

It's Time to Get Back to Basics

A rethink on the oyakata, deshi relationship

by Michiko Kodama

On July 25th, the day Hakuho clinched his 7th Emperor's Cup at the Nagoya Basho, the Nihon Sumo Kyokai presented a report to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The report, in part to help prevent a recurrence of the tragic death of Tokitaizan in June last year, indicated that they would welcome non-NSK individuals to their board of directors to make sure such an event never again sullied the name of sumo¹.

The NSK also announced that they would change the way in which their disciples would be trained and, according to the Japanese language newspaper accounts, included the following three improvements: a prohibition on violence of any sort on or off the 'dohyo', the removal of the bamboo swords (seen in keikoba) from all stables, and the prompt NSK led investigation and punishment of all connected to violence in heya..

When I read the newspaper article covering these changes in the way sumo conducts itself, I felt the NSK was taking the wrong road to reform.

To begin with, I would like to think about the background of MEXT demanding reformation in the NSK.

Until now, the NSK has been a distinctive organisation in which each stable was largely self-governed although they do also claim membership of the larger NSK. Each stable-master tries not to interfere in the affairs of others and historically, even the NSK try to avoid over use of interference in

a given stable's training methods, probably as a result of their opinion that each stable should be respected as independent.

As far as the oyakata go, if they can manage their stables properly, this style of self-government, unrestricted by any undue rules or supervision is the best modus operandi in professional sumo.

Nevertheless, the fact that one young rikishi was murdered by his seniors' inappropriate training methods and subsequent violence, including assault with a beer bottle, and the fact that the oyakata himself was privy to the tragic death, in addition to it not being addressed in a manner befitting the loss of life by the NSK, it does seem proper for MEXT as a governmental office responsible for the overseeing of the NSK to have demanded the amelioration of the organisation.

Also, looking at this issue from the point that the NSK is a foundation which receives financial assistance from the government, MEXT requiring this report is understandable.

The most important thing for the NSK to do at present is to regain the trust of MEXT and that of the general public – and to improve themselves in the truest sense of the word.

They have already said they do not want to use violence during training, and, perhaps, because of this have abolished (the use of) bamboo swords.

From a personal perspective though, the point that struck me

the most was why they have to get rid of the bamboo sword, as the sword itself is not the problem. The problem is centered on how the bamboo sword is used. If the bamboo sword is considered an article associated with violence, this is a mindset very impolite to the sword is it not?

The bamboo sword seen in heya was originally developed as a substitute for a real metal sword and was subsequently adapted for use in 'kendo'. As such, it should be treated as a precious item – not simply as something to use to hit others.

I for one will never approve of using the bamboo swords for reasons of brute force; my argument is based on the fact that even if they are banned, this does not necessarily mean violence will not be used.

It is vital to clearly distinguish between methods of training and violence, and each oyakata must instruct all their deshi and staff on these differences – especially in the case of the senior disciples who take care of the juniors in his absence.

Having said that, in the world of sumo, a lot of rikishi live together as if one family. To that end, it may indeed be more difficult to draw a line between discipline and abuse for who can draw that line, what criteria determine the right and wrong sides of the line?

I believe it is calm judgment and great affection shown towards the disciples that draws this line.

Away from sumo, in any situation,

if an instructor possesses a sincere spirit in which he wishes to train his / her students, this alone will produce the line in question. The line cannot be 'seen' and the person being taught may not initially see the difference between love and mere brute force. Hence, it is indispensable for a professional instructor (oyakata) to try to establish a deep relationship of trust with his pupils.

Perhaps overly idealistic, but by using historical fact as an example, let me explain a little more: it is known that sumo once had a close relationship with the society of warriors – samurai. During the age of the samurai, many clans had their own distinctive way of training swordsmanship and instilling the samurai spirit.

In Kagoshima Prefecture where I was born and brought up, for instance, the Satsuma Clan had a unique education system called

'gouchu' 郷中 (in English it means 'inside the region'); each region had its 'gouchu' inside which seniors provided guidance to juniors under the direction of a superior clansman. Juniors were not allowed to disobey seniors and seniors looked after juniors with affection – teaching them fidelity to their lord.

The Satsuma Clan created a form of swordsmanship called 'jigenryu' which was handed down over three hundred years from seniors to juniors despite the severe training that came with it. Without mutual faith and respect, 'jigenryu' could not have lasted for so long; and to toughen their body and mind during training, sumo was widely used as a form of training by the samurai. That is exactly why, I think, sumo wrestlers were permitted to retain their topknot when the law banning the hairstyle was issued in 1871.

I feel the rikishi beneath the

topknot are symbols of the good old Japanese spirit.

Sadly, these days in Japanese society the number of murder cases involving family members is increasing and the breaking of once tight social bonds that kept society together is becoming something of a problem in modern Japan. It is along these lines therefore, that I hope the NSK thinks deeply about the relationship between of the oyakata and their subordinates, and how stables should operate in this traditional sport based on cultural and ritual aspects – by going back to basics.

This alone will ensure the world of Japanese sumo has an auspicious future.

ⁱ The NSK recently backtracked with respect to the report submitted to MEXT, and at the time of writing, no concrete decisions have yet been made.