

The 51st Yokozuna Tamanoumi Masahiro (1944–1971)

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photos by Mark Buckton*

In living memory we have enjoyed several periods of dominance by two yokozuna vying for each yusho, contributing to Ozumo's popularity in the process. It started with Tochinishiki and Wakanohana in the late 1950s, Kashiwado and Taiho were next in the 60s, and Kitanofuji and Tamanoumi followed suit in the very early 1970s, followed by Wajima and Kitanoumi later the same decade. Who knows, we may even witness another such era with Asashoryu and Hakuho in the modern day.

Along with yokozuna Kitanofuji, the 51st yokozuna, Tamanoumi ascended to the sport's highest rank almost as if he were meant to fill the void left by the two greats – Taiho and Kashiwado.

As a yokozuna, Tamanoumi was a proponent of traditional yokozuna yotsu-zumo and in fact looked every bit like the yokozuna of old. Despite establishing himself as a yokozuna to be reckoned with, Tamanoumi could have left us with so much more if it had not been for his untimely death while still active at the age of 27 years old.

Tamanoumi and Kitanofuji were jointly promoted to yokozuna after the January 1970 tournament, and for the next two years their rivalry on the dohyo coupled with their contrasting personalities piqued the public's interest, leading to increased interest in their senshuraku head-to-head each basho. Tamanoumi was the visually more traditional of the pair, somewhat reminiscent of the great Futabayama, while Kitanofuji, with his new brand of



sumo, was full of flair, even known for leading something of a playboy lifestyle.

During their time atop the sumo rankings, Ozumo benefited from one of the greatest yokozuna rivalries of all time, with Tamanoumi winning four yusho outright, one yusho equivalent (once losing to Taiho in the yusho

decider), and four second place finishes, while Kitanofuji could lay claim to four yusho of his own, and four second place finishes over the short two-year period they enjoyed as rivals. When he lost his greatest rival and best friend after the September 1971 basho, Kitanofuji became a shadow of his former self; his sheen was gone even though he did win several more



yusho prior to his retirement at the July 1974 tournament. At times, the most popular presenter on NHK’s Japanese language show today looked as if he had lost his reason for being – his reason for competing in Ozumo.

Born Masao Taniguchi (he later took the name Takeuchi), Tamanoumi was born in February 1944, in Osaka – right at the time the city was suffering some of its heaviest aerial bombings of WWII. To escape the destruction, his family moved to what is today Gamagoori City in Aichi Prefecture where Tamanoumi grew up.

Away from Osaka, Masao was not exactly a healthy child in his elementary school days. After recovering from a near fatal illness, he became strong enough to join a judo club in junior high school. Masao excelled in judo, so

much so that he was soon unbeatable in his age class. Not all was brawn, however, as Masao also excelled in his studies and was invited to attend Tokai High School upon his graduation from junior high.

At the time though, Masao’s junior high school principal suggested he join Ozumo, having heard from a supporter of Nishonoseki Beya’s sekiwake Tamanoumi Daisaburo (later Kataonami Oyakata) that the oyakata of Nishonoseki was interested in the reputation Masao had built up. At the time, Masao had no interest at all in sumo, and his mother was vehemently against him joining.

At the time, Masao himself had one major concern: the welfare of his mother, given that she had raised him single-handedly. At this point, a close friend of the school

principal named Takeuchi, and the man who introduced Masao to sekiwake Tamanoumi, stepped in, pledged to Masao that he would not only take care of his mother but also that he would adopt the youngster should Masao decide to join Ozumo.

By this time, Masao’s future stable master, sekiwake Tamanoumi, was steadily expanding his roster of recruits, even while he was actively competing for Nishonoseki Beya, as he planned to open his own heya following retirement.

Masao was one of ten or so of Tamanoumi’s recruits, and when he finally made his dohyo debut in March 1959, with the brand new shikona of Tamanoshima (the “Tamano” coming from Tamanoumi, and the “Shima” from a name his newly adopted father used in his own amateur

sumo days - "Itoshima"), Masao was soon given the nickname that would stick with him to the very end - "Shima-chan".

