

Heya Peek – Minezaki Beya

by Chris Gould

Chris Gould journeys to the Tokyo suburbs to investigate one of the best kept secrets in the heya community.

On Day 13 of the Hatsu Basha, the Tokyo suburb of Akatsuka warms to the caress of the morning sun. At 8am, its younger inhabitants – sararimen and fledgling professionals – have long since departed for city centre pastures, leaving the backstreets to be populated mainly by pensioners. Some of the commuters occupying Akatsuka's plushier apartments are sumo fans, and are particularly good friends with former maegashira Misugiiso, who retired in 1988. This would perhaps explain why Misugiiso, the current Minezaki-Oyakata, chose to establish his own heya in the area 20 years ago.

The heya building, positioned a short distance from Akatsuka's main road, still sparkles in the sunlight two decades after construction. Protected from the outside world by a bunker-style wall and iron gates, entrance only appears possible via the intercom system at the front.

'Moshi, moshi.'

'Er... excuse me. Is this Minezaki Beya?'

'Yes.'

'Am I able to watch morning training?'

'Already finished.'

There are only seven deshi at the heya, so perhaps there is only so much they can do alone. Anxious not to waste my hour-long train-



Minezaki Beya

ride from Ryogoku – and remembering some advice from SFM's Editor-in-Chief – I try a different tack.

'Excuse me. I work for an English-language sumo magazine. Is it possible to enter the heya?'

The voice at the other end is gripped by blind panic. 'The English person? Whoah! Please wait just a moment!'

Our intercom exchange ends with a mad scuffling sound which is preceded by the appearance – ten seconds later – of a bespectacled sumotori marching round the perimeter wall with only a mawashi for clothing. His shikona is Akinomine. Ranked in sandanme, he is the highest-graded sumotori in the heya. Although double my weight, he panics over my personal details because his oyakata knows who I am. A week before, the former Misugiiso had handled my ticket at

the Kokugikan gate. He was flanked by his heya's only gyoji, Kimura Kenjiro, who despite his tender 33 years had already progressed to mid-juryo level and amassed several hitatare. Minezaki and Kenjiro, the Batman and Robin of the sumo world, took a collective interest in my gaijin appearance and invited me to their post-basho heya party. Having never heard of Akatsuka, I decided to investigate the heya's location beforehand. Hence, the meeting with Akinomine.

The 150-kilogram sandanme giant immediately led me past the heya kitchens and into the practice area, where two mawashi-clad colleagues lay in wait. The senior of the two was 24-year-old Torugawa, a pretty-faced Mongolian starlet anxious to climb out of sandanme. The junior colleague was 19-year-old Sekiho, the younger of two brothers at Minezaki Beya, ranked in low jonidan. Both men were on the

slim side for sumotori, their finely-cut physiques resulting from extra gym-work in their spare time. Akinomine, easily the largest of the three, was aged 30 – although his baby-face made him look far younger.

After light-hearted introductions, the atmosphere became markedly more formal as a sliding door screeched open to reveal the imposing frame of the 184-centimetre oyakata, his tracksuit slightly greyer than his 51-year-old hair. The deshi have unflinching respect for someone who once wrestled three divisions above them. At his peak, Misugiiso reached maegashira 2, wrestled Chiyonofuji and Konishiki, and served as sword-bearer to yokozuna Wajima Hiroshi.

'It is so difficult to bend your arm and hold that sword so still,' he later told me in the competent English resulting from several trips to Hawaii. 'We practiced so many times before we did the real thing.'

Minezaki began as he would with any invitee, striding towards a floor cushion at a right-angle to mine and engaging me in conversation. He insisted that green tea be brought out while he examined my train map and suggested I should have taken a better route to the heya. The presence of tea indicated the oyakata's intent to impress me. Larger heya seemingly reserve tea for koen kai members, with gaijin onlookers grudgingly tossed floor cushions and instructed to sit far away from the oyakata.

The most amusing moment of the morning undoubtedly came when the oyakata showed me the stable's collection of sekitori hand-prints (tegata). He challenged the assembled gathering of Minezaki deshi to read the sumo-ji on each tegata – so thick and hastily brushed that it is usually very difficult to decipher.

