

# The Curse of the Shiranui

by Chris Gould

*Many sumo lovers have heard of the 'Curse of the Shiranui,' but what is the evidence behind the claim? Chris Gould looks at the unlucky yokozuna who have been reduced to a Shiranui shambles.*

## Daimon-san's doctrine

It was a blogger named Daimon-san who first alerted me to the daunting challenge faced by Hakuho. His brow moistened with either apprehension or hard labour at the Kokugikan stalls, he alerted me to a page on his blog which contained the yokozuna family tree. In Daimon-san's 60-year-old eyes, there was only one conclusion to be drawn: if promoted to yokozuna, his beloved Hakuho would perform the cursed Shiranui-gata.

## The Shiranui-gata

As shown by Daimon-san's chart, a yokozuna's adoption of the Unryu or Shiranui ring entering ceremonies depends largely on the Ichimon (group of stables, literally: 'one gate') to which he belongs. Statistically speaking, grand champions hailing from the Dewanoumi, Nishonoseki-Hanakago, Tokitsukaze and Takasago Ichimon are most likely to practice the Unryu-gata, although Kotozakura of Sadogatake-beya proved a notable exception. Alternatively, yokozuna bred in the Tatsunami-Isegahama Ichimon are hotly-tipped to perform the Shiranui-gata. The 63rd yokozuna, Asahifuji Seiya, once stated that the ceremony was 'particularly liked by our group of stables as it symbolizes aggression.' It is certainly the case that when the Shiranui yokozuna inches himself upwards following an emphatic leg-stamp, the stance adopted is considerably more

provocative than its Unryu counterpart.

It appears the very term 'Shiranui' was jinxed from the moment of its inception. In the 1890s, a history

gata' was conceived in error, rather like many of the yokozuna who chose to perform it. Until the 1960s, the Shiranui-gata had no reason to be associated with a yokozuna's poor



*Tsuna in the Unryu (left) and Shiranui (right) styles (Mark Buckton)*

of yokozuna compiled by the former yokozuna Nishinoumi Kajiro attributed one entrance ceremony to the 10th grand champion Unryu Hisakichi, and another to the 11th grand champion Shiranui Mitsuemon. In the late-20th century, however, a re-examination of the evidence revealed that credit for the Shiranui ceremony had been mal-apportioned; it was instead 'founded' by Unryu. The present-day form of the Shiranui-gata (with the wrestler sporting a double-looped white belt and outstretching his arms after stamping) was attributed to the 22nd yokozuna, Tachiyama Minemon. Hence the 'Shiranui-

performance. Tachiyama was a fine grand champion who won eleven tournament titles, while the ensuing Shiranui-ist, Haguroyama Masaji, managed to hold sumo's highest rank for twelve years (1941-53). Only afterwards did the Shiranui rot set in.

## Miyagino Misery

As readers of the previous SFM issue will have discovered, the curse of the Shiranui first struck the [43rd yokozuna, Yoshibayama Junnosuke](#). Although Yoshibayama was a popular figure admired for the sheer strength symbolised by his mountainous stomach, he departed sumo with the unwanted statistic of never

having won a yusho while at sumo's highest rank.



*Yoshibayama (Mark Buckton)*

### **Toils of Tamanoumi**

Yoshibayama was let off lightly compared with the 51st yokozuna, a promising wrestler by the name of Tamanoumi Masahiro. Tamanoumi was only 22 when he earned his ozeki promotion in 1966, and although his progress stalled a little thereafter, he propelled himself to yokozuna status in 1970. However, just as he was approaching the peak of his career, he died of an embolism in October 1971, the direct result – it was said – of sumo's harsh ranking system which encouraged wrestlers to fight even when seriously injured and consequently neglect vital hospital treatment.

### **Kotozakura's Capitulation**

The fate of the third Shiranui victim was thankfully not so serious. Indeed, [Kotozakura Masakatsu](#), the 53rd yokozuna has only recently passed away at the age of 66 having not long ago retired as the head coach at Sadogatake-beya. However, Kotozakura was promoted to yokozuna at the late age of 32 and then with his best years behind him. He thus lasted just nine tournaments atop the banzuke and retired in the year following his promotion.

### **Troubles of Takanosato**

It was the same story with the 59th yokozuna, Takanosato Toshihide, a decade later. The late-bloomer took 14 years to travel from sumo's bottom division to ozeki, but wasted little time in securing his yokozuna status thereafter. Thirty-one years of age at the time of promotion, he failed to set the world alight as a grand champion and, after a succession of withdrawals from tournaments, retired with just two more trophies to his name in January 1986. He at least had the consolation of being one of the few wrestlers to bow out with a winning record against the legendary Chiyonofuji, mostly through preventing the Wolf from securing his trademark left-hand belt grip.

