

Hawaii Basho Report

Text and photos by Lon Howard

I nearly cancelled my trip to the Honolulu Basho due to the health issues which caused me to reluctantly resign the Editor post with SFM, but much of it was paid for, so I gave it a go, and for better or worse, here's the scoop – which by now isn't a scoop since everyone knows that Asashoryu won the first day, Hakuho the second day, and Hakuho took the playoff match. That's kind of how I had it all worked out myself... fancy that!

For this event I was working with an oafish photographer breaking in a new hotshot camera, who had never learned how to use the bare bones one he already had. So with most of that output unusable, here's another 'unique' perspective in which to view the proceedings... (cough cough).

About viewing the proceedings: There weren't many of us who boarded a plane to do that, so most of the folks in Honolulu's Neil Blaisdell Center were Hawaii residents. And to put it delicately, they were in short supply – between 4,000-5,000. Even with low expectations, there had to be disappointment there. The second day was slightly better attended, but the cynic in me suspects that was due to – after the first day – people getting wind that they could buy a cheap seat and then move down to watch from a better one. It certainly lacked the buzz and pizzazz I found at Vancouver 1998 and Las Vegas 2005, but then Vegas is always a hard act to follow, and Vancouver grows ever fuzzier for me.

The exhibition was the standard fare I saw at those other two places. Before the, well ... 'actual'

matches, there was a very slick demonstration of techniques and kimarite, followed by about 15 minutes of comic sumo featuring a really big guy (Kainowaka) and a really skinny guy (never found out who). It's amazing what timing and technique these two 'comedians' had when you consider they had to put the routine together while taking care of their day job – trying to attain sekitori status. It was a hilarious riot and would've been a hit on the Carol Burnett Show (dating myself here...). There was also the rikishi vs. the kids segment, and of course, the kids won most of those encounters.

Since Vancouver and Vegas had made me a grizzled foreign exhibition veteran, I hardly paid attention to the torikumi because it is sooo staged, it's comic sumo in itself. One has to remember, this is just an exhibition, and along with the PR, the rikishi's first order of business is not to get hurt. That's why each one has to know what the other is going to do. For a diversion, I started making notes

of who was taped up and who wasn't – the idea being that the only ones taped for this production would be the ones who are really hurting, and also because the NSK probably doesn't want the rikishi to look like they came straight from an ER.

Asashoryu wore no supports on either arm, just right ankle tape – but then I didn't see anyone with tape or other wrappings above the mawashi, so I'm suspecting that was mandated. Kotooshu was absent the right knee brace he had put back on in the late stages of the Natsu basho. Chiyotai kai had ankle tape, just like Asashoryu.

Tamanoshima and Takamisakari both wore those thin strips of tape just below the knee that are normal for them; but Asasekiryu, Aminishiki, Wakanosato, Dejima and Toyonoshima all displayed their full compliment of heavy-duty leg, knee and ankle wraps. It's possible I missed someone because I was trying to feel like I was on vacation, but I don't remember anyone else wearing



Sumo comes to Honolulu

tape or supports.

Everyone enjoys sumo in their own way, and you've probably already gathered that for me, the joy of attending a foreign koen is not about the torikumi. I also don't collect paraphernalia either, so what's in it for fans like me? It's just that, living outside Japan, running into a truly knowledgeable sumo fan is purely an accident that occurs maybe once every five years. Also, I speak little Japanese and don't get to Japan very often so something like this is the only time I get close enough to a rikishi to actually speak to one or get a nice picture.

That's why this time I hit the jackpot. Soon after arriving in Honolulu I found the rikishi were staying in the Hawaiian Prince Hotel and so I went over the next morning – the first day of the basho – and started hanging around. After having a few sightings I ran into Lynn Matsuoka, still a stranger to me. She and her husband were with Manfred, a German sumo fan who recognized me from my staff photo here in the magazine (right away I thought to myself I've got to buy

this guy something before I leave this place). Soon I was in sumo heaven, hearing directly from other certified sumo fanatics who can tell me more than a thing or two. This was fantastic – the reason I came. Not only that, but it turns out that Manfred had been to Naruto-beya so many times that he and Wakanosato have a personal comfort zone. Then I discovered that he and Waka-zeki and Lynn were having dinner that night after the sumo with a local physician and his wife, and the next thing I know, I'm getting invited to join them! Being a totally unconnected sumo fan from the Taiho era, I thought I could hear the word "Cha-ching" echoing somewhere in the ether.

