

# Heya Peek Tomozuna-beya

*by Chris Gould*

On May 6th 2009, Tomozuna-beya played host to a training session filled with impending farewells. It being just prior to the May basho, and thus during the de-geiko season, the tough men from Azumazeki-beya were invited inside the Tomozuna doors. Much of the session was thus watched by a jovial Azumazeki oyakata, who took great enjoyment from ambling around the keikoba, playfully striking unsuspecting rikishi with a half-drunk bottle of green tea.



*Ushiomaru*

Azumazeki was, of course, presiding over one of his final

practices in the capacity of oyakata, going on to retire from the sumo world six weeks later. His successor, pot-bellied juryo stalwart Ushiomaru, was thus undergoing one of his final keiko sessions as a rikishi on the same day. And, ever-present in the background, his aura overwhelming the juniors around him, his eyes surveying his surroundings with typically quiet content, was Kaio, the ozeki who has transformed the fortunes of Tomozuna over the past ten years.

Tomozuna is located in the Narihira district of Tokyo, a kilometre or so from the Komagata haven of Azumazeki-beya and some four kilometres from the Ryogoku Kokugikan. A member of the Tatsunami ichimon, it is managed by the former sekiwake Kaiki (born 1952), who achieved three kinboshi before retiring in 1987, and whose 30-year-old son has often appeared in the makushita ranks.

Famous Tomozuna rikishi of yore include Tachiyama Mineemon, the 22nd yokozuna, and Sentoryu, also known as Henry Armstrong Miller, the first mainland American to break into juryo and eventually makuuchi. The current building looks new, its shining facade complemented by the glitz of the oyakata's saloon car.

Interestingly, it is positioned very near a hospital, so any injuries sustained in keiko can presumably be quickly attended to.

The quiet backstreet in which the heya finds itself bears stark contrast to the main road running

parallel to it, which runs directly to the pachinko parlours of the Kinshicho entertainment district, which appears very popular with the rikishi. Younger wrestlers can frequently be seen cycling in the area, sometimes venturing into neighbouring Oshiage for some cheap evening food. The relationship between Tomozuna and Azumazeki appears strong, as members of both stables are often witnessed on the same bike rides.



*Kaisei*

On that cloudy May day, Ushiomaru decided that it was time to flex his muscles with the recruits he would soon be coaching on a permanent basis. Some of the more promising youngsters were

invited to tussle with him, but every one of them received a sound beating, usually sent careering into a nearby wall with more force than was necessary. This seems to be the standard way in which young oyakata establish themselves in the stable, with the former ozeki Musoyama of Musashigawa another good example. As Azumazeki himself often said: 'You have to show the rikishi who is boss.'

Azumazeki said few words that morning, occasionally joking with the smaller-in-stature Tomozuna, who was seated next to him. It was, in many ways, a heartwarming sight: Azumazeki, the foreigner in the arch-traditional sport, having beaten back the barriers of racial

prejudice and mastered Japanese to such an extent that he could be treated as an equal by an oyakata of the Japan Sumo Association.

The two men occupied the corner of the keikoba for some 90 minutes, and yet did not see Kaio fight a single bout. The wall-like ozeki, who weighs over 175-kilograms, was due to celebrate his 37th birthday in the next couple of months, and had already become the oldest active second-ranker in sumo history. Increasing age meant that everyday practice was simply not an option – the body would collapse under the strain. And yet the strength of the man is still phenomenal, especially when he establishes a kotenage grip – as a wincing Toyonoshima will testify.

'The man is incredible,' said the towering Kaisei, a half-Brazilian makushita wrestler at the heya. 'He is unable to practice as much as before, but he still looks a force in training and he still beats the top-division guys in the basho. He's an inspiration, really.'

Kaisei has attracted quite a fanbase with his boyish looks, but has so far failed to match Kaio's sparkle on the dohyo, occasionally breaking into makushita but looking far more comfortable in sandanme. A former judo student with a keen interest in football, Kaisei is certainly one of the more affable sumotori, and one can only wish him success as he bids to emulate his stable's most prestigious product.