by Akebono (well preserved in a glass case) soon gave way to scratched floorboards, dusty lime wallpaper and tattered floor cushions. The only decent cushion was reserved for Azumazeki's dog, a charming seven-year-old poodle, elegant in her slenderness, with pom-pom ears and curly grey fur. Twenty-nine rice bags rested against the wall to the left of the viewing platform, the 30th presumably having triggered the hyperactivity in the nearby kitchen. Overall, with little daylight entering through the wooden bars across the windows, the training room remained a glum orange in the artificial lighting; markedly less bright than Takamiyama's esteemed mawashi of the 1970s.

In public, Azumazeki Oyakata revels in the role of gentle giant, charming thousands with the quiet hoarseness of his voice and bone-crushing handshakes. In the privacy of his heya – even according to the man himself – he balances this affability with a firm belief in 'showing rikishi who is boss.' Recent events involving a yokozuna and a football match confirm that the relationship between oyakata and deshi is foremostly one of survival. The oyakata has to cement his position of authority, especially when in Azumazeki's position of managing top wrestlers weighing 200-kilograms and standing two-metres tall!

Azumazeki did little to enhance his reputation for stringency on the 13th morning of the September 2007 Aki basho. Calmly presiding over the second half of training in a super-sized white t-shirt and black tracksuit bottoms, he seemed more concerned with livening up the spirits of his dozen charges. Unlike most coaches, he preferred to address the wrestler nearest to him rather than shout across the room. His tone was soothing; his comments often amusing.



Smiles overcame the impassive faces of the sumotori engaging with him as they saw the lighter side of conversations centred upon minor injuries, tough opponents from other heya and scores they were expected to achieve in future basho. The strictness was left to a junior oyakata whose sole act was to burst in before Kuhaulua arrived and administer an almighty bamboo-cane thwack to the back of a tall, young deshi, who shall remain anonymous for the sake of his dignity. The coach was sufficiently piqued to threaten further blows, several times motioning to strike the sumotori – who twitchingly retreated from the raised cane as if it were an electric cattle prod. The junior coach clearly loathed the disrespect shown by wrestlers who laughed at the loser of a practice bout, and

thus walloped the one who laughed loudest.

The giant ex-Takamiyama greeted me as he creaked into the training room, much to my nervous embarrassment. I felt wholly unworthy of the welcome; the deshi, who had worked far harder for him than I, had been forced to greet him. I felt doubly uncertain when looking up from my notebook to find Kuhalua's double-chin, puffy cheeks, bushy eyebrows and puppy-dog eyes turned upon me. I at least expected him to talk about keiko, but instead he asked: 'When did you come to Japan?' Although no-one present was authorised to tell him what to talk about, he was surely supposed to concentrate on training rather than chit-chat, wasn't he? How was I to respond?

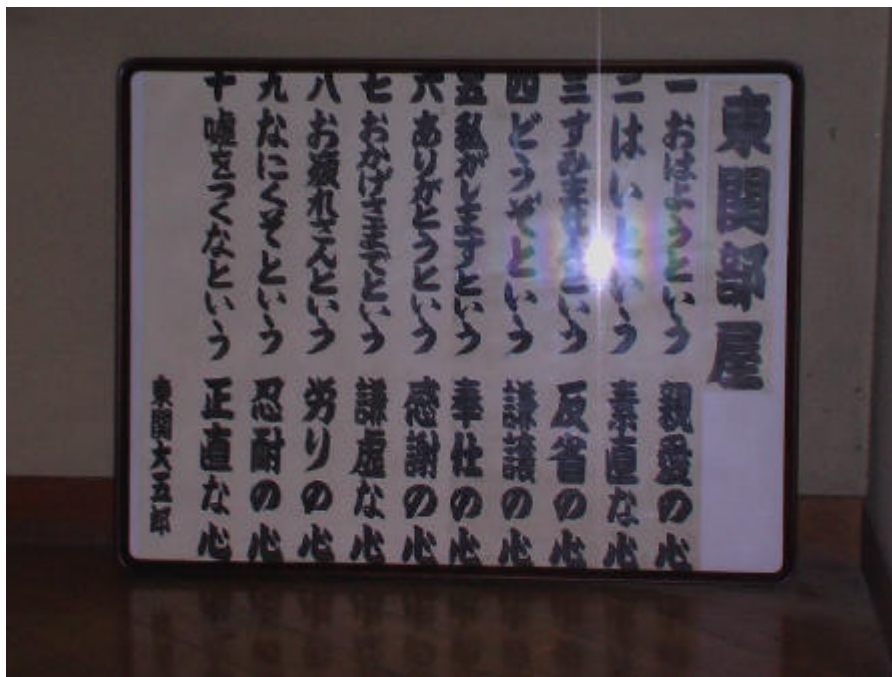
In truth, training sessions during basho are usually more relaxed affairs than those held outside of them. The oyakata further calmed the atmosphere by relentlessly fondling his poodle. 'That rikishi is looking at you,' he teased, indicating a black-belter ranked in sandanme. When the poodle remained sceptical, Azumazeki forcefully turned her head to look at the rikishi in question. The rikishi was one of 12 present, two of whom wore the white belts denoting salaried status.