Unfortunately, my own pictures taken at the table for six at the Indigo Restaurant late that night didn't capture the essence of Wakanosato the man – it's like that sometimes when you know you're about to be photographed, I guess. I expected him to be reserved, which he was, but he was also very playful, in a mannered and non-threatening way. He knew just a few English words but liked to sprinkle them in, and

especially liked to add, "It's a joke!" after telling us something. He didn't act like a guest of honor at all, and wanted everyone to be comfortable. He smiled and teased a lot, which isn't evident in the photographs here.

He was clearly comfortable around Lynn and Manfred, and spoke freely in Japanese with them. After one feeble try with Japanese myself, I knew I needed Lynn to translate if I was going to engage with him. After making sure it was ok, I started asking some questions. I didn't want it to seem like an interview since we were there for fun, but I'm sure it must have seemed like one to him.

Anyway, here's how he answered some of my questions: He said his injured knee is ok (I had seen it heavily wrapped earlier that day). He said that now that he is a mature sekitori, he doesn't eat nearly as much as he did in the beginning when he was trying to put on the weight. Having heard that though, I was then surprised to hear that he still continues the weight-gaining tactic of napping after meals that is taught to beginners. I can only guess that this eventually just becomes part of a rikishi's lifestyle, at least as long as they are active.

Continuing in the diet and training vein, he said it's true that today's rikishi eat more and more western foods, rich in starch and fat. He said it's also true that they are aware it's not good for them but they do it nonetheless. He offered that eating this kind of food has greater negative impact on Japanese than on westerners' bodies are accustomed to it. He added that he himself does not follow this trend – then either he or someone else added that his wife does some work in the nutrition field.

As for training, he said he does lift weights.



"This is all I get? You're joking, right?"



Nishikido Oyakata without his shimpan suit

At one point, I must have appeared reluctant to keep interrupting the dinner party with questions, and Wakanosato smiled and assured me he didn't mind, and then leaned forward and said, "Next question??"

He was ready and waiting, and Lynn said I should ask something now. This not being a pre-arranged interview, I had nothing, and I blurted out in cloddish much-too-direct Japanese what I had really been wondering: "Tsu

sanyaku ni kaerimasu ka?" or roughly, "When will you return to sanyaku?" Not a great move in such an amiable setting because I had taken myself off the hot seat by putting him on one, also with no time to consider a proper response.

So the poor man interrupted his blank expression with a broad Garfield-the-Cat grin and exclaimed with his finger pointed skyward, "Tomorrow!" Then right after that he said, "No...yesterday!"

Not my greatest moment, but nevertheless I thought I had inadvertently gained some insight I hadn't sought. That's for another time but for now I'll just say I was very impressed with Wakanosato's grace in accommodating a lunkhead.

As one of the pictures show, one can look manly with an umbrella drink, and it did come as a small shock when after just two of them, Wakanosato asked to make sure that they left out the alcohol from then on.

I couldn't help thinking that this hospitable and tolerant man would have made a sensational yokozuna, from a public relations point of view. After the affair ended, he and Manfred joined me in a taxi back to our respective hotels. It will remain one of the major experiences of my life, for which I can't thank Lynn and Manfred enough.

I can't think of much else to add that's relevant. I'll just say that if you attend one of these foreign sumo exhibitions in the future, come at least three days before it begins so you can start tracking the rikishi down, and don't schedule your departure until at least two days after it ends. You'll really need the wind down time. Also, a camera that will take decent pictures indoors without a flash wouldn't hurt either. Now, let's start saving those pennies and yen for L.A. next year! Aloha.