### **Futahaguro's Folly**

Just under two years later, the 60th yokozuna further sullied the Shiranui name. Shortly after Takanosato's retirement, Futahaguro Koji became one of the youngest grand champions ever at the tender age of 23. Tall, lean and handsome, he was tipped for great things, but his temperament was always considered fragile. In late-1987, Futahaguro snapped on a jungyo tour and instigated an altercation with several tsukebito, who consequently refused to serve under him. The fractious relationship between yokozuna and attendants came to a head on December 27th that year, when a further disagreement sparked a fierce row between Futahaguro and his stable master, Tatsunami Oyakata. Fearing for her husband's safety, Tatsunami's wife, Chieko, tried to intervene and ended up either aggressively pushed or slapped depending on which newspaper you believe. As a result of his rashness, Futahaguro became the first yokozuna ever to be sacked from the sumo association. Worse still, he left sumo as the only yokozuna never to have won a makunouchi tournament, having been promoted to the rank on the

dubious basis of two runner-up scores. Despite his frightening conduct, though, he was suddenly welcomed back into the sumo fold in the summer of 2003, whereupon he returned to take practice sessions at Tatsunami-beya.

### **Asahifuji's Ailment**

The Shiranui curse also accounted for the 63rd yokozuna, Asahifuji Seiya. Unlike Futahaguro, Asahifuji won three titles en route to sumo's highest rank. He experienced exceptional bad luck as an ozeki when, having effectively been promised yokozuna status if he could defeat Chiyonofuji on senshuraku in March 1989, he missed out on promotion simply because the Wolf was too injured to face him. He was eventually promoted in July 1990 after a sensational and highly controversial match against Chiyonofuji which – after thirty seconds of mayhem – ended with each man bent at a right-angle trying to crush the other over the rope. Asahifuji literally came out on top. His first three tournaments as a yokozuna yielded 37 wins and three runner-up scores, but his chronic diabetes and a pancreatic ailment soon caused his form to dip dramatically. Before long, he would post a shocking 8-7 and look increasingly vulnerable to inexperienced youngsters like Akebono and Wakahanada – wrestlers he should have been able to handle. He retired in January 1992, having lasted just eight tournaments and three days on sumo's loftiest perch.

### **Woes of Wakanohana**

In March 2000, Wakanohana III became the seventh Shiranui yokozuna in a row to retire having underperformed! As the nephew of 1950s yokozuna Wakanohana I, the son of 1970s superstar ozeki Takanohana I and the brother of 1990s heart-throb yokozuna Takanohana II, Wakanohana III received an immense amount of goodwill from the Japanese public.

His promotion to yokozuna after his fifth yusho in May 1998 heralded the first occasion on which two brothers had simultaneously held sumo's highest rank.

Although his younger sibling performed the Unryu-gata, Wakanohana opted to drink from Shiranui's poisoned chalice and soon lived to regret it. In September 1999, exactly ten years after the last such instance, Wakanohana III became only the second yokozuna to lose more bouts than he had won in a fifteen day tournament. He sat out the next two basho, and retired as a consequence of his abortive comeback attempt in Osaka, thus never winning a yusho as a yokozuna. He came closest in January 1999, during his infamous three-fight contest against Chiyotakai on senshuraku. Having lost their regulation match-up, Waka thought he had triumphed in the playoff re-match when, after slapping Chiyotakai down before flying off the dohyo, the gyoji ruled in his favour. However, strange (Shiranui?) forces ensured that the gyoji's decision was over-ruled and Chiyotakai won the re-match. Of course, it should be added that Wakanohana's luck outside of the ring was probably worse. After becoming yokozuna, he fell out with his younger brother, fell out with his wife to the extent that he moved out of their home for a

while, watched his parents divorce publicly and lost his father to mouth cancer at the relatively young age of 55.

### Conclusion

Although the curse of the Shiranui can probably be attributed to shocking coincidence, it must play heavily on the mind of any wrestler who performs it. Daimon-san understood this very well and feared for his beloved Hakuho



*Hakuho (Carolyn Todd)*

accordingly. The consensus remains, though, that he need not

fear. Hakuho is younger than all the aforementioned Shiranui-ists and does not appear anywhere near as temperamental as Futahaguro. He wrestles with a maturity far beyond his years and, like Muhammad Ali in the boxing ring, reads his opponents' moves with astonishing accuracy and ease. Even in late-2005, respected sumo commentators were insisting that the 20-year-old Hakuho would have already made yokozuna but for a foot injury. By March 2006, after his runner-up performance in Osaka, Japanese sumo coaches and athletes were billing Hakuho as a more able wrestler than Asashoryu. By May 2007, even Asashoryu fans were grudgingly accepting this view. At present, the only opportunity for Shiranui to work its black magic lies with Hakuho's troubled left foot.

As long as Hakuho stays healthy in that department, he will add generously to the three makunouchi yusho he has already won. Marriage and fatherhood will bring new pressures and added media intrusion, but the Mongolian has shown every indication of possessing the mental strength to cope. Most importantly, a large army of Japanese fans – Daimon-san firmly among them – is currently willing him to succeed, especially against Asashoryu. If anyone can bust Shiranui's myths, Hakuho can.