

# Rikishi of Old

## The 57th Yokozuna Mienoumi Tsuyoshi (1948~)

by Joe Kuroda

On September 14th 2008, Musashigawa Oyakata (former yokozuna Mienoumi) delivered his first basho opening address as the new Chairman of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai (Japan Sumo Association) to a sold-out Ryogoku Kokugikan. He had taken over the post just six days earlier when his predecessor, Kitanoumi Oyakata (the 55th yokozuna Kitanoumi), resigned after his recruit, Russian sekitori Hakurozan, tested positive for marijuana.

For some time now, the Kyokai has fielded complaints that Japan's national sport is being ruined by the ungraceful conduct of rikishi both on and off dohyo. It will be interesting to see how, as Chairman, Musashigawa will bring back the image of Ozumo as a sport of fierce competition based on class and grace. Success in sumo requires dogged determination and iron strength to withstand the disillusionment, tribulations and pains from injuries and illnesses. Most recruits fail to make sekitori level, and many of the few who do wait between five and ten years to get there. But for all recruits still toiling long after joining ozumo, Mienoumi is a shining example to follow, having finally ascended to sumo's highest grade of yokozuna after 16 years of graft.

Born Goro Ishiyama in February 1948, Mienoumi grew up as the fifth child of a construction worker who competed in local sumo tournaments. Using his 180-cm height, Ishiyama-senior used to bring in awards and goods which made his children happy. The young Mienoumi looked very



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much like his father, having broad shoulders and possessing good competitive sumo skills. Sadly, though, when Mienoumi was in the seventh grade, his father passed away suddenly and his family started to struggle financially.

Young Mienoumi joined a judo club at his junior high school and, after immediately showing his potential, was introduced to former sekiwake Hajimayama (then Matsugane Oyakata) of Dewanoumi Beya, only to be told – twice – that he was not tall enough

to succeed.

After graduating from junior high school, he and other graduates were hired at an aluminum factory located in Tokyo's Edogawa-ward. However, working conditions were atrocious and he decided to return home. With no job or money, he realized the only thing he could do to eat as much as he wanted was Ozumo. Though he was only slightly larger than several years before, he felt confident enough to contact Dewanoumi Beya again. This time he went to see Dewanoumi Oyakata (former

maegashira 1 Dewanohana) personally and was welcomed into the fold. However, at the new recruits' entrance examination, Mienoumi did not quite make the minimum height requirements, and only a timely intervention from the heya's Kokonoe Oyakata (former Yokozuna Chiyonoyama) ensured that Mienoumi passed.

Interestingly enough, this was the same entrance exam, in which the former ozeki Asahikuni (the current Oshima Oyakata) only just negotiated the minimum height requirements after allegedly receiving a bump on the head from one of his seniors. Mienoumi and Asahikuni were not only good rivals, but good friends, their enduring relationship even surviving the fateful bout in which Mienoumi broke Asahikuni's shoulder – thus enforcing his retirement from the ring.

Forty-five years ago, new sumo recruits were not automatically placed on the banzuke after finishing their mae-zumo bouts. Back then, mae-zumo was called 'tobitsuki' (literally 'flying in') and the bouts were started without any shikiri. New recruits needed to win four straight to proceed to the next level: 'honchu.' They then needed to win four more straight bouts to make it to jonokuchi.

Mienoumi made his dohyo debut using his real name, Ishiyama, at the 1963 July basho, but got stuck in the honchu class and did not debut in jonokuchi until November 1963. After making the banzuke, he trained hard but never appeared to gain strength, and his oyakata's expectations promptly faded. One day, Mienoumi himself felt unable to continue any longer, and managed to run away to his home only to be persuaded by his mother to return.

Believing his new home to be in Ozumo, and wanting to symbolically cut the tie with his family, he decided to drop his

family-based shikona of Ishiyama, and adopt a new shikona of Mienoumi based on the prefecture of his birth. Right after the change at the 1966 September basho, Mienoumi won the sandanme yusho. Once he reached a high makushita ranking, he easily won enough bouts to be promoted to juryo at the 1969 March basho. Mienoumi kept pressing hard, passing through juryo in just four basho to make his makuuchi debut at the September basho in the same year.

By this time Mienoumi was 181cm tall but his weight was still a puny 112kg and he had yet to perfect a style which enabled him to compete effectively against higher-ranked maegashira. When the former yokozuna Sadanoyama retired, the old shisho handed over the reigns to his son-in-law. The new Dewanoumi Oyakata wanted to prove his worth by grooming Mienoumi for solid showings in sanyaku or at ozeki. After personally taking over Mienoumi's training program, he got the former Ishiyama practicing a firm hidari-sashi (left-handed belt-grip), migi-ottsuke (pushing his opponent from the right side of his body), yori (force out) and nage (throwing) style through hard training sessions.

