

SFM Interview Nakamura Okamisan

*Interview by Michiko Kodama
Photos by Haruna Miyashita*

To date, of the many rikishi, oyakata and other interviews SFM has carried, we have never been able to bring to you the opinions of an Okamisan in the world of sumo.

That is all about to change, for in mid-August, SFM writer Michiko Kodama sat down with Nakamura Okamisan at the heya she runs with her husband (the former Fujizakura) in the Shin-Koiwa area of eastern Tokyo.

Also present were SFM's photographer Haruna Miyashita who took all the images within, and Mark Buckton.

SFM: How did you feel when you first realised you would likely become an Okamisan in the world of sumo?

NO: Actually, I thought I would like to start working in a job unrelated to sumo when the time came for my husband to retire from active sumo. Thus, when he planned to open his own stable, I just saw the role of Okamisan as one of (these) jobs.

SFM: You have released two books and in those have spoken of how best to care for junior rikishi entering the sport. How much of a 'mother' do you feel as regards these young men?

NO: At first, I think one of the duties of an Okamisan is to act as a go-between linking the Oyakata and the rikishi because sometimes it is difficult for the young disciples to understand what the Oyakata requires of them. Also,



these days the attitudes of their own mothers have changed; in times gone by, once parents left their son(s) in our hands they seldom tried to make contact with the boy. However, nowadays, they would like to concern themselves with their son's life in a stable, and they can easily do that by simply picking up the telephone. Consequently, over time, I try to be their mothers - taking as long (a time as is necessary) as they

gradually become independent from their own mother(s).

SFM: Do you maintain contact even after a rikishi leaves the heya?

NO: The oyakata decides that if his disciple continues as a rikishi for over ten years the man in question has the qualities necessary to be considered 'an old boy' of Nakamura Beya whether he



finishes in the upper ranks or not. If a rikishi leaves within 10 years, though, the Oyakata has no further relations with him because the boy chose to leave of his own free will; but of course when the retirement was inevitable due to his injury or sickness, the ten year stipulation falls by the wayside and does not matter. Besides, in general, rikishi who have been with us over 10 years try to communicate with us at least once a year anyway.

SFM: Sumo has had a less than positive couple of years. Has this affected the image of the sport in Japan?

NO: I think (the image of sumo) has really been affected. For example, the Oyakata has been scouting for next year's newcomers (to the heya) but has felt the proverbial cold shoulder of society towards the world of Ozumo. Last year the standoffishness was much stronger, though. I feel parents seem to be of the opinion that they should not light-heartedly entrust us with their sons.

SFM: Globally sumo has been increasing in popularity for several years now, but issues with TV coverage, the NSK stream, and

overseas jungyo have seen some groups of international fans fall away. Will this trend be reversed?

NO: To be honest, I did not know the current situation of Japanese Ozumo in foreign countries, but I suppose it will become better in the future. Nevertheless, it will need time (to improve) as sumo is still in a confusing place in this country. We (on the Japanese side) should make sure what (part of Japanese sumo) we want to provide to fans, and reporters (here) will have to try to deliver it properly. For that purpose, for instance, translations of sumo related texts must be performed correctly by individuals who know sumo well; otherwise, the sport as a part of Japanese culture would not be understood accurately.

SFM: If you were approached by the mother of a youngster wanting to get into the sport, but she was worried about the issues in the media, what would you say to her?

NO: The most important thing is her understanding of the world of sumo and to have her talk over the decision to join with her son. Judging by ordinary standards, sumo might be considered as we cannot prevent a boy picking up an injury or suffering an illness as these things are unavoidable

aspects of the hard training associated with sumo. Also, the will of the boy himself is indispensable. Hence, I would explain the situation with joining sumo to her over and over again - the real situation surrounding Ozumo, what we do daily and the like.

SFM: Nakamura Beya is known to make its rikishi finish high school - even by correspondence - why did you see that as so important and how did you make the decision to implement it?

NO: There are two reasons: one is linked to the Oyakata first meeting the parents of the boys he would like to scout. Many parents say that they hope their son will finish high school, worrying in case he has to leave Ozumo owing to injury or sickness.

The other is linked to my own study about 'lifelong education' in detail in a postgraduate school where I began to feel that graduating from high school would give rikishi a more comfortable lifestyle after their retirement (from the sport), and also from the viewpoint that our life expectancy is increasing.

SFM: Besides your husband, have you ever considered yourself a fan





of another famous sekitori?

NO: No one special – largely as a result of not being such a keen observer of Ozumo as a child.

SFM: What do Okamisan talk about when they get together?

NO: We do not have so many opportunities (to get together). Each stable has its own way of managing their heya, so we rarely exchange our views; because of that we sometimes have to deal with difficulties that arise by

ourselves.

SFM: Is there a lot of the seniority system in the Okamisan groups - by Ichimon etc - as occurs with the Oyakata?

NO: The world of Ozumo is divided into five Ichimon. In my group, there is no such system; but it seems that in other Ichimon there does exist a seniority system (within the Okamisan ranks) according to the rank of Oyakata.

SFM: How do you feel when the

boys in the heya lose (a bout) or get a make-koshi losing record in a basho?

NO: It may sound strange, but I really do not care about their record so much because I think sumo bouts can be said (to be more than) just winning and losing. I worry more about whether they had a good sound bout, and if they could avoid injury.

SFM: Are basho generally a busy time or a quiet time for you?

NO: Until the preparation for the senshuraku party begins, I am not so busy. During honbasho, rikishi usually finish their practice and chanko (preparation and eating) earlier; also visitors scarcely come during the daytime.

SFM: Do you think sumo will ever go truly global? Enter the Olympics for example?

NO: I think it is good if amateur sumo can be one of the games in the Olympics, however, amateur sumo is completely different to Ozumo. Although amateur sumo is purely a sport, in my opinion, Ozumo does not exist as a sport as the values of and attractiveness (found) in Ozumo are not at all similar to those aspects (found in) amateur sumo.

SFM: As an English speaker yourself, were you given the chance to send a message to all non-Japanese (and Japanese) fans of sumo, what would it be?

NO: Sumo is the condensation of Japanese culture; the beauty Japan contains within, and the way of thinking inherent in this beauty are one of the fascinating things about Ozumo. Thus, I would like to 'offer' these things (as representative of Japan and the sport) in order to let fans in foreign countries understand them well.



