

Rikishi of Old

The 62nd Yokozuna Onokuni Yasushi (1962 ~) Part 2

by Joe Kuroda

In our last instalment, Onokuni – a gentle 200-kilogram giant from Hokkaido – was on top of the sumo world having gained promotion to yokozuna.

Unfortunately, that was about as rosy as it got. Read on to find out how he made history for the wrong reasons, but also cemented his reputation as one of the most decent sumo men you can find.

In his yokozuna debut basho in November 1987, Onokuni appeared more nervous and tense, losing three straight bouts from day 2. He barely got an 8-7 kachikoshi, thus earning the worst new yokozuna debut record over 15 full days. Realizing he had to lose weight to restore mobility, Onokuni decided to go on an extreme diet prior to the 1988 January Basho. While he was able to stop his weight from ballooning, he was so weak from severe dieting that he could not generate power and he was finally forced to go kyujo after suffering his five defeats by day 10.

In the following 1988 March Basho, talk mainly centred on whether Onokuni could be forced into retirement in only his third yokozuna basho, especially after he lost to his nemesis Itai on day 3 – his second straight defeat. However he learned the painful lesson from the previous basho well and he recovered well enough to win the next 11 bouts, standing at 12-2 loss on day 14. On the Senshuraku, he again faced his rival Hokutoumi, who stood at 13-1. Onokuni had finally been lucky this basho as the other Kokonoe Yokozuna, Chiyonofuji, was kyujo

– meaning that only pug-faced Hokutoumi stood between him and the yusho.

Looking back at the records from the two previous basho, it was apparent that Hokutoumi had an edge as he had won 11 and 13 bouts, while Onokuni only managed to get 8-7 and 5-5-kyujo. But Onokuni possessed more motivation and determination this basho to show sumo fans and pundits that he was indeed worthy of being a yokozuna. After downing Hokutoumi on the Senshuraku, he went on to beat Hokutoumi again by tsukiotoshi in the resultant playoff to earn his second makuuchi yusho.

Onokuni was worn down by going against the two Kokonoe yokozuna consistently, and unending battles with bulge via one diet or another. Despite the obstacles Onokuni did not do badly, but he could never overcome Chiyonofuji and was always one step shy of a yusho. His rival Hokutoumi competed in the same era and it is no coincidence that, through never having to face Chiyonofuji himself, he won a total of eight yusho compared to Onokuni's two. It's also true that Onokuni often lost to lower ranked rikishi as if mysteriously losing concentration. His career record of 8-8 against the highly average Itai is especially hard to fathom. While he was far from the only rikishi with a losing record against Chiyonofuji, as a yokozuna he would have been expected to do much better than his career record of 9-23.

However we should not forget his

most memorable bout against Chiyonofuji on the Senshuraku at the 1988 November Basho when he stopped Chiyonofuji from winning his third successive 15-0 Yusho and 54th consecutive bout. With the passing of Showa Emperor Hirohito in the early new year of 1989, the magnificent bout indeed became the last of the 63-year Showa Era.

It was reported that Onokuni was told by his shisho the night before: "It's obvious that at a level you are competing, there isn't a chance of you winning at all, so the least you can do tomorrow is give him some moments to get scared." The shisho must have known how to inflame the normally docile Onokuni, who was so fired up that the next morning he showed up at the heya's training dohyo two hours earlier than usual and started thinking up a strategy to beat Chiyonofuji. Onokuni must have been incredibly psyched up that day as after the bout, his normally polite and quietly spoken nature gave way to the terse comment: "Don't you forget I am a yokozuna too!"

When reminded of Onokuni's story at a later date, Chiyonofuji could only laugh at himself. "You know I had no idea (about his extensive preparation). The night before I was thinking I could beat him easily just like always. No problem – that's the easiest thing in the world to do. I went out drinking that night and I think I went several spots with this special TV camera crew following me around. Why didn't you ever tell me about all [his preparation]"

before? I really hate you guys,” Chiyonofuji said with a wry smile.