Mienoumi learned the lessons from the former yokozuna well. At the 1970 July tournament in his komusubi debut, Mienoumi defeated yokozuna Taiho on Day 3, yokozuna Tamanoumi on Day 5 and (then) ozeki Kotozakura on Day 8, earning the Shukun-sho for his efforts. Unfortunately this basho turned out to be a flash in the pan and he zigzagged between sekiwake and maegashira 11 for the next five years. Matters were scarce helped by his inflammation of the liver at the 1972 July basho. With the help of his wife, Mienoumi tried hard to improve his diet to take in more vegetables but he was never able to free himself from a chronic liver

problem throughout his active career, and it was one of the prime factors influencing his retirement.

Despite falling to west maegashira 10 at the 1974 September Basho, Mienoumi did exceptionally well, eventually finishing with 11 wins 3 losses and 1 draw. The draw came on Day 11 after multiple mizu-iri and a re-match against east maegashira 6 Futagodake (the current Araiso Oyakata retiring in November 2008). It was the first draw to be called in makuuchi division since the 1963 September basho bout between then maegashira 10 Ohikari and then maegashira 4 Wakanoumi.

Whether illness was an impetus to find a lifetime mate is not clear, but Mienoumi got married after the 1974 September Basho. With the loving support of his wife Yoko, Mienoumi's health improved quickly and he bounced back to sanyaku within three basho, beating yokozuna Wajima twice and yokozuna Kitanoumi once. His sumo also saw a remarkable transformation, displaying more speed with sharp dynamic dashi-nage throws. His sumo style was favorably compared to his heya's legendary yokozuna Akinoumi, who stopped Futabayama's winning streak of 69 consecutive victories.

At the 1975 November basho, when ranked at east sekiwake, Mienoumi's big chance finally arrived. On Day 11, he downed fellow title-challenger Takanohana with his well executed uwate-dashinage, before downing ozeki Kaiketsu on Day 12 and frontrunner Kitanoumi by shitatenage the day after.

Come Day 15, Mienoumi had a record of 12 wins and two losses while Kitanoumi had 11 wins and three losses, and needed to beat his vertically-challenged friend from the new recruits' entrance exam, who had since become the ozeki Asahikuni. In make-or-

break circumstances, Mienoumi never let the technically-superb Asahikuni get started, winning by yori-taoshi and clinching the yusho which decided his ozeki promotion.

Mienoumi's ozeki debut was unimpressive as he barely managed to get kachi-koshi. Things got even worse the following basho when he severely injured his left ankle, finishing with a record of two wins, six losses and seven kyujo. In the 1976 May basho, he came back without his body having fully healed and suffered yet another injury to his knee which forced him to withdraw and thus lose his ozeki rank. Mienoumi bounced back to ozeki in July, after earning the 10 wins needed to regain the second rank in the basho following demotion. He also changed his name from Mienoumi Goro to Mienoumi Tsuyoshi to underline his determination to never again fall from ozeki, which – despite several cliff-hangers – he never did.

In late-1978, things started to change dramatically for the better. After consistently finishing with 10 or more wins for four basho, Mienoumi posted a jun-yusho score at the 1979 May basho, beating yokozuna Kitanoumi and Wajima as well as Ozeki Takanohana and Asahikuni. The following 1979 July Basho saw Mienoumi lose to sekiwake Tochiakagi on Day 1, but then win his next 13 encounters. On the last day he faced the unbeaten Wajima, jumping out quickly and unleashing a powerful slap to the yokozuna's face before attempting kata-sukashi. Wajima was finally forced to back down in the face of a relentless yorikiri, and Mienoumi thus forced a playoff for the yusho.

A potential second yusho was small change for Mienoumi when compared to potential yokozuna promotion. Aware that he had few

remaining chances in his active career, he knew that failure to ascend now would ensure that he finished his career as an ozeki. 'Now that I have reached here, I want to mount the dohyo as a yokozuna,' he said at the time. 'I don't care if it's only for one basho. At least I can show all the people I have known.'

Unfortunately for Mienoumi, Wajima possessed experience and natural ability that other rikishi could only dream of, and destroyed Mienoumi in the all-important play-off, attacking quickly from the right, grabbing the mawashi and then pulling him in tight while forcing him out.

Mienoumi missed out on the yusho, but his accomplishments of finishing with the same record as the yusho winner and being a runner-up the previous basho were considered to merit the yokozuna rank. Directly after the 1979 July basho, Mienoumi Tsuyoshi became the 57th Yokozuna at the ripe old age of 31. When receiving promotion messengers from the Kyokai office, Mienoumi's shisho, Dewanoumi Oyakata, commented: 'No one should be expecting 10 years or even five years from him. If he goes all out every single day as if it's his last, and he burns up in a year, there is nothing more you can ask of him. Our goal is getting



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a yusho. My only request for Goro is to win at least one yusho before he retires. That's all I am asking for.'