The senior white-belter was, of course, Takamisakari, the 'Robocop' whose eccentric pre-bout chest-beating antics had made him extremely popular. He was equally eccentric in training that day, restlessly pacing from side-to-side while lower-rankers fought. In record time, he became bored with everything he did. After one shiko stamp, he walked to the teppo pole. After one slap of the pole he marched across to the other side of the room. It was difficult to believe that I was observing Japan's most loved sumotori. Not one member of his huge support base was observing

him with me, even though they were welcome to. Perhaps the hour was too early or the stable too difficult to find? Perhaps no worker or scholar had time to witness morning training? But even with all these constraints, it seemed unimaginable that followers of western sports would ignore opportunities to gain such intimate access to their heroes. Since when did David Beckham last juggle footballs in a shopping centre to a nil audience?



As Takamisakari dithered, training intensified in the morning heat. Thrusts were dealt less sparingly; one resounding blow causing the victim to check for marks on his cheek. Increased competitive spirit saw Azumazeki challenge the gangly wrestler thwacked with bamboo to win eight successive practice bouts. The youngster's failure to do so provoked a most disturbing scene. Having won seven bouts and desperately seeking an eighth victory, the overwhelming pressure triggered a simple mistake which sent him careering into the exit door. The devastated rikishi, so close to pleasing his stablemaster, applied a clenched fist to nearby wooden panels and beat out his frustration. Then he began to sob; quietly at first so that he was mistaken for breathing heavily after a trying bout. Eventually, the sobbing



became uncontrollable. He retired to a corner, sunk to his knees, groped for tissues, blew his nose and dabbed his eyes. Coughs followed. He bent double. Then he rose and cried again for the best part of 10 minutes. This was not just a cry of pain. It was the cry of a broken man crumbling under a variety of demands with which he felt he could not cope. Azumazeki later revealed that one of his charges had just 'lost a family member.' Were the cries those of a man suffering from flashbacks about a parent recently deceased?

Training continued as normal throughout the sobbing episode. Such sights of turmoil are common in the unforgiving world of the sumo-beya. Eleven wrestlers simply ignored their colleague; he would bounce back in due course. Sumotori always did, didn't they?

'You alright?' Azumazeki inquired as the weeping died down.

'Don't worry,' the youngster replied, broken-voiced, before dipping bludgeoned toes back into the training routine.

After Takamisakari and his coach shared a quiet word – finishing with a bow from the former to the

latter – Azumazeki faced me again.

'So, what are you doing next week?'

'I was hoping to visit other heya, but there's no training, right?'

'No training next week,' he answered.

'So what will you guys be doing?'

The imposing Hawaiian narrowed his bulging eyes sceptically. He responded as though I had questioned his wrestlers' right to a holiday. 'Well, sumo is very hard,' he began. 'These guys have given their all for the whole tournament and they get very little time off every year. I'll just be telling them to relax a little; to go see their friends and family. It's a good opportunity for them to go to their home towns. Then they can come back a little fresher for training in a week's time.' He promptly lightened up again, beaming: 'I'll be watching the baseball. I'm a Giants fan.' He referred, of course, to the Yomiuri Giants, Tokyo's major baseball team who were playing some matches that week.

Swivelling his boulder-shaped stomach back towards the practice

ring, Azumazeki ran the rule over Takamisakari. His other poodle, meanwhile, indulged in new levels of lethargy, curling herself around her prize floor cushion, pom-pom ears dusting down ankles. Takamisakari's first 12 days of the basho had yielded as many defeats as wins. His upcoming practice bouts would allow me to assess his fitness from the closest quarters and pinpoint any niggling injuries that might hinder his progress. (He wore a narrow bandage on his right knee and strapping on his shoulder).

Fifteen minutes later, I had no doubt that Takamisakari was a healthy man. He looked infinitely stronger than the juniors around him, winning 16 straight bouts just on the strength of his initial charge. The top wrestlers simply move better than juniors, channelling their energy more effectively and generating more power from their bodies. Weight is not an issue; the 140-kilogram Takamisakari being relatively trim for a sumotori. So long as he hit upwards from a low charge and muscled his way underneath an opponent's defences, he would keep rank come Day 15. Throughout his mock matches, background noise was dominated by aggressive sneezing (I hoped not from the kitchen).

Towards the session's end I noticed that the bamboo mark was still visible on the Chinese rikishi's wide back. Cuts, bruises and scars are a given by-product of sumo but one winces at the pain behind some of them. In fact, this rikishi was comparatively lucky. A physically stronger oyakata would not have needed to threaten him with a second blow; the first one would have sufficed. It was interesting that the incident happened in Azumazeki's absence. Were Azumazeki present, he would have dictatorial power over use of bamboo sticks and the junior coach would only batter rikishi having first asked for



permission.