Tamanoshima was never a large rikishi, but he possessed first-rate techniques acquired in his judo days. Judo also helped him to develop a tremendously powerful lower back and leg muscles.

In January 1961, his master, the sekiwake Tamanoumi retired from active sumo and in time became Kataonami Oyakata. By this time the oyakata had twenty deshi who he had directly recruited - including Tamanoshima. He firmly believed he had a tacit understanding with the then Nishonoseki Oyakata to split from the heya following retirement, and to open his own heya, taking his own recruits with him.

This permission was not granted immediately, and one year later was still not forthcoming. Finally, Kataonami Oyakata decided to take the initiative and took nineteen of the rikishi to his home. Upon learning of his junior's apparent insubordination, Nishonoseki Oyakata exploded and proceeded to hand in the retirement papers pertaining to Kataonami Oyakata's nine rikishi then ranked in the makushita division and below.

The situation threatened to escalate further and become a major scandal within the association until Tokitsukaze Oyakata, chairman of the Sumo Kyokai, intervened to cancel the retirement papers. The chairman then disciplined both Nishonoseki and Kataonami Oyakatas and had them resolve their differences. As part of the process, he had Kataonami Oyakata establish his own heya.

Freed from the intense pressure surrounding his two oyakata, Tamanoshima relaxed and started to focus on his sumo. He gained

weight and began to show unparalleled strength on the dohyo, streamlining his sumo style by starting with tsuppari in most bouts before then going for the right uwate before eventually finishing off his opponents with yori or a throw. He was quickly promoted to juryo (September 1963) and then at the March 1964 basho he made his makunouchi debut.

In his first basho as a komusubi, Tamanoshima faced yokozuna Taiho. Tamanoshima never let Taiho initiate his offense as he stuck to his tsuppari before switching to yotsu-zumo. He finally downed Taiho using a right uchigake. Over time, he became a regular on the Sansho lists, winning three Shukun-sho and two Kanto-sho during the next ten basho. He also added four kinboshi to his tally, beating both Sadanoyama and Tochinoumi twice each.

