

Rikishi of Old

The 9th Yokozuna Hidenoyama Raigoro (1808 ~ 1862)

(Part 1 of 2)

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On July 20th, 2009, the current Hidenoyama (11th) Oyakata, former Sekiwake Hasegawa (real name: Katsutoshi Hasegawa), will be retiring as he reaches his 65th birthday. He leaves the sport with an illustrious career behind him that included nine kinboshi and 30 basho as a sanyaku man. He also served as a respected and distinguished member of the Kyokai's Board of Directors and former Chief Operations Director of the Nagoya Basho.

Frequently viewed as a rikishi possessing all the necessary ozeki qualities, Hasegawa was overlooked for promotion due to circumstances often beyond his control. Just when it looked as if he would be promoted, the bar was set higher as there were too many ozeki around with lacklustre records.

His shisho, the then Sadogatake Oyakata, the first Kotonishiki Noboru, thought so highly of him that he wanted Hasegawa to inherit the heya, but after his untimely death while Hasegawa was still active, the heya was passed on to former Yokozuna Kotozakura, who was actually thinking of leaving the heya and found his own Shiratama Beya.

Hasegawa never cursed his fate and frequently managed the heya in the absence of the former Kotozakura, who was often away travelling Japan searching for new recruits. It is generally agreed that Hasegawa should rightly share the successes Sadogatake Beya enjoyed in developing the two

ozeki; Bulgarian born Kotooshu and Nihon University grad Kotomitsuki, as well as producing such makuuchi standouts as Kotonishiki and Kotoshogiku. Another Kotozakura recruit who later became his son-in-law, former sekiwake Kotonowaka, took over the heya when Kotozakura passed away and is currently heading the heya to continue the legacy Hasegawa helped to establish.

While it may be true that Hasegawa was not blessed with banzuke fortune, in real life he had more than a normal share of good luck. While he was still a child, Hasegawa fell from a bridge but instead of hitting normally shallow water, he went into deeper water as there was a heavy rainstorm that day, saving him from certain death. After he joined Ozumo, he survived a food scare by not eating a blowfish chanko he helped to prepare in his heya's kitchen. The chanko turned out to be deadly and resulted in the death of some of the heya's recruits. Hasegawa happened to develop a stomach ailment that day and went out to eat elsewhere. Another incident that shocked his shisho happened in 1966. Hasegawa had a chance encounter with an old friend in Hokkaido while returning home to Tokyo and ended up cancelling his scheduled flight which later crashed at Haneda Airport in Tokyo, killing all 113 passengers and flight crew aboard. His shisho broke down upon hearing the news expecting the worst - while Hasegawa was out drinking with the friend in Sapporo, and had no

idea what was happening.

After retiring from active sumo in May 1976, Hasegawa became the 11th Hidenoyama and most of us can only remember this one (helped in part by his yusho portrait hanging in Ryogoku Station) – but obviously there ten other permanent holders of this same Toshiyori Myoseki before Hasegawa.

Hidenoyama was also once an active shikona, and one Hidenoyama in particular, Hidenoyama Raigoro, left significant contributions to the sumo world, reaching its highest plateau of yokozuna.

Possessing Toshiyori Myoseki or elder titles, currently numbering 105, is essential for any retiring rikishi to stay with the Kyokai. These are bought and sold, and even rented out but can only be utilized by a former rikishi meeting certain pre-set conditions such as the number of basho he served as a sekitori and if he holds Japanese citizenship.

Getting back to the Hidenoyama Myoseki, history takes us all the way back to 1795, when then Kashiwado Beya's Wakaura took the shikona of Hidenoyama Denjiro to found his own heya under what is known as "Nimai Kansatsu" - a license to operate a heya while still actively competing. This Hidenoyama Denjiro is considered to be the first Toshiyori Hidenoyama, and while it's possible there may have been active rikishi using the

Hidenoyama shikona prior to him he was the first to become an oyakata under this name.

When the first Hidenoyama died in 1823, the heya was inherited by the heya's former ozeki Genjiyama Kichidayu, who competed from 1807 to 1828. Genjiyama as the second Hidenoyama Oyakata groomed his own recruit, Hidenoyama Raigoro, not only to the rank of ozeki but also to such an impressive level that he convinced the House of Yoshida Tsukasa, then Ozumo's formal purveyor, to grant him the yokozuna license. In fact Genjiyama thought so highly of Raigoro that he took Raigoro as his son-in-law, virtually guaranteeing that Raigoro would take over the heya after his own reign.

This occurred in 1844 when Genjiyama passed away. Raigoro also became an ozeki that year and officially took over the heya becoming the 3rd Hidenoyama Oyakata. The first three Hidenoyama were working oyakata as they competed while managing their heya - not an unusual phenomenon in their day. Both Genjiyama and then Raigoro climbed up to the highest rank in Ozumo of ozeki, but to this day Raigoro is the sole yokozuna to have inherited the Hidenoyama Myoseki. While the current Hidenoyama Oyakata reached sekiwake during his active days, it appears that the next permanent holder of the Hidenoyama share will be an ozeki, the third ozeki in its history.

