

Hitachiyama Taniemon (1874 - 1922)

*Text by Joe Kuroda
Photos by Mark Buckton*

The recent shocking revelations surrounding the death of a recruit and Yokozuna Asashoryu's suspension have shaken the world of Ozumo, casting dark shadows across what is often described as the national sport of Japan.

In recent years, the older sumo fans out there have been generating increasing calls for the virtue and honor of yesteryear - once epitomized by yokozuna such as Futabayama, a man who steadfastly pursued a life of discipline and perseverance. Futabayama faithfully kept to the old way of sumo customs and traditions; themselves leftovers from the code of conduct practiced by Japan's samurai of lore.

Before continuing though, let's step back for a moment and have a look at the modern history of Ozumo.



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When the Tokugawa Shogunate

gave up power in 1868, they brought to an end, 250 years of feudal rule, thereby giving birth to a period of modernization and the new Meiji-era (1868 – 1912). As the nation opened up its doors to the outside world, tremendous upheaval and turmoil was experienced by its citizens. Almost overnight, the Japanese started to cast away the old ways as they adapted to the new paradigms.

The sumo world was no different. Although rikishi were permitted to maintain the “mage” (hair knot), they lost virtually everything else and, interestingly, as soon as the rikishi retired, they quickly chopped off their “mage” to keep pace with the rest of the population. The rikishi also lost their benefactors, as regional lords were no longer in a position to employ them in posts equivalent to samurai.

In the early Meiji years, Ozumo was full of ruffians, drifters, peasants and homeless, low ranking samurai – as well as providing a ‘home’ to former rikishi. The rikishi existed largely on meager rations provided by tournament organizers; events staged and run by selected Toshiyori – themselves controllers of all revenues and operations surrounding the sport.

Then, in 1873, maegashira rikishi Takasago Uragoro and his supporters decided to split and form their own sumo group after their demand for better conditions and compensation was rejected by the then leaders of the sport. The new group formed the Takasago Reformed Group and based their operations in Nagoya where they

staged tournaments in nearby Kyoto and Osaka. The group attracted a sizable number of decent rikishi similarly disenchanted by the way tournaments were being run in Tokyo.

Indeed, the first yokozuna to be listed on the banzuke, the first Nishinoumi – Kajiro - was a product of the Takasago group in Kyoto. Buoyed by a series of successful tournaments held in Kyoto and Osaka, the Takasago group soon expanded their operations and began holding tournaments in Tokyo's Akihabara, just down the road from the main sumo arena in the new capital.

However, in those days Ozumo like other attractions staged at the local level fell under the jurisdiction of the Police. Each participant and tournament needed to be licensed by the local police regulating such events, but soon the police believed that two groups promoting the same basic event was less than desirable and forced them to reconcile their differences and to operate as one in order to lessen the possibility for public confusion.

Both groups knew there really was no other option but to get together to survive.

Subsequently Takasago Uragoro returned to Tokyo Sumo as one of its executives and soon thereafter started to accumulate and amass power.

Takasago quickly restructured Tokyo Sumo operations, making it more economically viable and stable. He increased the number of

makunouchi rikishi and Toshiyori to help attract more recruits as well as to expand the foundations of the sport. He introduced an allowance system based on a given rikishi's performance thereby encouraging competitive sumo. Takasago brought Ozumo into a modern new age and established a product more attractive to the man in the street.

Unfortunately, as he gained more and more power, he himself became more and more like the dictatorial types he was trying to have replaced at the start of his career. He started to behave like an absolute monarch in his later years and was eventually chased away from the Ozumo world after all the West side rikishi on the banzuke went kyujo to protest his conduct.

As much as Takasago's accomplishments were significant to Ozumo's operations, the rikishi themselves remained cut of the same old mold. Most hailed from poor backgrounds with little or no education. They displayed few manners and were without any real social graces or refined etiquette. In the eyes of the gentfolk of the Meiji-era, sumo was still viewed as an uncivilized, naked form of dance performed by barbaric men - and the rikishi did nothing to betray society's views such - oftentimes behaving rudely and with utter disregard to the social mores of the day; in a way living on the fringes of the civilized society.

During these dire times in Ozumo history, a savior arrived. He was later called a "Sumo Saint" by fans and Big Boss or Godfather by his peers.

This man was the 19th yokozuna Hitachiyama Taniemon.

Hitachiyama worked in a similar form to the samurai of old to

elevate Ozumo from mere 'battles between oversized combatants' showcased in a carnival like atmosphere. Along with his great rival, the 20th yokozuna [Umegatani Toutaro](#), Hitachiyama was an integral part of the golden age of Ozumo in the late Meiji-era – essentially creating the national sport in the process.

achievement.

One day, Taniemon went to Tokyo to visit his uncle – a sword master at a school later to become part of the current Waseda University. His uncle immediately saw Taniemon's potential as a sumo rikishi, though his parents were vehemently against him joining



Memorial Stone to Hitachiyama in Tokyo's Yanaka Graveyard - thought to contain some of the yokozuna's hair

Hitachiyama Taniemon was born Taniemon Ichige into a distinguished samurai family, well known in the Mito area of Ibaraki Prefecture. His grandfather was an expert archer and his father excelled in his handling of swords as well as archery.

With the changing times, his father turned to business but with his samurai upbringing was never able to fully master commerce. Meanwhile, the young Taniemon focused on his studies until he was forced to leave school during the final year of middle school for family reasons. At the time, hardly any rikishi in Ozumo had graduated from an elementary school, so from that perspective, his middle school education would have been considered a great

Ozumo. Taniemon, unperturbed, decided to enter then feeble heya, Dewanoumi Beya, as the oyakata (former Maegashira 1 Hitachiyama Un-emon) – still an active sumotori, was from his own home town - Mito.

In 1891 he made his dohyo debut as Onishiyama and the following year he appeared ranked in jonokuchi, quickly making his way up to jonidan in 1893.

In 1894 Taniemon received his shisho's former name of Hitachiyama and made sandanme. Even though he was promoted to makushita for the 1895 January Basho, he suffered a makekoshi losing record and then felt so distraught after his shisho refused his request to marry the shisho's



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niece, that he ran away during a jungyo.

For a while he lived in Nagoya,

competing there before moving on to join Osaka Sumo. By this time

Taniemon had started to gain more body mass and more strength. Noticed by an influential figure in Osaka Sumo, it was arranged for him to return to Tokyo Sumo in 1897.

Resuming his career from a rank just below makushita, and reinvigorated and more focused this time round, Hitachiyama proceeded to win 32 straight bouts, making such rapid progress, that after the 1901 January Basho, he was promoted to ozeki.

By this time Hitachiyama was so confident in his own abilities and strength that no matter how his opponents started a bout, he received him head on prior to either swinging them out or simply using brute force to push them

back.

If his opponent came at him intent on a yotsu sumo battle, Hitachiyama pulled him up, pushed him into a tsuri form or used a technique called Izumigawa – attained by squeezing his opponent's arms tightly while attacking from his side. His sumo was always fair and in the process of a bout he always let his opponents try their own sumo before taking care of matters. His bouts with Umenotani (later Umegatani) were especially exciting and were eagerly awaited by dedicated sumo fans all over Japan.

With the emergence of the two great rivals, Ozumo was starting to usher in its greatest golden age to date – the Ume-Hitachi Era.