

SFM Election Special

Takanohana Controversially Joins Sumo's Board

by Chris Gould

There is an oft-used proverb, especially relevant to Japan, which reads: 'the nail which sticks out must be hammered down.' What the proverb neglects to mention is that some walls are – for want of politer words – so shaky, that no amount of hammering will keep the nail in.

Before Asashoryu's retirement, the hot sumo question was: 'What do you think of the troubles surrounding Takanohana?' Amid the sound and fury of the past few weeks, it is easy to forget that the Sumo Association held its biennial Board Selection Process on February 1st.

Over the past 150 years, jostling for positions on the Board, the ruling body of Japan's national sport, has often led to bitter rivalries and disputes and even the odd breakaway sumo movement. In recent decades, the selection process has generally calmed down dramatically, with each of the five ichimon (groups of stables) comfortably ushering in two candidates to make up the 10 Board (Rijikai) Members. One of the famous moments of discord occurred in 1998 when a rare contested board election led to current NHK announcer, Kitanofuji Katsuaki, esteemed coach of two yokozuna including Chiyonofuji, quitting the sumo association in disgust.

In January 2010, another esteemed ex-yokozuna, Takanohana Koji, holder of the highest ever sumo retirement payoff (\$1.3m to Asashoryu's \$1.2m), forced the first contested

elections to the Sumo Board in eight years. Long renowned as one of sumo's more reformist minds, the 37-year-old (amazingly, one month younger than Kaio) clearly raised alarm bells among the traditionalist sumo elite when announcing his intention to stand for election. Six oyakata, mostly his former stablemates from when he was an active wrestler, agreed to support his candidacy from within the Nishinoseki Ichimon.

The Nishonoseki elders were appalled and, in true Japanese fashion, decided to expurgate the details that didn't fit their comfortable image. On January 8th, almost seven years to the day since he was forced out of active sumo, Takanohana Oyakata was forced out of the Nishonoseki Ichimon, along with the six colleagues who vowed to support him.

What followed next was even more dramatic. In attempting to run for office from outside his own ichimon, Takanohana somehow needed to pick up votes from other ichimon. Such was his distinguished record as a wrestler, and his promise to deliver new ideas which many oyakata believe sumo needs, that Takanohana was always destined to gather admirers. The question was: could they escape from the clutches of the powerful ichimon loyalty customs which bound them?

On February 1st, the oyakata, leading gyoji and wrestlers' representatives gathered at the Ryogoku Kokugikan prior to the important vote, hand-shook and

back-slapped, and looked candidates in the eye to pledge votes for them. Ichimon ring leaders made rough calculations and concluded that, so long as everybody voted to plan, Takanohana could not possibly find a way through. But, for the first time in eight years, the ballot was to be secret and defections nigh-impossible to detect without a confession. Safe in this knowledge, two closet supporters of Takanohana defied their own ichimon and voted for him.

When the results were announced, Takanohana was revealed to have captured 10 votes and thus earned a place on sumo's most influential body at an unusually young age. Dumped from the Board was Takanohana's Oshima Oyakata, ironically viewed as one of sumo's key modernisers in the late-80s and 1990s. The Takanohana ichimon, incensed at having lost a key position of power, immediately held an internal meeting-cum-inquiry.

One member, Ajigawa oyakata and former sekitori Kobo, confessed to having voted for Takanohana in the unshaken belief that he would fight for the reform that sumo seems to need. The irony was that the Ajigawa name was formerly held by Oshima's prize protégé, ex-yokozuna Asahifuji, now Isegahama-oyakata. Few could have imagined how that stock name would come back to bite Oshima. The present Ajigawa offered his resignation after several fellow oyakata called for his expulsion from the Group, but after coming under widespread



Takanohana Oyakata

pressure, the ichimon opted not to accept his offer to quit.

So what next for Takanohana?

Over the past five years, he has suggested that wrestlers' salaries and holidays be reformed, as well as advocated better support for retired wrestlers. He also seems to have some ideas for ticketing reform, and is determined to make sumo appeal to young schoolchildren.

The problem is, as ever, that he is only one member of a 10-man Board. And let us not forget that having upset the Nishonoseki elite, he now has even more enemies than before. In the 1990s, of course, he became the subject of much oyakata resentment after the merger of his Fujishima stable with Futagoyama-beya.

The stables were run by

Takanohana's father and uncle respectively, and with wrestlers from the same heya forbidden to face each other in competition, many oyataka were incensed at the number of decent fighters Takanohana avoided facing in tournaments – seemingly due to a helping hand from his family. One such disgruntled oyakata was Musashigawa, the current Rijicho, who was training Musashimaru at the time and had to watch his protégé face every single one of the Futagoyama stars.

Takanohana knows that achieving his goals is not impossible, but it will take a sumo-sized amount of charm, convincing and the quality of everlasting importance: tact.