'Who's is this one?' asked the oyakata, like a stern schoolmaster. Silence and puzzled looks prevailed while Akinomine despairingly adjusted his glasses. The odd embarrassed laugh pierced the tension in the air.

'You don't know?!' the oyakata exclaimed between glances at the sumo-ji. 'It's Kaio! And this one?'

Valiantly though the deshi scrunched up their chubby faces, the answer would not come.



Akinomine

'You went to sumo school, right?' the oyakata asked, the pleasant hum of his voice crumbling with the increased volume. 'It's Ama!'

The oyakata soon departed for his morning shower, in preparation for a brief visit from some of Minezaki's financial backers and his own father, who was in town for a hospital appointment. The rikishi followed his strict instructions to serve me chanko, skilfully prepared by one of the lower rankers in the cluttered kitchen. Alongside the bowl of meat-based chanko was positioned a similar-sized bowl of rice, and a full plate of fried-pumpkin croquettes geared to sumo-sized stomachs far more vast than my own. Akinomine, now comfortably wrapped in his kimono, offered me

a zabuton facing the heya's giant plasma TV screen and followed the oyakata's silent demand to keep me company. Torugawa and Sekiho stood nearby, legs spread apart, fists clenched, resembling henchmen in a Bond movie but actually mimicking the role of restaurant waiting staff. Although I had no need for their services, the ageing party of financial backers exploited them upon their arrival.

While dividing his attention between zany Japanese television and my chanko bowl, Akinomine revealed to me how he had come to enter sumo.

'My parents were not big sumo fans,' he explained, 'but I was good at football in my Kanagawa high school and that's when I was spotted by someone from the heya.'

He continued: 'Tomorrow is a really important day for me because my score for this basho is 3-3. If I win, I could climb the banzuke a bit.'

The contest turned out to be a tense one, but Akinomine wrapped his mammoth arms around those of his opponent to force him out by kimedashi and capture that crucial victory.

Torugawa, although not my designated interlocutor, was equally talkative when spoken to. 'Speaking Japanese is not a problem,' the Mongol said to me. 'But writing Japanese is much harder, particularly as it's nothing like the cyrillics we use in Mongolia.' He continued: 'I really look up to Asashoryu and Hakuho. I have met Asashoryu twice and it was an amazing experience.'

Sekiho, the quietest of the three, would open up to me at the heya party two days later. When asked as to his realistic aspirations for this year, the teenager took a deep breath and exhaled: 'sandanme,'

his voice moist with emotion. His dream is clearly to be the next Kisenosato. The awe with which he viewed sumo's fourth division reveals the massiveness of the barriers that must be scaled by every makuuchi star.

The heya party itself began barely an hour after Torugawa's two heroes had settled the makuuchi yusho. The heya's practice area had been covered in tatami matting since Friday, which in turn had been covered with around 80 guests since the senshuraku musubi no ichiban. The atmosphere was family-like in tone, with several children enjoying making a mess of their chanko helpings while cigarette-smoke wafted over their naïve heads.

'And who invited you?' I was politely asked by the front desk as I nervously slipped through the door some 15 minutes late.

'Kimura Kenjiro,' I replied, triggering smiles and positive feedback from the threesome monitoring the guest list. Kenjiro was soon sent for, but appeared to have changed his appearance dramatically in the week since we had first met. For a start, he looked remarkably more feminine in his orange kimono. It turned out that the mysterious lady was Kenjiro's wife, who was greeting visitors on his behalf while he finished a late-night administrative shift at the Kokugikan. An elegant lady of around Kenjiro's age, the gyoji's wife made sure to kneel alongside almost every grouping of partygoers, her delightful conversation skills occasionally being translated into English.

Also kneeling at the side of guests were the Minezaki wrestlers, who would ironically spend their own party-night serving chanko. Only once the bulk of party attendees dispersed after 8.30pm could the Minezaki men even begin to relax

and savour their first mouthfuls of sushi. As Sekiho knelt next to me, I remembered a comment uttered by the eight-year-old seated to his right.

