

NSK meets NHK

by Chris Gould

Chris Gould marks the 55th anniversary of an initiative which changed sumo forever.

Fifty-five years ago, the radio broadcaster Nihon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) took the brave step of establishing Japan's first national television channel. Radio programmes which attracted hoards of listeners were naturally among the first to transfer to the small screen. NHK Sumo, long acclaimed for its live coverage of fabulous dohyo moments (not least Futabayama-Akinoumi in 1939), was one such programme. In wedding itself to television, Japan's arch-traditional national sport was about to change forever.

Visual impact

The initial impact of televised coverage on sumo was felt even at the preparation stage for NHK's first live broadcast. Until 1952, the six-tonne Shinto canopy (tsuriyane) above the competitive dohyo was upheld by four giant pillars. Amazing as it may now seem, matchday judges (shimpan) used to seat their rotund frames on the dohyo to observe bouts while resting their backs against these pillars. Many sumo texts report that the pillars were removed after an increase in spectator complaints about impeded views of dohyo action. However, as SFM's resident historian Joe Kuroda sagely points out, the disappearance of the pillars coincided with sumo's preparation for television coverage, and was thus as much of a gift to the television viewer as to the Kokugikan fan. Thus, when NHK first went live, the tsuriyane was found hanging from the reinforced ceiling of an unfinished Kuramae Kokugikan. To this day,

it continues to hang from a Ryogoku Kokugikan roof strengthened with a giant spider's web of metal bars.

In November 1957, a 34-year-old maegashira named Tamanoumi stunned the sumo establishment by collecting the makuuchi yusho with a perfect 15-0 score. His feat was all the more noticeable for the outrageous colour of his mawashi, a sparkling gold never before seen in the sumo ring. In choosing to shine from the waist, Tamanoumi was officially in breach of rules set by the Japan Sumo Association (NSK), which stated that sekitori sashes should be sombre in tone: dark blue, purple or black. But alas, several rikishi viewed Tamanoumi's garish belt as a symbol of good luck, and began to plump for more luminous belt colours themselves. A dual incentive for brightening up one's sash stemmed from the advent of NHK's colour television broadcasts in 1960. From then on, brightness of colour was seen by several wrestlers and sponsors as integral to attracting the attention of television viewers. By the early 1970s, sumo looked to have embraced pop-art, with stars such as Wajima and Takamiyama sporting emerald-green and bright-orange mawashi respectively. The early 1980s saw Chiyonofuji, Hokutenyu and Masuiyama popularise the sky-blue sash, while later in the decade, Misugisato and Mitoizumi would glow in a jolly green. A particularly outlandish leap was made by Futagoyama Beya's Takamisugi, whose mawashi was little shy of bright pink. At the same time, maegashira Kasugafuji opted for a more crimson variant which is occasionally worn by his

protégé, Kasugao, today. Disciples of the cult of the golden sash include Wajima, Mitoizumi, former komusubi Daishoho and – most famously in March 2005 – current yokozuna Asashoryu.

Sumo felt the third major impact of television in March 1969, when the 'plug-in drug' proved its ability to reveal human error. On a fateful day at the Haru Bashi, legendary yokozuna Taiho came up against an unfancied maegashira named Toda. Having won his previous 45 encounters on the dohyo, Taiho had his sights set on surpassing Futabayama's all-time record for consecutive sumo wins (69). Alas, he was lacklustre that afternoon and only just managed to slap Toda down before tumbling from the dohyo. Immediately before both men fell, Toda overstepped the rope with his right foot and the referee awarded the bout to Taiho. However, the transgression went unnoticed by the five shimpan who erroneously overturned the referee's call. Television replays provided conclusive proof of the officiating error and newspaper editors printed still-shots from such replays in the following day's sports pages. Although Taiho gallantly blamed his own tactics for the defeat that never was, acerbic criticism of officials prompted an embarrassed NSK to make an unprecedented decision. From henceforth, the chief judge would be furnished with an earphone link to two oyakata installed behind a TV monitor for all first and second division bouts. Close calls in salaried divisions would effectively be determined by TV replay.

Alas, even with recourse to

technology, chronic judging mishaps still occur. In the summer of 2000, chaos ensued after the sideburned makuuchi giant Toki continued to fight Oginishiki despite briefly having overstepped the rope. The resultant mono-ii saw the five judges embark upon an amusing search for Toki's footprint, scurrying towards the tawara and stooping heavily towards the clay. After the passage of too much time, the chief judge (Dewanoumi oyakata) re-claimed his ringside microphone and spent ten seconds fumbling for words. His conclusion was that – despite the proof of TV replays – there was no clear evidence that Toki's foot had exited the ring and a re-match would have to be fought. The two wrestlers were so dazzled by proceedings that they performed their warm-up out of sync and had to be corrected by the judges.

