

Heya Peek - Kasugano-beya: One year on

by Chris Gould

In late-September 2007, SFM left Kasugano Beya twinkling in both the autumn sunshine and the glare of expectation. One year on, Chris Gould returned to assess the seismic changes that have reshaped sumo's most impressive heya, and caught a rare glimpse of sheer sumo brilliance.

Twelve long months ago, Kasugano seemed a breath of fresh air in a sumo world shrouded in the fumes of heya mismanagement, yokozuna indignity and dohyo invasions by crazed fans. Its youthful 45-year-old oyakata, the former sekiwake Tochinowaka, proudly presided over more sekitori (five) than any of his fellow stable masters. Emblematic of the heya's promise was teenage sensation Tochiozan, whose youthful belligerence was threatening to overwhelm the makuuchi old-guard, in part

represented by Kasugano's very own Tochinonada, who persistently complained about the state of his 33-year-old limbs. The heya's breadth of experience was embodied in the powerlifter shoulders of juryo stalwart Kasuganishiki, the sheer self-confidence of 34-year-old ex-komusubi Tochinohana and the battered frame of former maegashira 1 Tochisakae.

Significantly lower down the pecking order hid the precocious talents of a little-known Georgian, and a podgy bespectacled Japanese nervously and humbly sweeping the ring after practice. Such were the days of yore.

In early September 2008, the talent in Kasugano's interior more than complemented the grandeur of the stable's Shinto-shrine-style r. However, the make-up of the

heya was nigh-unrecognisable from a year previously. Tochinohana and Tochisakae retired from the ring within a day of each other in January 2008, daunted by the prospects of long and painful unsalaried existences in makushita.

Having arranged a joint retirement ceremony for January 2009, the one-time sumo veterans now took their places as baby-faced oyakata, barking instructions from the sidelines, occasionally joining in butsukari-geiko, and leading wrestlers through their warm-down. Their sekitori belts had been speedily inherited by the strapping Georgian and the pot-bellied Japanese, now known as makuuchi fixtures Tochinoshin and Kimurayama. At the very moment his seniors were hanging up their sashes, 20-year-old Tochinoshin was blazing towards



Kasugano beya entrance, Ryogoku

the juryo yusho on his sekitori debut, before sealing his promotion to the big league in March 2008. Twenty-seven-year-old Kimurayama had been hot on his heels, bouncing through juryo in March and May, and into makuuchi in July.

Meanwhile, Tochinonada had been transformed from supposedly washed-up no-hoper to Japanese Hero for the Day after his amazing defeat of Asashoryu in the 2008 Nagoya Basho. For Tochiozan, though, the story was not so rosy, with 2008 constituting none other than a year of frustration and lack of progress. Steel-shouldered Kasuganishiki provided the only semblance of stability in a fast-changing heya.

Kasugano's extraordinary success in rearing prize sumo stallions has oft been attributed to the gruelling training regime laid down by the oyakata. The heya's novices regularly begin shiko between 5.30 and 6am, while the stable's seniors will often toil away until 10.30. Practice sessions during tournaments are unusually intense, nigh-always running for three hours when neighbouring heya appear perfectly satisfied with two or less. Through sheer



Taped-up stalwart Tochinonada lends his chest for collision practice



Dewanoumi beya's Futeno battles the Kasugano boys in de-geiko

hard practice comes the determination and fighting spirit so perfectly epitomised by the taped-up frame of Tochinonada frequently causing problems for the sumo elite.

From the moment three journalists with camera lenses akin to space-telescopes breached Kasugano's defences on Thursday September 11th, it was clear that a member of sumo's elite would be gracing the keikoba that very morning. When the member appeared to arrive in the shape of Futeno, keen to test himself against the stars of a heya just 300 metres from his own, the rapidly assembled crowd of 30 journalists seemed a gross overreaction. But, sure enough, another special guest had certainly been invited and, at 9.05pm, could be seen aggressively wiping himself down in the entrance to the keikoba. He may not have been the tallest, or the heaviest, or the broadest-chested, but his aura consumed the entire room. Enter Yokozuna Asashoryu.

