

The 36th Yokozuna Haguroyama Masaji (1914-1969)

*text by Joe Kuroda
photos by Mark Buckton*

In the shadow of one of the greatest yokozuna of all time, Futabayama, walked another yokozuna whose achievements are often overlooked by sumo fans.

The longest consecutive winning streak of 69 bouts achieved by the 35th Yokozuna Futabayama is generally considered to be the ultimate symbol of strength and is deservedly well known. The yokozuna to hold the rank for the longest term though is far less respected and the longevity of Haguroyama's position atop the banzuke is known by very few.

In addition, Haguroyama's 15-0 makuuchi yusho at the age of 37 is today a record that will likely never be broken.

Some may argue that as Haguroyama only managed to win seven yusho in his career he should not be included among the list of the greatest yokozuna. However, during the majority of his active career, there were only two basho per year and even when winning the same number of bouts as a higher ranked rikishi, the yusho automatically went to the man holding the higher rank as there were no yusho deciders in those days. This was often Haguroyama's heya mate Futabayama.

In his prime not only did Futabayama have no credible foe on the dohyo, he was a man without equals off it too. Passionate about elevating the sport of sumo, he spared no personal cost or expense in his quest and devoted a great deal of his own time to teaching and instructing his fellow rikishi in

both his own and other heya. Futabayama was respectful and graceful with all he encountered, and one of those so blessed was the young newcomer to Tatsunami Beya in 1933; 19-year-old Masaji Kobayashi.

Masaji was born in a small village located in Niigata Prefecture on November 18th, 1914, the child of a long line of public bathhouse owners. As a child growing up, Masaji had no other aspiration than to follow in their footsteps and in preparation, when he was 14, Masaji was sent to his aunt's Asahi-yu bathhouse in Ryogoku, right next door to the then Nishikijima Beya building in Tokyo. Still a teenager but already tall for his age and noticeably muscular, Masaji was immediately spotted by Nishikijima Oyakata, but for his part wanted no part of Ozumo.

Without his knowing, news of Masaji's presence spread quickly around the sumo world, and soon he was seeing more and more oyakata visiting the bathhouse and asking for him. Among them, Tatsunami Oyakata (former komusubi Midorishima) proved the most persistent as was visiting daily – asking Masaji to join his heya.

Finally, Masaji could take no more, and off he ran to his uncle's bathhouse in another part of Tokyo, but Tatsunami tracked him down and started the courtship all over again. By this time Masaji himself had started to think about a career in sumo and eventually the oyakata persuaded him sumo was the best option for a boy wanting to help his parents – by becoming a yokozuna. Masaji no longer had a reason to refuse the oyakata and finally decided to join



Haguroyama

Ozumo in December of 1933.

Immediately given the shikona of Haguroyama; relating to the place of his birth (Haguro in the village of Nakanokuchi), he was told to prepare for his maezumo debut at the 1934 January tournament. Though Masaji was a newcomer with virtually no sumo experience, one sekitori, the then maegashira 4, Futabayama, took a shine to him and began to give him training sessions.

Possibly due to lack of experience at this time, Masaji ended up twisting his right ankle and had to postpone his sumo debut until the following May Basho. In the end though, this additional training time helped Masaji to build up his physique and endurance level, especially during an extended jungyo tour at which the heya held rigorous training camps.

In his 1934 May debut, Haguroyama easily won all of his five bouts, followed by the jonokuchi yusho at the 1935 January Basho with a 5 win, 1 loss record, the jonidan yusho at the 1935 May tournament (6 wins – no defeats), the sandanme yusho in January, 1936, again with 6 victories and no defeats, and the makushita yusho at the following May Basho (10 wins and just 1 loss). He followed up this fantastic run with the juryo yusho at the 1937 January Basho – 9-2; yusho victories in each division and progressing to makuuchi in only six basho – an achievement unheard of at the time.

His impressive ascent continued in the top division when he went 9-4 in his first makuuchi basho, and following a 10-3 at the 1938 January Basho, was promoted to komusubi in time for May 1938. While Haguroyama was establishing himself as a makuuchi stalwart, his senior heya mate, yokozuna Futabayama was extending his renowned winning streak. Furthermore,

Haguroyama's chief rival, another heya mate Nayoroiwa, was already aiming for the rank of ozeki. Sumo fans were delighting in the anticipation of a sumo dynasty they were labeling the three pillars of Tatsunami.