One of Japan's most popular hot spring areas, Kesennuma, in Miyagi Prefecture (the area known as the land of Rikuzen at the time) was Hidenoyama Raigoro's birthplace. Born Tatsugoro Kukuta in 1808, he was the fifth son of farmer who was also managing a marine transportation shop. From an early age Tatsugoro helped out with his

family business by moving heavy machinery in a wheelbarrow all over town, developing exceptional strength rarely surpassed by his seniors. Tatsugoro himself had a fervent desire to be stronger than anyone else. He especially modelled himself after one of his older brothers who achieved an ozeki rank in local amateur sumo tournaments after being coached by a former rikishi who had competed in the Edo (Tokyo) version of sumo - a place Tatsugoro desperately wanted to be as soon as he was old enough.

The biggest handicap Tatsugoro faced was his short stature - 150cm. Even in an era when most rikishi were around 170cm, no one took his sumo dreams seriously despite his exceptional strength. However Tatsugoro had one personality trait that carried him through life, and that was a spirit of never wanting to give in. Stubborn to the core, Tatsugoro was never a gracious loser either. As Tatsugoro was accorded the highest distinction in Ozumo despite his physical handicap, this personality of his may have been the single most important contributing factor to his success.

In his early teen years, the young Tatsugoro took his first steps towards joining Ozumo by running away from home, leaving his small home town, Kesennuma, and headed for a larger city to help establish much needed connections by following another older brother who was working for a fish wholesaler in the largest regional centre in Miyagi Prefecture, the city of Sendai. In 1823 when Tatsugoro turned 15 years old, he headed to Edo (now Tokyo) from Sendai, and ended up knocking on the doors of Isenoumi Beya - one of the major sumo heya around at the time.

Not knowing anyone connected to Ozumo, Tatsugoro really did not know how to properly prepare himself mentally for sumo life. It

was indeed a world full of physically large and rough young men with very little or no education, almost invariably from very poor backgrounds, attracted by nothing more than the mere promise of decent meals and a roof over their heads. Any that did not fit into the mould became instant outcasts and ended up brutally manhandled. Those physically challenged like Tatsugoro became easy targets. At best Tatsugoro was thought of as a gofer or messenger by other rikishi, too puny to even have a chance of making his presence felt as a recruit. He was never even given an opportunity to train on the dohyo like other recruits as they all considered him too short to make it in Ozumo as a rikishi. Deeply disillusioned, Tatsugoro saw only one way out of his predicament, to leave the heya but continue with his quest by seeking another path.

Tatsugoro left Edo and went to work for an oil based product manufacturer in Tochigi Prefecture, north of Tokyo, but he kept up with his sumo training in his spare time to gain more power and techniques as he believed he could easily overcome his shortcomings by intensity and deft skills. He felt he could not let his dream be quashed that easily, that quickly. And, when he discovered in Tochigi a man with whom his company owner did business was in turn connected to former Ozeki Genjiyama, head of Hidenoyama Beya in the Edo version of the sport, Tatsugoro believed he was more assured of success at a heya if he had the proper introductions from a supporter. It turned out he was correct, as, unlike the last time he was welcomed into the heya's fold more promptly and more professionally. Another factor may have been Tatsugoro himself as by this time he had gained enough weight and his height grew by 10 cm.

At the 1828 March Basho, Tatsugoro made his dohyo debut

as a shin-jo (equivalent to the current mae-zumo level) and made jonokuchi as Kitayama at the 1828 October Basho. Unlike the other recruits Tatsugoro had been working hard to master sumo techniques for some time and as a result he was able to make quick progress – making the jonidan division at the 1829 February Basho and the sandanme division at the 1830 March Basho. Tatsugoro's performances impressed the Lord Matsue of Izumo domain (current Shimane Prefecture) who invited Tatsugoro to serve under his sponsorship and offered him a stipend. To reflect his new standing, Tatsugoro changed his shikona to Amatsukaze Kumoemon in 1831, and by 1833, he was already competing convincingly in the makushita division representing the Lord Matsue.

Around this time there were quite a few outstanding rikishi competing under Izumo sponsorship. Two such rikishi, Ozeki Inazuma Raigoro (the 7th yokozuna) and Shiranui Dakuemon (later the 8th yokozuna but then known as Kurokumo Ryugoro) were indeed head and shoulders above all others in Ozumo, and well deserving of their reputations. Such an atmosphere in the Izumo domain further motivated Tatsugoro to work even harder than before to reach the position achieved by Inazuma and Shiranui.

