

Rikishi of Old

The 60th Yokozuna Futahaguro Koji (1963~)

by Joe Kuroda

“There was no other way left, you know,” the 68th Yokozuna Asashoryu Akinori quietly told an NHK-TV reporter after he made his retirement announcement at the Ryogoku Kokugikan on February 4, 2010.

Yokozuna Asashoryu and his shisho Takasago oyakata hardly expected their day would end this way. They were asked to attend a Sumo Kyokai Board of Directors meeting to explain an incident in which Asashoryu was alleged to have hit a manager of night club in a drunken stupor. Asashoryu came in to the meeting with a letter of settlement avoiding a possible criminal or civil charge stemming from the incident. Both Asashoryu and Takasago oyakata knew it would not be easy to convince the directors but they felt rather confident that at the worst case scenario, they would face a suspension and pay cut. They clearly misjudged the anger expressed by the majority of directors over the series of troubles in which Asashoryu had been involved over the years.

Two external directors (one a former director of Japan's national policy agency and another a prominent lawyer) strongly felt the Kyokai must not reinforce the general public's impression of their not dealing effectively with one of their own over misconduct. Hours prior to the directors meeting, the Kyokai Chairman Musashigawa had received a letter from the Yokozuna Deliberation Committee advising Yokozuna Asashoryu to resign from his post. If there was any chance left for

Asashoryu to stay with the Kyokai, it would be in a sincere admission and apology to the directors.

Instead Asashoryu started his defense by stating he had not used any violence at all. Some of the directors became so upset that they were prepared to dismiss him from yokozuna right away. It meant not only that Asashoryu would lose his separation pay but that the Kyokai also would sever their tie with him completely and not permit him even to have a proper retirement ceremony at the Kokugikan – an opportunity to earn well over 100 million yen in gift money.

Some directors were still sympathetic to Asashoryu. Three oyakata in particular, Tomozuna, former Yokozuna Kitanoumi and Chiyonofuji asked for a break in the meeting to try and convince Asashoryu to tender his resignation voluntarily so that at least Asashoryu could retire from his rank preserving all his retirement rights and privileges.

Finally sensing the gravity of situation, Asashoryu did the only sensible thing left for him to do, and retired gracefully. He and his shisho came back to the meeting room minutes later to announce his retirement from Ozumo. As if on cue, TV stations started to report the breaking news of his retirement within 60 minutes. Extra editions of newspapers were distributed within hours of his announcement.

Not coincidentally, most news articles were accompanied by a

report of two other yokozuna who were also forced to resign from their rank, the 39th Yokozuna Maedayama (subject of another Rikishi of Old in SFM) and the 60th Yokozuna Futahaguro.

Maedayama was forced to leave Ozumo after a picture of him attending an exhibition baseball game was published in newspapers while he was on kyujo (similar to Asashoryu's soccer incident). What made it worse was that it was during a basho and without any knowledge of Kyokai executives or even anyone from his heya. Many people simply felt betrayed. Despite Maedayama's pledge to come back by the Senshuraku, the Kyokai denied his request. Maedayama realized he has lost the support he needed to remain in Ozumo and announced his retirement grudgingly.

However Maedayama's indiscretion may be considered to be quite insignificant when compared against Futahaguro's. As with Asashoryu, he was accused of committing violence against another person but in his case he was not even given a forum to explain the circumstance nor asked to offer his defense. His shisho at the time, the former Tatsunami oyakata (Sekiwake Annenyama Osamu), forwarded Futahaguro's resignation papers to the Kyokai without his knowledge or consent!

There are still quite a few unanswered questions surrounding the circumstances behind his leaving Ozumo, as Futahaguro himself has not talked

about the incident fully. The Japanese media, which kept up incessant attacks on him throughout the ordeal, has kept repeating the same story ever since even though new facts reveal Futahaguro may have been indeed a victim rather than the perpetrator of violence.