In his first sekiwake basho at the 1939 May Basho, Haguroyama finished with 11 wins and 4 losses, and thanks to a dose of 'perfect timing' – ozeki Kagamiwa announced his retirement during this basho – the Sumo Association decided to fill the second available ozeki spot with Haguroyama and promoted him even though he only had one sekiwake basho to his credit.

Haguroyama had no trouble fulfilling their expectations as he finished with 11 wins and 4 losses in his first ozeki basho. Following the basho he also married a daughter of his shisho, Tatsunami Oyakata, Kinuyo, to secure himself a position with the Kyokai after his retirement.

After his promotion to ozeki, Haguroyama's sumo style began to change for the better as he opted for a more aggressive and speedier approach from the tachiai. In his third ozeki basho at the 1941, January Basho, he finished 14-1 (a record good enough to win the yusho but being tied with Futabayama, thus lost out to the senior ranking rikishi). The following basho Haguroyama was more determined than ever and won 10 consecutive bouts from shonichi, finally capturing the yusho with 14 wins and 1 loss. These two straight 14-1 basho brought great praise from the fans and sumo experts alike and Haguroyama was promoted to the rank of yokozuna after the basho. He was 26 years old by this time.

As the first yokozuna from Niigata Prefecture, and the first yokozuna born in Japan's Taisho-era (1912-1926), his appearance was in stark contrast to Yokozuna Futabayama

with his supple and highly flexible physique. Haguroyama was himself put together in a harder, more muscular and rugged image. Fittingly perhaps, and opposed to Futabayama's 'Unryu' form of dohyo-iri, Haguroyama went with the 'Shiranui' form – thereby restoring to sumo the style used by Tachiyama thirty years earlier.

In his yokozuna debut basho at the 1942 January Basho, ranked as the east hari-yokozuna, Haguroyama finished with 13 wins and 2 losses, again runner up to perennial yusho winner Futabayama with his 14 wins and 1 loss. As sumo fans were beginning to see another Futabayama in the making, expectations grew higher, but the following May, Haguroyama suffered gastroenteritis which, coupled with acute inflammation of his kidneys meant he had to withdraw from the basho after Day 6. Meanwhile in Haguroyama's absence, Futabayama won his 10th yusho and both Akinoumi (who had been responsible for stopping Futabayama's historic streak) and Terukuni, who finished 13-2 were promoted to yokozuna; crowding the yokozuna rank with four capable men.

Coming back from his kyujo basho Haguroyama was eager to show he belonged at the top by winning the yusho, but could only manage 13 wins in the 1943 January Basho and 14 wins in May; both basho again claimed by Futabayama with zensho yusho.

By 1944 though, the effects of World War II were being felt throughout Japan and Ozumo was no exception. The Kokugikan was taken over by the military and the following basho, the sport moved to outdoor Korakuen Baseball Stadium for a 10 day tourney which Haguroyama did win – without loss in the 10 bouts scheduled. It was a special moment for Haguroyama as he had finally won a yusho as a yokozuna - three years after his

promotion.

In March, 1945 Tokyo was firebombed and suffered heavily (over 100,000 dying), and with casualties and devastation all around, the populace was in no mood for sumo. The Kyokai on the other hand, boldly moved on, staging a closed-door 7 day basho at the Kokugikan (one of the few buildings still standing). That May, Haguroyama achieved a 5-2 kachikoshi, but in the same mind as everyone else, found it hard to focus on sumo when everything around was burned out and no one was sure where the next meal was coming from.

As a result, soon after the basho, the Tatsunami Ichimon left Tokyo and moved to a rural area to collect vegetables and plants for the war effort. They remained outside Tokyo until the end of the war.

When the Tatsunami Ichimon returned for the first basho after the war in November 1945, what they discovered was a Ryogoku mostly burned out with only the façade of the Kokugikan left upright. At the end of this 10 day basho, Futabayama announced his retirement signaling the end of an era. Having always lived in the shadow of the greatest of yokozuna, upon hearing the news Haguroyama reportedly said, "With this, my time has arrived." As if to underscore the point, Haguroyama won all his (10) bouts during the basho, winning the yusho in the process.

