

Amateur Angles #18

The Junior Sumo World Championships as a breeding ground of rikishi (II)

by Howard Gilbert

In the last Amateur Angles I began looking at the Junior Sumo World Championships as a source of current rikishi. There are almost twenty rikishi who are still active who have come through this tournament, and a couple of others have already retired from the professional sumo. In this column I continue looking at these JSWC alumni from 2001 onwards, and then focus on the latest JSWC competitor to make the step up to ozumo.

2001

The most successful JWSC to date was the winner of the open weight category in 2001. Kikutsugi Kazuhiro was a 17 year old from Meitoku High School who had been the national middle school yokozuna three years earlier.. Only six months after his JWSC victory he joined Sadogatake Beya, took the shikona Kotokikutsugi, and began a quick move through the lower ranks. With strong kachikoshi in his first four basho he was in makushita before the end of 2002. The next seven basho were spent bouncing around in makushita before a shikona change to Kotoshogiku coincided with three consecutive kachikoshi and promotion to juryo. He spent only three basho there before making his makuuchi debut with a 5-10 makekoshi at maegashira 16. The subsequent drop was quickly arrested as Kotoshogiku took the juryo title with a 13-2 record, was re-promoted for Natsu Basho 2005 and has remained a makuuchi regular ever since. Kotoshogiku has shown that he is capable of achieving double-digit wins at the higher maegashira

ranks, even spending a couple of stints at sekiwake (the latest being in the middle of last year). However, he is currently on a downward slide, having posted only six wins in each of his last four makekoshi (in the last five basho).

The heavyweight division was also won by a Japanese athlete, 17 year old Shimoda Keisho. Unlike his open weight compatriot, Shimoda went on to a career in college sumo at powerhouse Nihon University. While part of the Nichidai team he won 16 individual college titles and many more as part of the university's five-man team. Shimoda also represented Japan at senior level with distinctions. In 2004 he won the open weight title and was part of the winning team at the Sumo World Championships. The following year he won the heavyweight title at the World Games and was runner-up in the open weight division, while at the Sumo World Championships he lost in the open weight final and helped the Japanese men's team win again. His success back home in the 2005 National Athletic Meet sumo tournament and in being crowned gakusei yokozuna at the National Student Sumo Championships assured him of makushita tsukedashi status, but he could only manage third at the All-Japan Amateur Champs later that year. He joined ozumo in May 2006 and was instantly impressive. In his debut he took out the yusho undefeated and rose to lead makushita for the next basho. That has remained Shimoda's peak in ozumo so far as

he has spent the last two years slowly slipping down the makushita ranks. A shikona change to Takateru at the beginning of this year has seen him secure consecutive 4-3 kachikoshi in an attempt to claw his way back.

Mongolian Gankhyag Naranbata placed third in the heavyweight competition. He entered Takadagawa Beya as a 19 year old at the start of 2004 using the shikona Maenoyu. At over 150 kilograms he bulldozed his way through the lower ranks, reeling off seven consecutive kachikoshi and reaching mid-makushita. However an absence in the next basho dropped Maenoyu back to sadanme and sparked consecutive makekoshi. He recovered to creep back into makushita at the beginning of 2006 but spent the remaining year of his career in sandanme before retiring in 2007. Since this time he has returned to amateur sumo and won the open weight division in Estonia at the 2008 Sumo World Championships.

2002

In 2002 the open weight division was won by Ichihara Takayuki, now Kiyoseumi, who was mentioned in the last edition because of his position as runner-up in 1999. While Ichihara was extremely successful during his amateur career, two JSWC alumni from 2002, also with some amateur sumo success, have surpassed him in the professional ranks.

The heavyweight division was won

by Yamamoto Ryuichi, an 18 year old from sumo powerhouse high school, Saitama Sakae High. He his schoolmate Ichihara in moving on to Nihon University, were he won 5 individual titles and became a mainstay of the team. His amateur career was not enough to give him makushita tsukedashi status and so he began at the bottom of the ranks. At more than 230kgs when he began, the lower ranks proved no problem for him as Yamamotoyama literally bulldozed his way through to makushita for his fifth basho, collecting a jonidan yusho along the way and losing no more than a match per basho. His first makushita basho saw him hit the wall and suffer a 1-6 makekoshi. The drop in rank saw him at the very bottom of makushita for Hatsu basho 2008 from where he won a zensho yusho. Since that time he has not had another makekoshi and has climbed to the lower maegashira ranks.