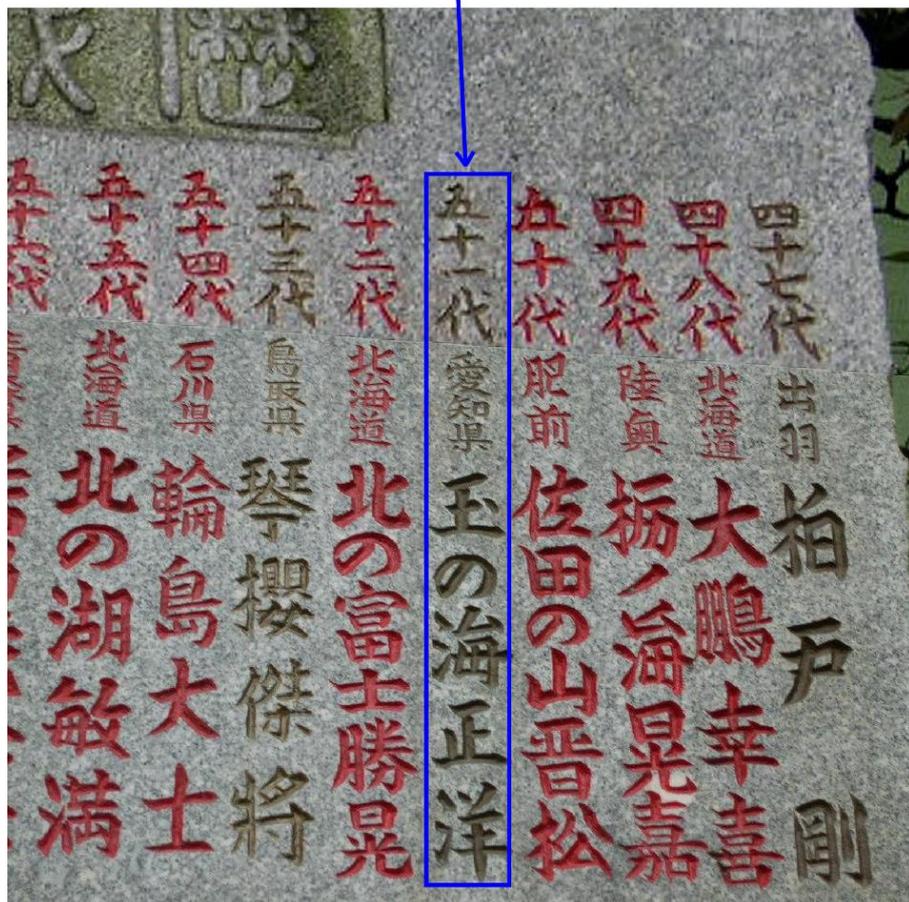
Prior to his ozeki promotion he

had only put together 10, 9 and 11 wins in the previous three basho, so he was rather fortunate to be given the promotion, following this up with a less than stellar record in his first six basho as ozeki: one 7 win-8 loss record, one 8-7 and the rest 9-6. At this point, things began to change. From the 1968 January basho onwards, Tamanoshima started showing his true worth by winning 12 bouts in two straight basho before improving to a 13-2 record at the May 1968 tournament to win the yusho.

As his previous two tournaments (12-3 / 12-3) saw him finish runner-up to the yusho winner, there was talk of yokozuna promotion, but some felt his long-term records did not merit such a step and he was passed over this time.

With 12-3 records again at the November 1968 and January 1969 basho, he was getting more and more attention, but as Taiho was

Tamanoumi



still chalking up zensho figures, promotion was not even discussed.

His next chance came after the September, 1969 tournament in which he walked away with the yusho with a 13-2 record. While he only won 10 bouts in the November of that year, in January 1970, Day 9 saw him embark on a six-day winning streak. Facing fellow ozeki Kitanofuji with his own 13-1 record on the line, Tamanoshima, 12-2 at the time, was up against a man certain to be promoted if he won the yusho.

In addition, Tamanoshima himself knew what was at the stake as yokozuna Taiho had sat out the basho and attendance was close to an all-time low. Ozumo needed a new yokozuna to generate fresh excitement, and Tamanoshima was aware he could not afford to miss such a chance again. He was prepared to show every sumo fan he too deserved promotion to a yokozuna along with Kitanofuji. Tamanoshima was to meet Kitanofuji on senshuraku – and both yusho and promotion were within his reach.

During that bout, Tamanoshima never gave Kitanofuji a chance to get started as he quickly moved in, winning by tsuru. This meant they were level on 13-2. As a result, they were to meet again in the yusho decider. Tamanoshima would win the yusho and with it yokozuna promotion if he could beat Kitanofuji again.

However, in the yusho-deciding bout, Kitanofuji never allowed Tamanoshima to get the right uwate and beat him using a quick sotogake move. Kitanofuji was then assured of his yokozuna promotion but there was a similar question hanging over Tamanoshima and his yusho-equivalent record. The sumo powers took into account Tamanoshima's past record, the need for a reinvigoration of Ozumo, and therefore decided to

promote Tamanoshima as well, bringing about the Kitanofuji-Tamanoshima era.

"I definitely want to win two consecutive yusho and catch up to him right away," Tamanoshima said at his yokozuna promotion press conference, referring of course to Kitanofuji – his chief rival. Following his yokozuna promotion, Tamanoshima received a new shikona, his shisho's shikona: Tamanoumi.

In the first two yokozuna basho, Tamanoumi came second and then finished with a 9-6 record in his third basho at the top. As some were starting to voice their concern over his worth as yokozuna, Tamanoumi's assault on the makunouchi division began in earnest.

At the September 1970 basho, Tamanoumi won the yusho with a 14-1 record, and the following basho he again finished 14-1 – losing out only to Taiho but beating him in the yusho decider to win the consecutive yusho he had so long sought. He missed out on the yusho in January 1971 after losing to Taiho in a yusho-deciding bout, but was back on top again the following basho. Finishing the May tournament that year as a runner-up, Tamanoumi explicitly expressed his deep desire to win a yusho in the near future with a perfect zensho record.