His joy was short-lived, however, as after this basho, while en route to a jungyo stop; he received a telegram informing him that his wife was suffering a grave illness. He immediately returned to Tokyo but it was too late. His wife Kinuyo suffered a heart attack and passed away before he could return home. She was only 31. Still grieving, he was hit by tragedy again as just months later his oldest son, the 3-

year-old Masayasu contracted measles and died on May 13th. Haguroyama was devastated and appeared totally drained and exhausted.

But once on the dohyo, as if being pushed on by unseen forces, Haguroyama was almost unbeatable. In the 1946 November Basho at the Kokugikan – renamed Memorial Hall at this time, Haguroyama won all 13 bouts to capture the yusho. At the following 1947 June Basho he won the yusho again with 9 wins and 1 loss, and then at the November tournament finished 10-1 to make it four yusho in a row.

Just as he looked to be coming into his own, he suffered a significant setback. While going against fellow yokozuna, Terukuni, during a jungyo, his right foot stuck in a too soft dohyo rupturing his Achilles tendon. The injury was severe enough to make him withdraw from the following basho.

Any time Haguroyama was not able to participate in a basho or a jungyo event, it literally killed him. He could not sit quietly by while it was taking place. Having long served under the great Futabayama who had instilled in him the responsibility of a yokozuna, he chose to ignore his doctor's advice and participate in a jungyo after the basho so he could at least perform the yokozuna dohyo-iri for the fans.

He caught up with his fellow rikishi in Hokkaido, and proceeded to perform his yokozuna dohyo-iri. Then, just as he raised his left foot, his injured right foot could not sustain his full weight and he collapsed on the dohyo. There was an eerie snapping sound audible to the spectators which brought about instant silence. The result was Haguroyama's second ruptured Achilles forcing him to miss three more basho; a span of 18-months

and with it little hope of returning to the dohyo.

In January 1950 he married Hatsue Takagi which helped return some normalcy to his life and although back in action was no longer powerful enough to duplicate the feat of winning four consecutive yusho. That said, he did not embarrass himself as yokozuna and finished with a decent record each basho – his persistence and endurance showing he still had something to contribute to sumo and that he was not quite finished yet.

In 1952, at the January tournament, the now 37-year-old won 14 straight bouts and faced Chiyonoyama who had just one loss on senshuraku. During the bout Chiyonoyama came out with his ferocious trademark tsuppari but Haguroyama did not give in and remained patient until he was able to grab the mawashi. When he finally did get the mawashi, he threw Chiyonoyama with a shitatenage (a video clip of which is available on the official NSK site at:

http://sumo.goo.ne.jp/eng/kiroku_daicho/mei_yokozuna/haguroyama.html).

Winning all 15 bouts to win his seventh and final yusho, Haguroyama was now 37-years, 2 months old: the oldest age at which a zensho yusho had been achieved and a record still not broken.

Despite his sturdy build, Haguroyama was known to succumb easily to fevers. He also had an aversion to oily food, and he avoided eating Chinese dishes as he often experienced stomach ache afterwards. But, at the same time he was capable of enduring extreme pain on dohyo; during the 1953 Hatsu Basho, Futaseyama biting his right index finger and breaking it on Day 4. Haguroyama chose not to pull out as the previous day Terukuni had

withdrawn from the basho and both Azumafuji and Chiyonoyama were kyujo leaving the Niigata man alone in the top rank – a responsibility he felt to the extent that despite the break he could not let the fans down. He actually went on to achieve a 9-6 kachi-koshi by the end of the basho.

There is an anecdote often told by the first yokozuna Wakanohana, about Haguroyama. When Wakanohana was still in juryo, he went drinking all night and fell short of money to pay a bill. Wakanohana called his buddy Azumafuji to loan him some money, but his excess was quickly discovered and the next day he was called in front of a committee made up of yokozuna and ozeki. On this day it was Haguroyama who saved Wakanohana from certain expulsion.