International impact

Television coverage has proved key to the internationalisation of sumo, and is particularly responsible for the phenomenal growth in European sumotori in recent years. Many leading non-Japanese sumo writers were only able to share their knowledge with westerners after getting hooked on NHK. Lora Sharnoff, whose 1992 sumo text received glowing praise, was first captivated by sumo on senshuraku of the March 1975 Basho. 'My eyes were naturally drawn to the screen when the relatively-slender Takanohana came into the ring to face the hefty Kitanoumi in a playoff for the tourney championship,' Sharnoff wrote. 'It is no exaggeration to say that Takanohana's dramatic victory had a profound affect on my life thereafter.'¹ The match proved to be one of NHK's finest broadcasting moments, sparking such excitement in the Osaka gymnasium that Kitanoumi later claimed he was unable to see the ceiling due to the amount of zabuton thrown. NHK is also responsible for the birth of

internet sumo in the form of the Sumo Mailing List. At the time of SML's inception, its founder, Masumi Abe, had never visited a live basho, instead having built up an encyclopaedic sumo knowledge from books and NHK alone.

NHK footage first appeared on British television screens in the late 1950s as part of a BBC documentary. Thirty years later, Channel Four decided to make the first of four sumo TV series profiling Aki Basho, and whipped the UK into a sumo frenzy which triggered the first jungyo tournament on non-Japanese soil at London's Royal Albert Hall. Channel Four sumo programmes, of course, consisted entirely of NHK footage and were presented by the controversial biologist Dr Lyall Watson, who was himself impressed with NHK when studying tea ceremonies in Japan. 'I came to sumo when Chiyonofuji appeared in the upper ranks, and he was beautiful to see,' Watson once told me. 'I was bowled over by sumo as a whole. But the problem was to convince the western television sports producers that sumo was more than fat men falling down. That took five years.'

However, once British producers were convinced, their European counterparts quickly followed suit. Since 1992, the NHK highlights from every day of every basho have been screened on Eurosport. Many leading amateurs – and indeed several European professionals – first came into contact with sumo through this medium. Meanwhile, ex-French President Jacques Chirac allegedly seldom departed on a state visit without his Eurosport sumo videos, which would then be watched in his hotel suite.

Buoyed by the spread of sumo's popularity around the globe, NHK concentrated more energy on English-language sumo broadcasts in the early 1990s, and quickly

built up a team of highly respected experts to commentate for the NHK World Service. Among this team was the professional artist Lynn Matsuoka, who was featured in [SFM's analysis of sumo art](#). 'After spending several years in Japan, attending basho and keiko and interacting with rikishi and oyakata, I gradually accumulated an enormous amount of information,' Matsuoka wrote. 'When I was asked to be among the charter group of NHK commentators, it was my opportunity to share this knowledge and insight with everyone "out there" who was really interested, and who would never be able to gain the same insight. Commentating over 15 years really helped develop my analytical and verbal skills, and led to many invitations to speak on sumo around the world.'

Regrettably, drastic cutbacks in NHK's budget for non-Japanese-language broadcasts in the mid-2000s meant that English-language sumo broadcasts suffered greatly. Several commentators were culled while live English colour commentary from invited guests was reduced from 15 to around five days per basho. In 2007, rumours circulated as to whether NHK would pull the plug on English commentary altogether. Although these fears are yet to be confirmed, NHK has shown no signs of shifting funds from zany flagship programmes such as Chris Pepper's 'Let's Study English.'

Emotional impact

There were times, at sumo's zenith, when NHK repeatedly captured the mood of the Japanese nation during its sumo broadcasts. The one that fans particularly seem to remember is that on senshuraku of the July 1981 basho, when a slight but muscular Chiyonofuji shoved out the gargantuan yokozuna Kitanoumi to earn grand champion status himself. The image of

Chiyonofuji's oyakata, Kokonoe, shedding tears of joy while seated as a ringside judge has become iconic in sumo circles.

Several fans name Chiyonofuji's defeat to a naïve and fresh-faced Takahanada in May 1991 as their most unforgettable NHK moment, with the match symbolizing a transfer of power from one sumo generation to another. Takahanada, long after changing his shikona to Takanohana, would appear in another NHK classic in May 2001 when somehow managing to defeat the mammoth Musashimaru in a yusho playoff despite barely being able to walk through injury. As SFM's Joe Kuroda put it: 'Takanohana's devil-like face after winning the bout was something most of us would never forget.'

More recently in September 2007, NHK news – which tries its hardest to indirectly market sumo broadcasts – skilfully tapped into the nation's revulsion at the recent death of 17-year-old Tokitsukaze deshi Tokitaizan, and screened a memorable five-minute report which showed NSK Chairman Kitanoumi looking distinctly uncomfortable when explaining the situation to his boss, Japan's Education Minister. Generally, though, NHK news exercises a sizeable degree of self-censorship over sumo matters. Merely a week before its rather liberal coverage of the Tokitaizan affair, NHK censored footage of a woman touching the Kokugikan dohyo for the first time in sumo history, thus pretending that arguably its most famous sumo scene of all never happened.