That opportunity finally arrived a year later at the Nagoya 1971 tourney – his home basho. It was one of the hottest and most humid Nagoya basho in recent memory, but from Day 1 Tamanoumi was simply unbeatable, overwhelming his opponents for 14 consecutive days. On senshuraku he faced his chief rival and fellow yokozuna Kitanofuji, who always appeared to stand in his way at the most crucial moment. Things were somehow different this time as Tamanoumi was determined to win the basho with a 15-0 record and nothing, and no-one, was

going to stand in his way.

The spectators at the sold-out Nagoya arena witnessed one of the hardest fought bouts in the history of sumo. Kitanofuji started out with a fierce tsuppari but Tamanoumi responded with thrusts to the throat. Kitanofuji then got his left arm inside while Tamanoumi secured his own migi-uwate. At this point Kitanofuji's mawashi worked loose and the bout was stopped. After the break, Kitanofuji repeatedly tried to push Tamanoumi to the edge of the dohyo but each time Tamanoumi stayed in. After an exhausting two minutes and 40 seconds of struggle, Kitanofuji, finally out of energy, was pushed out. It was a glorious win for Tamanoumi and arguably the finest triumph of his career.

However, by this time, unbeknownst to most, Tamanoumi was suffering from an inflammation of the appendix. Symptoms had appeared a couple of months earlier but each time he was taking care of the pain with painkillers. There was talk of him withdrawing from the September tourney but he refused to go kyujo and somehow managed to stay in the basho until Day 15 – finishing with a 12-3 record, second best to the eventual yusho winner Kitanofuji with 15-0.

Tamanoumi did not want to go kyujo because first he wanted to fulfil his duty as yokozuna before the fans. After this, he could not refuse Taiho's honor of asking him to serve as tachimochi during his retirement dohyo-iri. For Tamanoumi, nothing else, his health and even his life, was as important. As if on cue, right after the ceremony, he was rushed to Toranomon Hospital in Tokyo.

Initial reports indicated that the surgery had gone well and that Tamanoumi was recovering well. Then, around 11:30 a.m. on October 11th, 1971, Tamanoumi

suffered a fatal pulmonary embolism and died soon after. It was a tremendous shock to all throughout the sumo world. His death was totally unexpected, and his main rival Kitanofuji is said to have burst into tears on hearing the news. No was prepared for such an outcome and this led to a great deal of confusion at his funeral as the heya could not even find one of his tegata to use; they had to ask one of Tamanoumi's

supporters to loan them one.

When he passed away, Tamanoumi was just coming into his own, almost perfect with the migi-yotsu style he used in such similar form to the great Futabayama. He had a phenomenal 130 win/20 loss record as a yokozuna in just 10 basho for an average of 13 wins, 2 losses per basho. From the 1970 September Basho onwards he won

96, and lost just 9 losses for a 96.9 winning record.

Since the beginning of the Showa-era, the only other yokozuna with a better winning record during his years as a yokozuna was Futabayama. Had Tamanoumi lived longer, there is little doubt that he could have become one of the greatest yokozuna in the history of Ozumo.

Tamanoumi Masahiro

Born:	February 5 1944
Real name:	Masao Taniguchi (later Masao Takeuchi, then again Taniguchi.)
Place of birth:	Gamagoori City, Aichi Prefecture
Heya:	Nishonoseki - Kataonami
Shikona:	Tamanoshima - Tamanoumi
Dohyo debut:	March 1959
Juryo debut:	September 1963
Makuuchi debut:	March 1964
Ozeki debut:	November 1966
Yokozuna debut:	March 1970
Final basho:	September 1971
Died:	October 11th, 1971 (aged 27 years old – still active)
Highest rank:	Yokozuna
Height:	177 cm
Weight:	134 kg
Favorite techniques:	tsuppari, migi-yotsu, yori, tsuri, uwatenage (in all his great bouts against Kitanofuji, Tamanoumi excelled using hidari-yotsu).
Toshiyori Myoseki:	
Makuuchi basho:	46, 469 wins, 221 losses, 1 draw, 32 kyujo
Win ratio:	0.680
Yusho:	6 (2 equivalent, 9 runner-up)
Sansho awards:	Shukun-sho (4), Kanto-sho (2), Kinboshi (4)