

Heya Peek Kokonoe beya

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Kokonoe Oyakata is a victim of his own success. The former yokozuna, in his fighting days known as Chiyonofuji, became such an iconic figure in the world of sumo that even today, two decades after he called it quits, he continues to draw fans and onlookers alike – from all corners of the globe.

The last two or three years have seen many of these individuals find their way to Kokonoe Beya north of the Kokugikan. Not all behave as they should, but whether these visits have any long term effect on the way the heya is run remains to be seen.



SFM has been there before, and we are returning ahead of covering all



the other heya, but given that it is one of the more popular of heya for non-Japanese to visit of late, and given that our last effort at covering the heya centered more on personal feelings that the heya itself, we thought to ourselves, why not go back?

The heya building, set a block or so back from one of the main north-south running streets that turns Sumida-ku into a Kyoto-like grid pattern, is one of the most modern

heya, certainly one of the largest, and from the usual work ethic demonstrated within, a heya those in any century past would be proud to set foot.

No slackers here, no cutting corners or joviality when sweat and effort is the name of the game – Kokonoe is about business.

Ironically, it was early one humid morning just ahead of the Natsu Basho – when Asashoryu had



failed to turn up at Takasago – that Kokonoe became the focus of the next SFM Heya Peek.

Kokonoe has an air about it lacking in many other heya. Takasago seems unsure of its place in the world of sumo, suspicious of guests, unsure how to welcome and unsure how to treat those visiting – perhaps to be expected after 2007. Miyagino is so small as to initially seem intimate, but usually ends up hot and clammy if too many turn up.

Kitanoumi Beya is so crowded on the keikoba that you can barely swing a leg as is Kasugano on a full house day. Several other heya see rikishi smiling a little too often for some and only Tokitsukaze gets close to Kokonoe in terms of atmosphere; quiet, serious, aware



of the role its occupants are playing on the national stage – a fact easily attributable to the man after whom the heya is named.

Even when Kokonoe is away, down the road at the Kokugikan fulfilling



his duties in the Koho (PR) Office as head of all things publicity, you can sense nothing changes here. This is a heya where 'shingitai' reigns.

The building entrance is dominated by a large iron bust of the oyakata in his active days, arms crossed, demeanor serious with the standard vertical wooden board sporting the Kokonoe Heya name (the use of 'beya' being the verbal version of heya).

Once inside the silver coloured doors a surprisingly small but dark foyer opens onto a wooden floored hallway – equally lacking in light. Cups / miniatures of trophies fill a glass cabinet in one corner almost from floor to ceiling, with a box of koen-kai application forms atop the shoe box nearest the door.

The main keikoba is to the right through sliding slatted wooden doors and once inside, the light returns.

Zabuton sit piled to the left, another trophy cabinet to the right at the rear of the viewing area, but the roughly 7m x 4m raised area is dominated by a huge, well polished table – oftentimes the back support for the oyakata when he has time to attend training sessions.

Large areas off to the left and right of the dohyo proper serve as warm-up / cool-down areas for those in action, towels hang off a rail around the top of the wall and the requisite teppo pole stands in the corner off to the far right – the position heyagashira Chiyotaiikai long ago claimed as his own.

A door in the far left corner leads onto the street running behind the heya and at an angle into the access area for the second floor and private quarters. Back on the raised platform from which those watching are able to view one of the most intense keiko sessions in the modern sport – and to the left – are the heya kitchens; almost always the origin of mouth watering smells, the chatter of those preparing the food, and for koen-kai members, drinks when attending the morning training session.

Kokonoe is a well oiled business – but a business with one eye on the past as they seem far more willing than most to single handedly carry forth responsibilities due sumo's ancestors.

A pleasure to visit, a place to stay silent and soak up the atmosphere, and an opportunity to view asageiko sessions as they should be.