In the first three basho of the new Heisei Era (1989-present), Onokuni compiled reasonable records, winning two jun-yusho. However on day 4 of the 1989 July Basho, he suffered a near career-ending left knee injury (similar to what Yokozuna Takanohana suffered in his later years). He attempted a heroic comeback in the following September Basho but it was obvious his mobility was severely curtailed despite coming into the basho at a lighter weight after more dieting. The tell-tale signs were there as early as Day 2 when, having won his opening day encounter, he was easily forced out by balding maegashira Daijuyama – a man of moderate skill at best. A crushing by Tochinowaka followed on Day 3 before he was unceremoniously flung down by little Akinoshima on Day 4. From 1-3, he raced to 5-3 but was pegged back again by Konishiki on Day 9 in a titanic battle of the bulge. This defeat was particularly worrying as Konishiki was having a disastrous basho himself, relentlessly hindered by chronic knee problems. Onokuni bravely battled back to 7-4, but found Hokutenyu too tough on day 12 and then blew his best chance for kachi-koshi with a lame defeat to Sekiwake Kotogaume on Day 13. Sumo purists feared the worst. With Onokuni at 7-6, and having the two Kokonoe Yokozuna to face, sumo's first yokozuna make-koshi over 15 days was looming larger than Onokuni's girth.

Day 14 was simple torture for Onokuni. Chiyonofuji almost mocked his nervous state, hammering into him with a false start before easily muscling him over the rope. 7-7. Disaster was on the cards. Legend has it that Onokuni was asked by several figures to drop out of the tournament, or to pre-arrange his result with Hokutoumi on the final day, but for a man notoriously

renowned for his determination never to fix a match, this was never an option. He went into day 15 with only a half-genuine belief that he could beat arch-rival Hokutoumi as security. The Kokugikan reached fever pitch as the two men crouched for the tachi-ai, and the tension was incredible as flesh finally met flesh. Onokuni got a good start and tried to thrust Hokutoumi back but the smaller man was well wised-up to this tactic and deftly side-stepped, knowing that Onokuni had insufficient mobility to retaliate. Getting behind the giant yokozuna, Hokutoumi dived in low and bulldozed him back towards the rope to screams of disbelief from a frenzied Kokugikan. Onokuni was over the rope in no time, looking at his feet in pure shame. The last professional bout in Tokyo of the 1980s had ended with him becoming the inaugural make-koshi yokozuna.

Realizing he had tarnished the rank of yokozuna, he tendered his retirement papers to the Kyokai office. However, the then Kyokai chairman Futagoyama oyakata (the first Wakanohana) told Onokuni to remain active and asked him to recharge his career, as if starting his sumo life all over again.

Onokuni withdrew from the 1989 November Basho and returned in January 1990. He somehow managed to get kachi-koshi on Day 11 but lost the last four bouts, to finish with a precarious 8-7. He was able to save his reputation by at least gaining kachi-koshi but he suffered another near career ending injury when Chiyonofuji hooked his right leg on his left ankle to force him out. Onokuni ended up tearing his left ankle ligaments and suffering bone fractures. For Onokuni, this injury turned out to be the beginning of the end, rendering him kyujo for four basho and hopelessly unable to regain his strength.

Full of anxiety and with his career on the line, Onokuni gingerly made his comeback at the 1990 November Basho. Despite the long absence he did as well as he could have possibly wished for by winning 10 bouts and losing 5, even beating yusho winner Chiyonofuji on the Senshuraku. (Chiyonofuji actually tried to lift 200-kilogram Onokuni over the ropes, but lost his balance and was crushed by the giant's sheer weight). Onokuni followed up his comeback with another 10-5 record at the 1991 January Basho. It was as if Onokuni was finally rid of his injury concerns and prove to all his worth as yokozuna. At the following March Basho, both Onokuni and Hokutoumi left day 13 with one loss record, heading into their encounter on day 14, both standing at 12-1 record. This time Hokutoumi outsmarted his old rival and beat Onokuni on day 14, appearing to crush Onokuni's yusho hope for the basho.

On the Senshuraku Onokuni had an easier opponent, Ozeki Kirishima, who was suffering quite badly with a 4 win-10 loss record, while Hokutoumi needed to go against Asahifuji who had easily outsmarted young Takahanada on day 13 and overwhelmed hapless Kirishima on day 14. Onokuni still had a good chance of overcoming the one-loss difference but his mind appeared to have lost focus chronically and he ended up losing to Kirishima on the Senshuraku.

What Onokuni not aware of was that Hokutoumi had an injury sustained from his bout against Onokuni during their encounter on day 14. Hokutoumi could not offer any resistance in his bout against Asahifuji on the Senshuraku due to the injury, and finished the basho with 13 wins and 2 losses – and a sitting duck for any playoff that might have materialised. Alas, as Onokuni lost his Senshuraku bout, Hokutoumi was able to win the yusho despite losing on the

Senshuraku. Hokutoumi said later that if there was the yusho kettei-sen against Onokuni, he was not even certain that he could have entered the ring. Onokuni blew it big time.