In his makuuchi debut at the 1837 January Basho, Tatsugoro finished with 4 wins and 1 loss, considered to be quite an impressive feat in his first makuuchi basho. After suffering a loss in this debut basho Tatsugoro went undefeated for the next six basho, till the 1840 February Basho, leaving behind him a record of 30 consecutive wins without loss, galloping all the way to sekiwake in the same timespan from a low maegashira rank starting point. Due to financial hardships, however, Lord

Matsue terminated the sponsorship soon after, but Tatsugoro had no trouble finding another benefactor, Lord Morioka, as his reputation grew and in his honour, Tatsugoro changed his shikona to Tatsugami Kumoemon and kept competing as a sekiwake.

At this time, the rank structure was not as formally established as some rikishi could have easily disappeared and then resumed their careers in their original rank as if nothing had happened. However, the ozeki rank was significantly more unique as the East and West Ozeki rankings must constantly be filled on the banzuke. This meant that once one became an ozeki, one basically remained there until retirement. It followed then that becoming a sekiwake meant he was considered to be as strong as an ozeki, but his tenure in Ozumo was briefer and less distinguished than the sitting ozeki and he had to bide his time the presiding ozeki retired. In the ozeki's absence, the sekiwake could have been ranked at ozeki for a period of time, but he then had to give up the seat when the old ozeki returned. It was the ozeki rank every red blooded rikishi ultimately aspired to, but then achieving sekiwake in itself a rikishi could have felt he had indeed arrived.

So, in becoming a sekiwake, Tatsugoro felt all the blood, sweat and tears he shed and endured through the years were washed away, and he was being rewarded with the near ultimate prize in sumo. His shisho, the former Ozeki Genjiyama, was so impressed by his accomplishment as well as his work ethic and perseverance, that he asked Tatsugoro to become his son-in-law. Then, prior to the 1841 March Basho, Tatsugoro achieved what he had been dreaming of his whole life, finally becoming an ozeki, and proving to the whole nation that he was indeed the strongest rikishi of all, heading the entire sport at

just 164 cm and 135 kg.

Tatsugoro actually made ozeki in only five years, just 9 basho after joining Hidenoyama Beya, extraordinarily fast progress for the time. Although this first time, his stay in the ozeki rank was rather brief, he did make it in convincing fashion as it was obvious that there simply were no other rikishi equal to his abilities. Though shortly thereafter, thanks to the peculiarity of banzuke ranking, Tatsugoro had to return to the sekiwake ranking despite not having suffered a losing record, (and because of Shiranui Dakuemon's return as an ozeki), Tatsugoro did not take the demotion seriously as he believed for certain that he was no longer the second best to any other rikishi.

Though the reason is not clear, around this time he changed his shikona once again, this time to Iwamigata Joemon. Sure enough at the 1844 October Basho, he was back again in the ozeki ranking as Shiranui retired. On the third day of this basho his shisho passed away and he immediately took over the heya to preserve the legacy of his shisho. From this basho onwards he became Hidenoyama Raigoro, the third Hidenoyama oyakata, the title he relinquished only upon death.

By 1845, Hidenoyama had established his position as an ozeki and his popularity grew wider. In September 1845, the House of Yoshida Tsukasa formally acknowledged Hidenoyama's achievements and granted him the yokozuna license. It was doubtful that Hidenoyama was as moved with the designation as when he was promoted to ozeki. The title officially allowed him to perform the yokozuna dohyo-iri ceremony which became a considerable attraction at any sumo event and was eagerly watched by the crowd.

Incidentally there are period

drawings of Hidenoyama performing the yokozuna dohyo-iri ceremony even prior to this time so it may be possible he was granted a yokozuna license by Yoshida Tsukasa's rival, the House of Gojo, but the circumstances of such a move are not clear and there is no credible record of the House of Gojo granting their yokozuna license to Hidenoyama prior to September of 1845.

Hidenoyama maintained his vigour even in his late 30s as he continued to serve at the summit of Ozumo with distinction. As he passed 40, he appeared to lose his mental edge though physically he was still going strong, feeling he had indeed accomplished everything he had set out to do -

and more. The moment of gracious departure came in April of 1849 when he was accorded the highest personal honour of performing his magnificent dohyo-iri ceremony in front of the Emperor of Japan. And then, as if to bid his final farewell to the dohyo life, he participated in the following 1850 February Basho and then announced his retirement, putting the period of his active sumo life behind him as he approached his 42nd birthday.

During his active sumo life, he had a total of six yusho-equivalent basho, experiencing not even one losing record against any rikishi, with only two (Ozeki Tsurugiyama Taniemon with 3 wins and 3 losses and Sekiwake Inagawa Seiemon

with 7 wins and 7 losses) having even records. It's been reported that Hidenoyama's bouts against these two rivals were eagerly awaited by sumo fans as they were always competitive and exciting.

Even in his active days, as the head of a heya, Hidenoyama poured as much of his passion into coaching and developing rikishi he inherited from his former oyakata. Through his efforts and care many of them became successful and the heya in turn prospered. The two rikishi Hidenoyama personally recruited left a distinction after Hidenoyama passed away. Jinmaku Kyugoro was granted the yokozuna license and Ayasegawa Yamazaemon became an ozeki in the Meiji-era.