Famous commentaries

When asked to name a famous NHK commentary, many seasoned sumo observers recall the retirement ceremony of the ozeki Takanohana in 1982. As various snips of the Prince of Sumo's topknot were made, NHK commentator Mr Sugiyama broke

down in tears and choked on several of his sentences.

Lora Sharnoff vividly recalls the commentaries given by the former sekiwake Tamanoumi, who continued to court controversy long after donning his golden belt in 1957. 'I recall one time after the late Aobayama, who tended to throw a lot of salt, lost very easily,' Sharnoff says. 'Tama commented: "Shio o takusan maita wari ni, amai sumo datta ne." A rough translation is: 'Given how much salt he threw, his sumo was rather sweet (gentle and underpowered).' It is rumoured that Tamanoumi's NHK contract was eventually cancelled due to the acerbic nature of his analyses.

Another NHK man unfazed by controversy was former announcer Shozo Ishibashi, who recently stepped down as head of the Yokozuna Deliberation Council. On senshuraku of the September 1999 Basho, Ishibashi was clearly distraught as yokozuna Wakanohana III registered a dreaded make-koshi against Hawaiian rival Musashimaru, whose win secured the yusho. When the time came for the Kokugikan to sing the Japanese national anthem of Kimigayo during the yusho presentation ceremony, Ishibashi noted that Musashimaru seemed rather quiet.

Using an indirectness of expression which is typical to Japan, Ishibashi (falsely) insinuated that Maru had failed to learn the lyrics of Kimigayo – and hence broken a promise made to him in a prior interview. Ishibashi's outburst backfired terribly, attracting 30 viewer complaints which revealed exactly how popular Musashimaru had become – regardless of his gaijin status.

A fan's view

Many members of sumo's core ageing fan base have followed televised coverage of Japan's

kokugi from the very beginning. Sixty-seven-year-old 'Michiko,' (whose name has been disguised), is one such person, and thus ideally placed to comment on the evolution of televised sumo. 'At the moment, I like some of NHK's special features,' she says. 'In the 2008 Haru Basho, I enjoyed learning in detail about the work of a gyoji, being introduced to shin-Juryo and watching the interviews of the various yusho winners. However,' she continues, 'I don't like today's broadcasts very much in general.'

'The problem is, there are too many people on television who think that sumo is just about winning and losing. As a result, NHK no longer shows the full shikiri-naoshi, despite its importance. It's like television does not understand or appreciate the distinctiveness of Japanese culture anymore.'

Michiko adds: 'I best like the commentaries of sumoists who are recently-retired, in particular those of Tochiazuma, former sekiwake Terao, and Tatsunami oyakata. Others I am not so keen on. Furthermore, I dislike NHK's recent trait of allowing random famous people to commentate on sumo, even though they don't seem to know much about it. I don't listen to these tarento.'

The reliance on tarento to sex up broadcasts is a sad indication that NHK is displeased with its sumo viewing figures. In February, the Yomiuri reported that sumo viewing figures had improved for the first time in five years, most conceivably due to the long-awaited return of bad-boy yokozuna Asashoryu. However, not all tarento are clueless as to the dohyo action before them. Demon Kogure, a middle-aged 1980s New Order musician with a kabuki actor's voice and a love of outrageous costumes, appears especially clued-in, and even demonstrates his love of gyoji and

Asashoryu during his concerts!

Charity tournaments

After 15 years of televising bouts, NHK appeared on the sumo calendar itself. For the past 41 years, an NHK charity sumo event has been staged on the first Friday or Saturday after the Hatsu Bashi. The event takes place in the confines of the Ryogoku Kokugikan and sees makuuchi wrestlers face each other in an elimination competition.

Conclusion

Fifty-five years on from its first transmission, NHK continues to screen 90 live sumo broadcasts per year in an evermore demanding

television environment. Each three-hour-long broadcast in turn merits a three-minute excerpt on the NHK evening news at 7pm. The sumo round-up bulletin which shows edited footage of the day's top-division bouts has returned to late-night television after briefly being axed in the mid-2000s. (Highlights of such bulletins include the male host placing a plastic replica of a sumo belt around his dark suit and asking a sumo coach to demonstrate winning moves upon him!) NHK's coverage has massive spillover effects, with many morning news programmes and talk-shows containing sumo analysis during

tournaments. Off-season, these same broadcasts carry reports of child sumo festivals around Japan, which see the world's smallest sumoists tussle each other in loincloths. Furthermore, news corporations still enjoy carrying reports of sumoists visiting shrines, participating in festivals and holding babies (allegedly to 'pass on some strength to them'). Even if sumo is no longer the undisputed national sport of Japan, NHK, at least, ensures that it is still treated like one.

ⁱ Lora Sharnoff, *Grand Sumo : The Living Sport and Tradition*, Weatherhill press, 1992, p.viii