The majestic Mongol strode purposefully to the corner of the keikoba, before demanding a drink of water from the quivering young tsukebito scurrying behind him. His mouth rinsed, the 22-time yusho winner adopted the sonkyo

position towards no-one in particular, and observed proceedings with a menacing glare, inwardly grinning at the inadequacies of his potential practice opponents. Once or twice, his media-obsessed nature caused him to turn his inquisitive face towards the rows of journalists crowding the stable master's viewing platform, and to the huddle of ordinary spectators flabbergasted by the turn of events. On one occasion, he even appeared to wink.

As a rattling barrage of snapshots tried to capture the yokozuna's contemplative visage, sekitori practice bouts went shamefully unnoticed, with even the scowls of the strict oyakata being moderated in the presence of the media. Kimurayama was simply awful that morning, losing virtually every bout against white-belted opposition and appearing completely devoid of the confidence that had propelled him up the banzuke.

Tochinoshin, on the other hand, defeated nearly everything in his path, and seemed keen to exact revenge on Tochinonada after the latter had humiliated him in butsukari-geiko four days before. Tochiozan, meanwhile, was



Kasugano's special visitor prepares to unleash his venom

characteristically inconsistent, sometimes overawing his foes with an almighty tachi-ai, oftentimes appearing worryingly bereft of focus and hand speed. Many onlookers were left wondering if he had learned anything at all during his two years in makuuchi, and whether he would ever acquire the composure and self-belief to vault the sanyaku barrier. Futeno, alas, was doubtless left rueing his decision ever to have made the short trip to Kasugano, crashing to almost as many defeats as Kimurayama, and suffering many more hits to the body.

At 9.20, the tension in the room

prematurely end Asashoryu's career. The Mongolian legend caught Futeno with some choice thrusts before hammering him into the agari-zashiki with a vicious throat-hold. The crash of Futeno's head against the wooden platform was like that of a yobidashi pounding a taiko drum, and the maegashira took several seconds to stagger to his feet. An eagerly awaited re-match was that between Asashoryu and the man who forced him to go kyujo in Nagoya, 34-year-old Tochinonada.

Alas, on this occasion, normal service was resumed in

He did find a few seconds to share a joke with Kasugano oyakata before racing out of the keikoba. Several reporters immediately sprung from their crouched positions in an attempt to follow him, and received a stern reprimand from all three stable masters on duty. Ultimately, though, their shameful disruption of the sumo training environment went unpunished, and several hacks were allowed to linger in the main entrance, desperate for any further snaps of a man they hoped would crumble in the days ahead.

Training ended with the customary butsukari-geiko among sekitori which highlighted the comic difference between the deepness of Tochinoshin's voice and the high-pitched squeal of Tochinonada's. At times, it was as if Barry White had returned from the grave for a duet with the Bee Gees. Afterwards, the white-belters dusted themselves down in the street outside and fielded questions from the few reporters who remained after Asashoryu's hasty departure for Kinshicho.

Readers of last year's piece may recall my 17-year quest to show Kasugano Oyakata a photograph of him and me taken during the London Jungyo of 1991.

Thankfully, in May 2008, the opportunity finally arose. As the towering stable master clamped the photo in his chubby fingers, a smile came over his oft-grumpy face.

'Good, isn't it?' he mumbled.

'I will never forget that evening,' I replied. 'For example, your opponent was future yokozuna Akebono.'

The oyakata reflected for a moment. 'I probably lost,' he mused.

'Unfortunately,' I replied.



Tochisakae, standing in the doorway, conducts the day's warm-down

was pierced by a grunt of 'yoisho' which signalled Asashoryu's intent to enter the ring. The grand champion's only pronounced movements prior to the announcement had been to perform mild shiko and, more memorably, to unleash a cacophonous, mucus-filled cough near the water bucket. A silence of the starkest contrast fell prior to the yokozuna's opening collision with Tochiozan, which resulted in the latter being beaten with the minimum of fuss. A demoralised Futeno then tried in vain to out-thrust the fiery 'Blue Dragon' and ended up eliciting the ungentlemanly behaviour which has long threatened to

scintillating fashion, with the yokozuna completely bamboozling the 160-kilogram maegashira with a pulling inner-arm throw.

Tochinoshin, indomitable when pitted against everyone else, was subsequently upended by a devilishly tricky 'kawazu' technique as Asashoryu began to toy with his hapless sparring partners. The brief sumo masterclass offered absolutely no hint of the turmoil to befall Asashoryu during the basho itself. Ten minutes, ten bouts and ten wins was all the yokozuna needed for self-satisfaction before retiring from practice with an emphatic 'that's enough.'