More than anyone else Haguroyama trained hard and often. Whenever he found another rikishi who did the same, he felt a sense of brotherhood and immediate bonding with them. “This guy trains so hard. He will be a great rikishi one day. Let’s try to keep him,” Haguroyama said of Wakanohana. For his part, Wakanohana never forgot the kindness and did not disappoint Haguroyama as he too became a yokozuna who formed half of the Tochi-Waka golden age of Ozumo with yokozuna Tochinishiki.

On another occasion, Haguroyama literally saved a fellow rikishi’s life once. Makushita Fukusumi was notorious for his drinking habit. While in Shanghai, returning from a drinking binge, he got into a fight with a taxi driver. Soon the military police were in attendance to stop the altercation, but

Fukusumi started beating them and in no time he was surrounded by more officers ready to shoot to kill. Haguroyama rushed in to apologize profusely to each and every officer to spare Fukusumi’s life. Haguroyama risked his own life and seeing this big man so humbly bowing his head down, they finally agreed to let Fukusumi go. Although Haguroyama was able to save Fukusumi’s life, he could not convince the Kyokai executives to let him stay on as the Kyokai decided to get rid of the troublemaker and expel him.

This punishment turned out to be something of a step on a long road though as after leaving the Kyokai, Fukusumi joined the Navy, but was captured by the Soviet army and sent to Siberia. He was able to escape his prison camp and managed to get himself back to Japan to rejoin Ozumo.

Ironically, Haguroyama once again met ‘Fukusumi’ at the 1953 Natsu Basho. Haguroyama’s name remained on the banzuke till the 1953 September Basho, but his last active basho was actually May, 1953.

At this basho, Haguroyama lost his Day 1 bout to Kotonishiki, and was scheduled to face maegashira 2 Tamanoumi (the former Fukusumi whose life he had saved 13-years earlier). Having pondered retirement for some time, Haguroyama could not decide the best time to call it quits – until now. When he lost to Tamanoumi, he felt it was finally time to leave the sport he loved and this loss became the last bout of his career.

Tokitsuyama – same heya – eventually claimed that yusho with a 15-0 record and for Tamanoumi

it must have been a time of sadness and gratification. He was still alive thanks to Haguroyama, and had eventually become strong enough to beat a yokozuna.

Haguroyama officially announced his retirement prior to the 1953 September Basho at the inauguration of the new Tatsunami Beya building. Already aged 38 years, 6 months, he had been a yokozuna for almost 13 years – a record unlikely to be broken.

He remained with the Kyokai after his retirement as Tatsunami Oyakata and brought up more than a few excellent rikishi, Kitanonada, Annenyama (Haguroyama II), Wakahaguro (later an ozeki), Wakanami, and Tokitsuyama (four of them winners of makuuchi yusho). He served the Kyokai with distinction as a director and in time, Annenyama married his daughter, later inheriting the heya.

Of course, some may recall an incident involving the heya’s Kitao – said to have hit his okamisan and subsequently forced out of the Kyokai as a result – that okamisan was Haguroyama’s daughter.

Haguroyama himself suffered kidney failure on October 14th 1969, and passed away at Keio University Medical Hospital in Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo. He was only 54-years of age.

As one of the top men in the Kyokai, Haguroyama needed to think about both himself and the whole world of Ozumo. Many times, he literally carried the sport, a contribution to Ozumo that will not and could not be easily dismissed.

Haguroyama Masaji

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| Born: | November 18th, 1914 |
| Real name: | Masaji Kobayashi |
| Place of birth: | Haguro, Nakanokuchi-mura, Nishi Kanbara-gun, Niigata Prefecture (currently Nishikan-ku Niigata-shi) |
| Heya: | Tatsunami |
| Dohyo debut: | January 1934 |
| Juryo debut: | January 1937 |
| Makuuchi debut: | May 1937 |
| Final basho: | September 1953 |
| Died: | October 14th, 1969 |
| Highest rank: | Yokozuna |
| Height: | 179 cm |
| Weight: | 129.5 kg |
| Favorite techniques: | Hidari-yotsu, yori, tsuri, uwate-nage |
| Toshiyori Myoseki: | Haguroyama (Nimai-kansatsu) => Tatsunami |
| Makuuchi basho: | 37 basho. 321 wins, 94 losses, 1 draw, 117 kyujo |
| Win ratio: | 77.3% |
| Yusho: | 7 |
| Record: | 32 consecutive wins (1945 to 1947) |