

Kokugi Konnections

Chiyonofuji's X-factor 20 years on

by Chris Gould

Had the previous basho been anything like a normal tournament, it would have escaped the attention of few that it marked exactly 20 years since the great Chiyonofuji retired from sumo. The departure of the man affectionately known as “Wolf” was one of the biggest blows ever dealt to Japan’s national sport, marking as it did the end of a Golden Decade in which audiences were enthralled by his sheer speed, muscular ability and outrageous agility. To most, it seems impossible to believe that two decades have passed since his impeccably toned physique was last witnessed on the dohyo. To others, against the backdrop of the recent match-fixing scandal, the glory days of Chiyonofuji seem light years away.

He featured in dozens of memorable matches on the way to notching over 1000 wins and 31 top-division tournament championships, but it does seem that the bout for which he is most remembered is one that he lost. That match occurred on the first day of the May 1991 tournament in Ryogoku, when he was paired against a handsome new maegashira 1 named Takahanada.

Under the guise of future grand champion Takanohana II, Hanada would dominate sumo throughout the 1990s, earning more popularity – helped in no small part by his brother Wakanohana – than perhaps any sumotori before or since. But on that warm early-

summer’s day in 1991, Takahanada was best known as the son of Chiyonofuji’s childhood hero and erstwhile mentor: Takanohana I.

For the best part of three years, sumo’s faithful had been following the meteoric rise of Takahanada with unusual interest, wondering if he would emulate his father as the Prince of Sumo – and possibly one-day mix it with the greatest. On this fine day, they got their wish: the experienced teacher against the excellent pupil, two sumo generations battling frantically to either keep or wrest power from the other. What followed was arguably the most iconic match in sumo history. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hkOueU_HC4

There are two things to note. First, look how Takahanada’s game plan is all about keeping Chiyonofuji’s feared left hand from his belt. Second, in a desperate attempt to secure the left-hand belt-grip, Chiyonofuji deftly tries to flip Takahanada forward, a gamble which fails to pay off as it presents the youngster with the perfect opportunity to latch onto the belt himself. And as for the crowd... present-day fans can only dream of being involved in such a Kokugikan atmosphere. It was simply magical.

So, what was it about this guy that makes the Japanese fawn over him even to this day? Without doubt it was his muscularity, as can be seen on numerous occasions in the

following sequence, which chronicles his 53 consecutive wins between May and November 1988. This was a post-war record until Hakuho broke it last year. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYO5i-IWDDk>

Maybe it was his Wolf-like glare during the pre-match warm-up, as evidenced in this stare down of Asahifuji in Kyushu in November 1988 (about 1:30), the last of his famous 53 consecutive wins. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPxoh6Z6HGK>

The piece also includes an interesting analysis of Chiyonofuji’s techniques, led by his esteemed rival Takanosato, who amazingly retired with an 18-13 record against him. Perhaps it was the sheer heights to which his legs were raised during the ring entering ceremony, and the sheer intensity in his eyes which magnetized viewers towards him. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWv68Yp0CVA>

Perhaps it was the way he ritually rolled over bigger opponents, often humiliating them, playing the classic role of the underdog who overcomes the odds through sheer grit and determination – and a touch of flair. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWMLsxbwhQY>

That Chiyonofuji had X-factor was undeniable. That he is still wistfully reflected upon today is undeniable too.