At the JWSC Alan Gabaraev placed third in the heavyweight division before becoming a mainstay in the senior Russian team. At the 2006 Sumo World Championships he won the open weight division and performed strongly for the Russian team that won its first world title. The 22 year old Gabaraev beat Japanese ace Ichihara in both these competitions to secure his golds. The next January he was starting his ozumo career with Mihogaseki Beya. Going by the shikona Aran, the Northern Ossetian used his amateur sumo experience and muscular frame to blast his way through the ranks. He secured his makuuchi promotion with a juryo yusho in September last year, and only had his first makekoshi in mid-maegashira.

2003

No IFS-run tournaments were run in this year, including the JSWC, because of travel fears surrounding the SARS outbreak.

2004

The Class of 2004 is the largest to have entered professional sumo, with no less than six future rikishi. The middleweight division was won by Fukunaga Takeshi, a standout junior who had also been impressive at high school. He joined professional sumo the next year, although his lack of height meant that he had to pass the second entrance exam before he could join Sakaigawa Beya. Competing under his own name, Fukunaga made his way quickly to makushita but has been mired there ever since. For Kyushu basho last year he took the new shikona Satsumahibiki, a combination of his Kagoshima roots and his alma mater Hibiki High School in Yamaguchi prefecture. However, it has not yet helped him to escape the lower reaches of makushita.

The heavyweight division was also won by a Japanese athlete, Kageyama Yuichiro. A product of Meitoku Gijuku, the prestigious sumo school, Kageyama did not wait to graduate high school before joining Kasugano Beya in January 2005. He took nine basho to make juryo, achieving a sandanme yusho along the way and tying the likes of Asashoryu and Takanohana for speed into the sekitori ranks. His promotion came with the new shikona of Tochiozan, and he had three solid kachikoshi before moving into makuuchi. He debuted at maegashira 14 and posted a kanto-sho worthy 11-4 record. This precipitated a four basho losing streak, including one withdrawal part way through the basho. To date he has shown himself to be more than capable in the lower maegashira ranks but not yet as comfortable at higher levels.

Kageyama's rival at high school and in the early stages of their professional careers, Sawai Gotaro, won a strong open weight division. Sawai was a phenomenon through the schoolboy ranks,

becoming the high school yokozuna in the same year and placing third in the All-Japan Amateur Champs while still a schoolboy. He turned pro in early 2005, joining Sakaigawa Beya with schoolboy rival Fukunaga. He won jonokuchi, sandanme and makushita yusho (all 7-0) in alternate basho before suffering consecutive 3-4 makekoshi at the very top of makushita. This halted the potential of him reaching juryo while still in his teens and he was left behind by Kageyama, who debuted as sekitori and later maegashira before Sawai could. However, Sawai was soon back on track, earning his promotion to juryo with three kachikoshi, the last of which was an undefeated yusho. His promotion came with a shikona change to Goeido, combining elements of his first name and his alma mater. He has proven himself capable of double digit wins in the higher ranks of maegashira and has even been promoted to komusubi, ahead of both of his rivals.

All those that Sawai beat into the minor medals at the JSWC also made their way into ozumo. Runner-up was Hungarian Attila Toth, who came from a family with plenty of wrestling and amateur sumo experience. He joined Chiganoura Beya at the same time as the others above, and there was hope that he would become the new heya's first sekitori. With the shikona Masutoo, his initial results were streaky: impressive kachikoshi have been followed by makekoshi, the influence of injuries, and a general inconsistency. These have also seen the Hungarian stuck for much of his career in sandanme, although he has made a move in the last year into the lower rungs of makushita. Another entrant who has struggled in ozumo is bronze medalist Brazilian Ricardo Sugano. He came from a judo background and only had a couple of years sumo training behind him

when he won his medal was 17 years old. He won the Brazilian open weight contest the following year and joined ozumo in September 2006 when he was almost 20. His training in Brazil had been with former Wakaazuma, and it was through this connection that Sugano gained a place at Tomozuna Beya. Kaisei, as he was named, produced some good kachikoshi but subsequent losing results meant a slow progress through sandanme. For most of the past year Kaisei has been in makushita but appears to have reached his plateau.

A far more successful minor medalist is Georgian Levan Gorgadze. He followed up his bronze with silver in the 2005 JSWC heavyweight division. By this time he was already on the ozumo radar, and upon his success in 2005 he trained at Nihon University until an opening appeared. We know him better by his shikona Tochinoshin, and details of his route to ozumo can be found in this interview at the time of his juryo promotion¹. Since then Tochinoshin has flown through juryo with a yusho and another kachikoshi, becoming a makuuchi regular in the last year. He has managed kachikoshi as a lower maegashira but his one foray into the higher maegashira ranks resulted in a 3-12 result.