'Kisenosato is my favourite wrestler,' he had beamed in response to my question. 'He knocked over Asashoryu.'

Calling out to the same eight-year-old, I nodded towards Sekiho and said: 'Here's the next Kisenosato!' As nearby parents chuckled, Sekiho proudly bowed his head and promised to his best.



Torugawa

'Did you see my bout yesterday,' he asked, with an enthusiasm which suggested it might have marked the first significant step on the path to stardom. 'I spun at the edge and threw him down. Did you see it?'

I did see what he clearly viewed as one of his more impressive victories. I hope it happens for him in sumo. Too many of his companions sink without a trace.

The hopes and dreams of the Minezaki men were no better encapsulated than by their sumo jinku chorus which was performed just before the main party closed. At that moment did I realise that sumo jinku is not only sung by

middle-aged sumo obsessives who tour restaurants and seem depressed that Taiho will no longer fight Sadanoyama.

'All the rikishi learn jinku while on jungyo,' Minezaki Oyakata told me. 'It is a very important part of sumo culture.'

Their voices may not have been as polished as those of the professional jinku-ists, but the Minezaki men produced a magical effect by singing from their sumo-sized hearts. One of them had a delightfully soothing voice, but the biggest impact was made by powerhouse Akinomine, who passionately sung of his desire to return from the upcoming Osaka Basho as a local hero. After such a delivery, nobody watching could have failed to share his dream.

After the rousing finale, party numbers dwindled, with only the oyakata's closest confidantes remaining behind. As trays of food and zabuton were rearranged into a banqueting table format, high-paid businessmen, tax-administrators, professional photographers, a Buddhist priest and a local politician converged to loosen their belts yet further.

'Can you eat one more time?' asked the attractive, bespectacled 20-something adjacent to me – the daughter of personal friends of Minezaki oyakata. 'The sushi is very tasty. It was made by that man over there and his wife; the owners of a sushi restaurant.'

As the two said persons smiled and bowed in delight, I was certainly not prepared to feast again, having assumed I would have to leave at 8.30pm. However, the oyakata was so keen to impress a foreign guest that he insisted I stay – provided time permitted. He would even arrange a sumo escort to the station, he said, so that I would not have to negotiate the dark streets alone. Given a sumotori is never supposed to use

his skills outside of a controlled sumo environment, I assumed his role was merely to deter attackers unaware of this fact.

As the clock struck 10.00pm, Kimura Kenjiro returned to popular acclaim and the wrestlers finally wound down their waiter like duties and enjoyed some hard-earned sumo food. Torugawa was in particularly fine fettle despite sporting a large bandage on his right foot, the result of a painfully-earned victory the previous day which earned him another crucial *kachikoshi*. He doubtless appreciated the following week's break from training, and would restrict himself to hand exercises in the gym while the determined – exerted himself.

With food supplies disappearing, stomachs protruding and levels of sobriety decreasing, the time came for business cards to be exchanged and for final messages of good luck to be delivered. The *oyakata* introduced me to his wife (a former model) and son, a 23-year-old university graduate who currently works as a manager in a Ginza department store. At 192-centimetres, he certainly possessed the height for sumo but was decidedly lacking in weight.

'Did you ever want to become a *sumotori*?' I asked him, aware that the sumo museum was currently



Minezaki senshuraku party

running an exhibition on sumo families.

'No – no!' he chuckled. 'I like basketball much better. And although the working hours are tough, I really enjoy fashion management.'

Which means that the challenge of becoming the next Minezaki *sekitori* lies firmly at the oft-bandaged feet of the seven *deshi* currently comprising this absorbing and close-knit community.

'At the moment, we only see the

sekitori on *de-geiko*,' the *oyakata* explained. 'Our men always have to do *degeiko* with *Hanaregoma Beya*. The *Ichimon* is very good to us.'

As possible potential *sekitori* lined up to accompany me to the station, I asked the *oyakata* for permission to write a magazine piece about my enchanting Minezaki experience.

'Okay,' he said, sticking up a giant thumb before opening his fist for a handshake. 'Only next time, please come and watch us train.'