Onokuni withdrew from the following 1991 May Basho due to high fever resulting from skin infections and thus made the 1991 July Basho another comeback basho. He faced the new Ozumo sensation: the Hanada brothers, Wakahanada and Takahanada, for the first and last time in his career and was able to defeat them after being blown away by a young Akebono in makuuchi by Tsuppari on day 1. He also felt the wind of the new generation blowing strongly after he was easily pushed out by Komusubi Akinoshima, finishing day 8 with a shaky 4-4 record. No doubt it was a painful and miserable loss for yokozuna to lose so one sided. Onokuni said he realized it was not a form of sumo that would lead him even into the next day, and announced his retirement immediately.

His ineffably polite personality has shone even after his retirement. When he retired, he was to inherit Shibatayama Toshiyori Myoseki, but the then Shibatayama oyakata (former Komusubi Miyanishiki) was only 10 months away from retirement from the Kyokai, and Onokuni felt he could not force him into premature retirement. Onokuni instead went with one generation Toshiyori given to former yokozuna for a term of five years. Then, after Miyanishiki's retirement, he let former Komusubi Wakajishi of Futagoyama Beya use it till 1993.

In his Retirement Sumo Tournament held in May 1992, there was no active yokozuna to

serve the roles of tsuyu-harai or tachi-mochi for the yokozuna dohyo-iri ceremony as Hokutoumi retired just prior to the May Basho. Instead he asked two active Futagoyama Beya rikishi to accompany him for the ceremony, Takamisugi as tsuyu-harai and Misugisato performing tachi-mochi duty.

The luck factor Onokuni experienced prior to his yokozuna promotion appeared to turn against him once he became yokozuna. Ever after his promotion, he had nothing but uphill battles and struggled throughout his yokozuna career. He was only able to win one yusho after becoming yokozuna, but this yusho was a result of his kettei-sen win against Hokutoumi and at the time the kettei-sen win was not recognized for banzuke ranking. Onokuni thus ended his career never having attained the most prestigious East Yokozuna position on banzuke.

After inheriting Shibatayama Toshiyori Myoseki, he founded his own heya in June 1999. As if to underscore his own philosophy of playing to a different beat, Shibatayama oyakata located his heya in Takaido, Suginami-ward in Tokyo, away from hustle and bustle of Ryogoku, though not too far away from his old Hanakago Beya and current Futagoyama Beya. He raised one recruit Daiyubu to Juryo but so far he has not been as successful in bringing up sekitori rikishi. He is unique in many ways, for instance, naming one of his recruits as Hamadayama, one station east of Takaido station on the Inokashira line. Even as an oyakata, his personality shines through brightly. Unlike other former yokozuna he is shunning the

spotlight and has never shown any interest or ambition in running for a directorship or any other high profile position within the Kyokai.

As his oyakata life continues, we can watch with great interest how his career progresses. However the fact remains that there are still many older sumo fans viewing his active career with a certain sense of regret as they believe his yokozuna reign could have been a far more rewarding one. He was only 28 years and 9 month old when he left his active career behind. Excepting those who left the rank by death or leaving the Kyokai altogether, only Tochinoumi retired younger at 28 years and 3 month old.

Unlike some of the yokozuna we may know, Onokuni was truly a gentle giant with unsurpassed dignity. His name has never been tarnished or associated with yaocho allegations, and he has come across as sincere to all those who have come to know him. He is a spiritual man but he never appeared to possess the spirit of real combat which he truly needed. One must admire the fact that he did reach the ultimate rank in Ozumo without stepping onto others and trashing his critics with his straight forward honest character. He was known as an adorable and cuddly giant panda in his active days. It is rather befitting – if a sad reflection on his fighting career – that he is now affectionately known as the Sweets Oyakata of Ozumo. With all the turmoil and controversies the world of Ozumo is going through right now, it is a comfort and a relief to know that we do still have a decent oyakata overseeing the development of the next generation of rikishi.



Onokuni Yasushi

Born in:	Memuro-cho, Kaseki-gun, Hokkaido
Born on:	October 9, 1962
Real name:	Yasushi Aoki
Shikona:	Aoki, Onokuni
Heya:	Hanaregoma
Dohyo debut:	1978 March
Juryo debut:	1982 March
Makuuchi debut:	1983 March
Final basho:	1991 July
Highest rank:	Yokozuna
Number of makuuchi basho:	51
Makuuchi record:	426 wins, 228 losses, 105 kyujo
Winning percentage:	65.10%
Number of makuuchi yusho:	2
Nickname:	Panda
Height:	189 cms
Weight:	211 kgs
Greatest match:	v Chiyonofuji, Senshuraku, November 1988
Toshiyori name:	Onokuni, Shibatayama