During his yokozuna debut at the 1979 September basho, Mienoumi looked more tentative and lacked sharpness, losing to maegashira in the early stages, but as the basho progressed, he started showing his strength by beating both yokozuna Wajima and Wakanohana, and finishing runner-up. In the following basho of November 1979, Mienoumi was again tripped by his nemesis Tochiakagi but recovered well to beat ozeki Takanohana, Yokozuna Wakanohana and Kitanoumi on the last three days to finish with 14 wins and his first yusho as yokozuna. He thus satisfied the earnest demand made by his shisho.

Mienoumi himself was not satisfied with a solitary yokozuna yusho and looked invincible at the January 1980 basho. Tochiakagi could not stop him this basho, and neither could fellow yokozuna Kitanoumi and Wakanohana. His bout against ozeki Takanohana on Day 14 was one of the most spirited performances ever remembered and became legendary in Ozumo history. The basho turned out to be the finest hour of Mienoumi's active career. His 15-0 record and his second consecutive yusho served as fitting testament to his shisho's comment about burning out every fire left in his body.

Mienoumi was never the same afterwards and announced his retirement before the year was out, winning as many bouts for his zensho yusho as he did in the five basho following it. With his body breaking down, and his liver disease unrelenting, he missed the entire 1980 September Basho. Finally, after losing to Chiyonofuji and (later sekiwake) Tamanofuji at the following basho, Mienoumi knew it was the time to leave. His

short but brilliant yokozuna sumo disappointed neither his oyakata nor all ozumo fans fortunate enough to experience the brief but magical moments.

Immediately after his retirement, Mienoumi announced he would be working for Dewanoumi Beya as Yamashina Oyakata, under the 9th Dewanoumi Oyakata (former yokozuna Sadanoyama, later the Kyokai chairman). However, his old shisho, former maegashira 1 Dewanohana (and later Chairman

group.

As the head of a heya, the former Mienoumi (after changing his name from Mienoumi Tsuyoshi to Musashigawa Akihide) built up one of the most successful stables in recent memory, developing the 67th yokozuna Musashimaru, the ozeki triumvirate of Musoyama, Dejima, Miyabiyama, Komusubi Kakizoe, and komusubi Wakanoyama (the current Yamawake Oyakata who was the first non-college and non-foreign



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of the Kyokai) displayed how much he thought of his former recruit by transferring his old toshiyori myoseki of Musashigawa to Mienoumi right after the basho. Since its foundation by the 19th yokozuna Hitachiyama, the Dewanoumi Ichimon had boasted an unwritten decree that forbade heya to break away - with the only exception made for the 27th yokozuna Tochigiyama, who founded Kasugano Beya. In August 1981, Musashigawa Oyakata was given permission by his old shisho Dewanohana to found his own heya - the first time in 62 years that Dewanoumi Ichimon had permitted an amicable separation from the

born rikishi at Musashigawa to reach a sanyaku rank). Musashigawa also developed makuuchi men Buyuzan (the current Onaruto Oyakata) and Daikiko.

In September 2008, the Kyokai's board voted for Musashigawa Oyakata to take over the chairman's position from Kitanoumi Oyakata. His old shisho Dewanohana, as Musashigawa Oyakata was also asked to take over the chairman's position in December 1968 when the then Chairman Tokitsukaze Oyakata (the 35th yokozuna Futabayama) suddenly passed away.



The previous Musashigawa Rijicho is acknowledged as the man who brought Ozumo into the modern age by introducing video cameras to help decide the bout decision, and contributed greatly to the maintenance of the old Kuramae

Kokugikan building. Under his able leadership Ozumo's popularity increased so much that it demanded a new arena, the current Ryogoku Kokugikan - the construction of which was allegedly paid for entirely in cash.

The Ozumo world, and the whole of Japan, is now waiting to see if the current Musashigawa Rijicho can accomplish feats equal to those of his beloved shisho.

### **Mienoumi Tsuyoshi**

Born in:	Honmachi Matsusaka-shi, Mie Prefecture
Born on:	February 4th, 1948
Real name:	Goro Ishiyama
Shikona:	Ishiyama, Mienoumi
Heya:	Dewanoumi
Dohyo debut:	July Basho 1963
Juryo debut:	March Basho 1969
Makuuchi debut:	September Basho 1969
Final basho:	November Basho 1980
Highest rank:	Yokozuna
Number of makuuchi basho:	68
Makuuchi record:	543 wins, 413 losses, 1 draw, 51 kyujo
Winning percentage:	56.8
Number of makuuchi yusho:	3
Awards:	5 Shukun, 1 Kanto, 3 Gino
Height:	181 cm
Weight:	135 kg
Favorite techniques:	Hidari-yotsu, yori, uwatedashinage