While Futahaguro showed extraordinary potential from the very beginning, he was never able to harness all his talent in order to be a truly successful rikishi. Because his great ability was quite apparent to everyone, he was never coached well and subsequently his lack of discipline became legendary. Throughout his active career he was known to be lazy, always finding one excuse or another to skip most hard training sessions. Whenever senior rikishi put him through rigorous workouts, he used to complain to his shisho who simply scolded the senior rikishi of wasting away his great talent instead. He was pampered and treated so specially by the heya officials and oyakata that he became ridiculously spoiled. He was effectively allowed to come and go as he liked and to do only whatever he felt like doing.

His shikona of Futahaguro was only adopted after his yokozuna promotion. Even on the promotion certificate, he was known as Kitao – his real name. Kitao himself wanted to use his real name all through his career as the 54th Yokozuna Wajima did, but his oyakata and officials at Tatsunami Beya wanted a yokozuna shikona befitting their heya's distinguished history. The shikona is an amalgamation of two great yokozuna shikona from Tatsunami Beya, the 35th Yokozuna Futabayama and 36th Yokozuna Haguroyama.

As often happens with a shikona change in the late stage of a rikishi's career, the name Futahaguro turned out to be

unpopular among sumo fans, and many kept calling him by his previous shikona of Kitao. The shikona even became the subject of a sumo cartoon by Yaku Mitsuru, being ascribed the fake meaning of hating training twice ("Futa" means two in Japanese) more than the heya's other "haguro", Wakahaguro, notorious for his distaste for training sessions.

Like Futahaguro, Ozeki Wakahaguro showed huge potential when he joined Tatsunami Beya. He made quick progression and reached Makuuchi by the age of 20, a rare achievement in his era. But he never listened to his elders' coaching and became more and more obnoxious after his promotion to ozeki. His personality traits had a lot to do with him finishing his career as ozeki even though he was blessed physically to be a yokozuna. He never changed his ways, always preferring to take an easy route even after leaving his sumo career. After leaving the Kyokai he was imprisoned for attempting to smuggle guns into Japan.

Futahaguro Koji (real name: Koji Kitao) started sumo training when he was in his fifth grade when his elementary school built a training dohyo in the grounds. There was no question he loved sumo in those days as he used to get up early and run 5 km every day in addition to his regular training. It was obvious that he had sumo ability which surpassed that of anyone else as he started to win prizes at every local tournament he entered.

After he graduated from the school, he continued with sumo training despite his junior high school not having a sumo club. He was never well known nationally but the reputation of a young phenomenon from Mie Prefecture soon became known in Ozumo circles. Through a supporter of

Tatsunami, Koji was invited to train at Tatsunami Beya during his third year of junior high school. At a tournament held at the Kyokai's sumo clinic, he beat all his opponents easily. By this time he was also training at a local high school and even there he could not find anyone equal to his ability.

As Koji's father was an executive at a major construction company, he wanted his son to at least attend high school. But Koji's mind was made up. He joined Ozumo on the condition that if he could not make it to sekitori in five years, he would return home to Mie. (Kitao did indeed make it to Juryo in five years).

Often taller rikishi lack leg strength and find it hard to face shorter foes, but Kitao was unlike any other tall rikishi. He could get himself low and, using his hidari uwate deftly, easily fended off short opponents. It was obvious from the beginning that he had extraordinary sumo skills and sumo sense. Combined with his imperious physique, he was able to beat all comers effortlessly. Ever since starting his sumo training in fifth grade, he realized he could beat just about any opponent without going through any specific training, and his attitude did not change even after he joined professional sumo.

Raised spoiled and having a generally lazy nature, it became all too rare to find him working out on a training dohyo or doing any type of practice at his heya. His shisho thought he could beat anyone and was betting the heya's whole future solely on Kitao. Naturally the shisho let Kitao do whatever he wanted and told others not to be too harsh on him. Meanwhile Kitao knew he could be welcomed back home anytime to work for his father. Whenever he was about to face a tough training session, he had a favorite saying: "Well thanks for everything but I am going home now".

Actually his escape from the heya was legendary. He injured his back and went kyujo at the 1982 March Basho. During an official kyujo, the rikishi was expected either to be treated at a hospital or rest at his heya, but Kitao promptly went back home knowing he could be well pampered. But this time even his father was aghast at his son's blatant misconduct and kicked him out of his own home, sending him back to Tatsunami.