2005

While Gorgadze has done the best of the 2005 group thus far, the picture is far from complete. The Japanese champions in the open, heavy and middleweight categories have all since gone on to college sumo. We can expect at least one of Tateno Takashi (Nihon Taiiku University), Okuya Kou (Kinki University) and Matsuda Seiya (Doshisha University) to go into the professional ranks soon.

Also on the Japanese team that year (only in the team competition) was Marvin Lee Sano, whose father was formerly

in the US Navy and is now a radio DJ in Tokyo. Born and bred in Tokyo, Marvin gained his interest through his maternal grandfather and attended prestigious Saitama Sakae High. While at school he was twice part of the school's national championship winning team. He entered the professional ranks in early 2006, a couple of months before his 19th birthday and already weighing a whopping 150kg. He was in makushita within a year, despite missing one complete basho, but his career stalled with a highest rank of makushita 18. He missed his last three basho and was forced to retire after the 2008 Aki Basho due to a congenital heart problem.

The third rikishi to emerge from the 2005 group is Georgian Gagamaru, who as Jugheli Teimuraz came third in the open weight class. By November that year he was in maezumo, and began 2006 with the jonokuchi yusho. For 2006 he rattled off six consecutive kachikoshi to settle into mid-makushita. The next 18 months were spent bouncing around makushita before a change in the given name of his shikona (from Taro to Masaru) sparked four consecutive kachikoshi to bring him to the very top of makushita. He has sekitori in his sights, but will need to demonstrate the consistency of the last year if he is to make that a reality and to hold the position.

2006, 2007 & 2008

I've chosen to look at the last three tournaments as one section because, given the age group that the JSWC caters for, many of the representatives are still at school or college. Indeed, while there are some names to look for in the future, only one athlete from these three years has taken the step up, and that was only at the beginning of 2009.

In 2006 the open weight was won by Sakuma Takayuki, who has since gone on to Nihon University.

He has been a phenomenon in his time at the Nichidai club, even though the school is going through a leaner patch of late. As a leading member of the team while still a first year student, Sakuma definitely has the pedigree to go on to ozumo and should be a name to watch for in the makushita tsukedashi tournaments. The heavyweight champion in 2006 was Yamaguchi Masahiro, who also took out the title in 2007. He has followed Sakuma to Nichidai and also appears to be a strong contender to enter ozumo in the future. The 2007 open weight winner was Hashimoto Seiya, who has since gone on to Nihon Taiiku University and could also be a professional prospect. Last year's two Japanese representatives, Yoshida Keisuke (2nd in the open weight) and Nagumo Gakuto (heavyweight champion) are also names to keep an eye on.

The sole rikishi from these last three years is young Mongolian Adiya Baasandorj, who finally got to step on the official dohyo as he completed his maezumo bouts in January. He had joined Takanohana-beya prior to the Kyushu Basho last year, but was forced to wait the now mandatory two months so that his visa could be put in order. This new requirement is also supposed to allow a "bedding in" period whereby new foreign recruits can get used to life at the heya, understand their responsibilities, and begin learning Japanese. All of this will be old hat to the newly named Takanoiwa as he has been in Japan since March 2006 as a student at prestigious Tottori Johoku High School. Takanoiwa has performed well in Japanese high school sumo and comes into the professional ranks with experience in international amateur sumo. In 2007 he won the JSWC middleweight title in Chiang Mai, and in Rakvere in 2008 he took out second place in the JSWC heavyweight and claimed a bronze in the Senior

teams competition. This is already an impressive resume for an 18 year old, and training with the other Mongolians, former makushita athletes Maenoyu and Daishochi, will have given him good experience. He should be a name to watch for the future.

It was Takanoiwa's entry to ozumo that got me thinking about the Junior Sumo World Championships, particularly as it came at the same time as

Shotenro's remarkable results in juryo. I predict that this tournament will see future Japanese entrants to ozumo, as it is a step along the way for those who have stellar amateur sumo careers. The prospect of more foreign entrants seems less likely as long as the foreigner quota is in place in ozumo. Already we have seen a number of foreign rikishi emerge from the ranks of the JSWC, but it is they who hold the slots that the new generation need.

However, ozumo is not the only avenue for these talented youngsters. The JSWC will continue to produce international athletes with great potential who, we hope, may filter into the senior ranks of amateur sumo and the Sumo World Championships themselves.

ⁱ http://sumofanmag.com/content/Issue_16/Interview.htm