At 8.20am, the wrestlers wound down their 90-minute workout. The poodle anticipated impending departure of the room and sat up with ears pricked. Takamisakari took charge of warming down, leading colleagues through thigh stretches and matawari. He then asked his attendant Taikomaru, a rare completely-bald sumotori, to formally close proceedings by reciting some short sentences beginning with the verb 'to do.' The congregation repeated each one back to him. Unable to understand the mini sermon, I leaned over to the oyakata.

'These are like the 10 commandments,' he announced. 'They're behind you. Against the wall.'

He motioned his obscenely-large head towards a framed A3 sheet of white paper with 10 vertical lines of thick, black sumo-ji upon it.

'And these are about doing one's best and showing respect?'

Azumazeki heaved deeply. 'Yes, they are about respecting your elders, behaving well, working hard. It's all elementary school stuff.'

'And they are recited by the deshi after every practice?'

'Every asa-geiko, yes. The last one is the most difficult for me to get them to accept.'

He casually tossed his head leftwards and called to a rikishi clutching a straw broom with thick fingers. The 10th commandment was briefly discussed.

'You see,' Azumazeki returned his attention to me, 'it's all about... even if your opponent does something bad, you don't lose your temper. You carry on in the proper way.'

The rikishi who refused to retaliate upon being cuffed by his Chinese opponent doubtless valued this maxim; the Chinese guy presumably valued it less.

'Twenty-two years ago,' (the coach held up two crooked fingers), 'I got a professional writer to do that sheet there. He did an impressive job.'

We paused briefly; he for silent reflection, I for committing his sentences to memory.

'The portrait in the hall,' was how I restarted conversation. 'This is your yusho-winner's portrait, yes?'

He nodded.

'July 1972?'

The Takamiyama on canvas shone with the handsomeness of youth.

'Thirty-five years ago,' came Azumazeki's wistful response, his visage showing, in more ways than one, just how long ago that seemed. Back then his feat was legendary; a world first. No gaijin had officially won a makuuchi yusho until Takamiyama triumphed in Nagoya. Ironically, the feat sowed the seeds of its own

destruction, inspiring Hawaiians who would never otherwise have joined sumo to eclipse it. The proof of one such eclipse lay three metres behind us in the genkan.

'The tsuna in the genkan,' I began. 'That's Akebono's, right?'

'It was the first one ever made for him,' recalled the proud stablemaster of Akebono Taro, the first gaijin to be crowned yokozuna.

'So January 1993, then?'

It was a regulation question, requiring simple confirmation. But try as Takamiyama might to cast his mind into the mists of time, he could not remember the date. The tsuna forever outlives – and ultimately outshines – the achievements of the powerful body encircled by it.

By now the poodle had warmed to me completely, swooning at my knee in the hope I would caress her underbelly. Conversation inevitably turned to her exceptional demeanour (gained from obedience classes) and dog-walking in general.

'Normally I take her out at 5.35am



during a basho,' Azumazeki explained. 'But sometimes, if I'm up early, I take her at 5am.'

The mere thought of a 5am start, once common for Takamiyama, jaded the 63-year-old Azumazeki, who yawned to underline the point. The lights above our heads went out, casting the practice room into a grey cave-like entity reliant on strips of sunlight passing through barred windows. With a polite nod in my direction, the venerable oyakata relieved the cushion of his enormous weight and creaked himself into a standing position. The ever-loyal poodle followed suit. 'Thankyou oyakata,' I said as his massive figure trudged stiffly towards the front exit and faded into the

general dimness.

Soon the lights will go out on the current Azumazeki era, a legendary expanse of time producing the first gaijin yusho-winner, stablemaster and yokozuna, and the first fully-trained sumo poodle. When I visited, Azumazeki Oyakata was 21 months short of mandatory NSK retirement. Whichever Japanese inherits the Azumazeki reigns, they cannot possibly shape sumo as profoundly as Jesse Kuhaulua. (Ushiomaru, ganbare.)

As Azumazeki tapped my shoulder, prayed that I took care and entered the lift to the living quarters with poodle in tow, I was overwhelmed by the sensation of a

golden – or, more accurately, luminous-orange – era nearing its end. I could sense it in an atmosphere almost entirely defined by past glories. The sliding elevator door obscured Azumazeki's weather-beaten face. He began his ascent upwards to a quieter place. Downstairs pots continued to clang, wrestlers continued to chat and scurry, while strands of hair were grasped and styled. For them, life went on. Days were long, training was tough. It was impossible to think in terms of months let alone years. But for me, outside of the sumo bubble, time was short. Azumazeki-beya was about to change forever, and I was relieved to have got there before that monumental change took place.