With Kitao's father on his side, on this occasion the shisho had no trouble consigning Kitao to one year's toilet-cleaning duty. This may have been a seed of destruction that eventually ruptured the relationship between Kitao and his shisho, as Kitao never appeared to forgive him for what he considered to be a shabby treatment of a star pupil. In his mind he always felt he was special, heads and shoulders above all the others.

A year later at his highest rank yet, Makushita East 3 at the 1983 July Basho, Kitao was injured again and decided to head over to a hot spring resort in Izu. He started thinking he could do without the pain and hurt integral to sumo, and made up his mind to quit the sport for good. Hearing this, Tatsunami oyakata got himself over to the spa immediately and promised just about everything and anything for him to stay in Ozumo. Kitao was ever so close to sekitori-hood and the oyakata could certainly not let him go now. Kitao knew himself that if he was promoted to juryo he would be able to live outside the heya and become more independent. He agreed to stay on not because of a re-discovered passion but because he could be outside the supervision of other senior rikishi and the shisho.

It became abundantly clear that Kitao never learned the meaning of "hungry spirit", "patience" or

"willpower" even if they hit him squarely on the face repeatedly. Despite hardly experiencing any strenuous workout, with his god given physique, talent and uncanny ability Kitao was promoted to juryo at the 1984 Hatsu Basho. Within the same year he was ranked in makuuchi.

After finishing with a 12-3 record and the jun-yusho at the 1985 November Basho while fighting from the sekiwake east position, Kitao was promoted to ozeki. He earned promotion ahead of two other prominent rikishi born in the same year as him, Konishiki and Hokutoumi, both known for doing exhaustive training sessions at the time. Further seeds of ill-feeling were sewn.

By this time Kitao was a towering figure, standing of 199 cm and weighing 152 kilograms, still having no problem at all with less gifted opponents. However, he was beginning to experience tough times against those with similar ability who were doing harder training sessions. Kitao's career record against Hokutoumi was 9 wins and 8 losses, while against Konishiki he was even at 9-9. The amazing thing is that even without much training, he was still competitive against future yokozuna and ozeki.

At the time of his ozeki promotion, Kitao's shisho and Tatsunami Beya officials urged him to take over the shikona of Haguroyama, hoping to revive the proud traditions of Tatsunami Beya. But Kitao was having none of it, making it clear that he was his own man – unwilling to do anyone else's bidding.

At the 1986 May Basho, Ozeki East Kitao remained undefeated on the 10th day and was the sole leader in the yusho race. He was to face one sekiwake (Hoshi, later Yokozuna Hokutoumi), three ozeki and one yokozuna in the remaining five days. He was confident of winning

his first yusho as he felt he could beat all of his remaining opponents, with the possible exception of Chiyonofuji. However he ended up losing to Ozeki Wakashimazu and Onokuni (later a yokozuna), and then lost to Chiyonofuji on the senshuraku. His 12-3 record was still good enough for his third Jun-Yusho. One wall named Chiyonofuji still stood firmly in front of him. However if there was anyone who could stop Chiyonofuji eventually, most agreed it would be Kitao. This was still the golden age of Chiyonofuji, as he won his 16th yusho with a 13-2 record in this tournament.

Kitao was determined to win the yusho at the following July Basho, especially as his rival Hoshi had already won his first yusho in March 1986. Kitao was confident it was his turn to win as he felt he was coming into the basho in peak condition. As expected he had no trouble mauling his opponents in the first 10 days, even setting aside ozeki Wakashimazu with relative ease. Then he faced his nemesis Hoshi. If there was one rikishi Hoshi did not want to lose against, it was Kitao. Hoshi displayed more intensity than usual and defeated Kitao on Day 11.

Kitao, with a 13-1 record, was again to face Chiyonofuji (14-0) on the Senshuraku. To win his first yusho, Kitao take Chiyonofuji into a yusho kettei-sen and win it. He remembered well his defeat of the previous basho and was determined not to fall into the same trap. He put his hand firmly into Chiyonofuji's mawashi and threw him out with an uwatenage. He finally stood equal to the great yokozuna Chiyonofuji, 14-1, on the Senshuraku. Unfortunately Kitao appeared to have exhausted all his mental and physical energy in the regular bout and could not repeat his performance in the kettei-sen, losing to Chiyonofuji by yorikiri. Chiyonofuji won his 17th yusho and Kitao recorded yet another

yusho equivalent record.

The Kyokai directors were almost euphoric getting an opportunity to summon the Yokozuna Deliberation Committee to discuss Kitao's yokozuna promotion after the basho. They were having a jam on the second rank with Hoshi in line to be the sixth ozeki following a 12-3 record at Sekiwake East. Along with Kitao they already had Onokuni, Asashio, Wakashimazu and Hokutenyu in ozeki rank but they only had one yokozuna, Chiyonofuji. They desperately needed to bring in another yokozuna to curb Chiyonofuji's dominance and usher in a new age.

The Kyokai directors knew they were facing a tough hurdle and huge challenge in getting Kitao acclaimed by the Yokozuna Committee, as Kitao came in with rather unpleasant baggage filled with past indiscretions. The committee members were clearly divided in their assessment of Kitao. One member openly questioned if Kitao was really qualified to be promoted as he had never even won one yusho in the past, adding he was also too immature to be promoted to the rank. The committee was clearly heading into a quagmire. The Kyokai executives decided to step in and made it clear that they wanted a new, young yokozuna at the age of 22 years old to rival Chiyonofuji.

Kitao represented a vital youthful sumo, often displaying overpowering and overwhelming sumo moves, fully utilizing his two-metre and 155 kg physique.

Kitao fit the bill so well, contrasting the compact and tightly disciplined sumo of Chiyonofuji.

With his yokozuna promotion, Kitao was finally persuaded to adopt the new shikona, Futahaguro. The name was proposed by then chairman of the Kyokai, Kasugano oyakata, the 44th Yokozuna Tochinishiki. This time Kitao could not easily decline the name change when it came from a former yokozuna and chairman of the Kyokai. Following the tradition of Tatsunami Beya Yokozuna Haguroyama, Futahaguro adopted the Shiranui style of yokozuna dohyo iri, even though it was known at the time it could bring a short yokozuna life. Former Yokozuna Kotozakura (former Sadogatake oyakata) coached the Shiranui style to Futahaguro.

The following 1986 September Basho may have been an omen of things to come as Futahaguro could not even make it past Day 7, withdrawing from the basho after suffering his third loss, losing to Asahifuji on Day 6, Konishiki getting the fusen win on Day 7. Three basho earlier, it was Kitao who injured Konishiki's right knee so severely that the Hawaiian giant never really recovered from it. Konishiki was attempting a Tsuru when Kitao used Saba-ori and both of them tumbled down after Konishiki carried both their weights on one leg. The sound of Konishiki's bone breaking reverberated loudly through the arena.

Tragically, this injury may never have happened if only a mono-ii

had resulted in a different call. The injury came in a tori-naoshi which many felt should never have been awarded. The first match fought by Kitao and Konishiki that day was awarded to Konishiki by the gyoji, and many in the arena agreed with the decision. However, the judges saw fit to call a re-match, and the rest is history. The injury became a career ending one for Konishiki, and destroyed his chances of yokozuna status. Amazingly, a year later at the 1987 Haru Basho, Konishiki himself inflicted a career-ending knee injury on fellow ozeki Hokutenyu who was never able to properly recover.

Coming back from his mid-basho withdrawal, Futahaguro displayed his yokozuna-like sumo at the 1986 November Basho, only losing to two ozeki and a fellow yokozuna, and finishing with a strong 12-3 record. It was as if he was trying to show he belonged, he had changed his ways and proving his mettle as yokozuna.

Unfortunately it all turned out to be a facade. After becoming yokozuna, he became even more dismissive of others, and his truancy rates in training sessions behavior remained as before. With his yokozuna promotion, he appeared to develop delusions of grandeur, often treating others despicably. By this time he was well beyond a pampered spoiled child but a fully grown adult with erratic and vicious behavioral streaks. His tsukebito received the brunt of all this and it was inevitable that one of these flashpoints would turn into a major incident... to be revealed next time.