

Rikishi of Old

The 22nd Yokozuna Tachiyama Mineemon (1877 - 1941)

by Joe Kuroda

At the 2009 Kyushu Basho, Ozeki Kaio reached yet another milestone by beating former Sekiwake Takamiyama's longevity record of 97 makuuchi basho. On Day 15, the Tomozuna giant defeated Ozeki Kotomitsuki to record his 806th makuuchi win, only one away from the record set by former Yokozuna Chiyonofuji in the 1991 May Basho. Kaio was in makushita at the time but as if spurred on by the great yokozuna's achievement, he went on to win the makushita yusho the following basho and make his juryo dohyo debut in January 1992.

When Kaio made his Makuuchi debut in May 1993, the old Futagoyama Beya rikishi won all available awards – Takanohana taking the yusho, Wakanohana III earning Shukun-sho, Takanonami getting Kanto-sho and Takatoriki capturing Gino-sho. With the Futagoyama dynasty so firmly entrenched, who would have believed that a rikishi who spent five years languishing in lower divisions would be around for 16 years at the highest level in Ozumo?

Kaio undoubtedly stands at the top of Tomozuna Beya's modern day history and may only be rivalled by its founder Sekiwake Tomozuna Ryosuke who made his dohyo debut at ni-danme west 2 at the 1757 October Basho. This man held a makuuchi rank for 24 years, a total of 41 basho until he retired at the 1781 October Basho as maegashira west 1.

However, another rival for Tomozuna's all-time number one

ranking is the 22nd Yokozuna Tachiyama Mineemon who led Ozumo singlehandedly after the so-called Golden Age of Hitachiyama-Umegatani. From the 1910 June Basho until the 1916 May Basho, Tachiyama was virtually unbeatable, winning nine yusho in 13 basho and only failing to collect the rest through kyujo (three times) and a runner-up record of eight wins and one hold. Tachiyama's tsuppuri was so explosive that it earned a nickname of "45 Days" (a word play in Japanese meaning "a Month and Half" or "Hito Tsuki Han (a push and half in Japanese))."

Born Yajiro Oimoto in what is now Toyama Prefecture in 1877, Tachiyama was the second oldest son of the Oimoto family, who specialised in green tea growing. From an early age, Yajiro used his great physical strength to roll, twist and part the leaves to process the tea plants. It soon became apparent that Yajiro had the special skills required for cultivation and the Oimoto tea became rather well known, regularly winning first place in regional contests.

When Yajiro turned 20, he had to undergo a physical exam for a local militia. His tall and muscular physique attracted considerable attention and the news quickly spread, reaching the then Tomozuna oyakata, who was in the area for a jungyo tour. Tomozuna oyakata visited the Oimoto farm right away but was quickly asked to head home as both the father and Yajiro expressed no interest in

joining Ozumo. Understandably Yajiro's father could not give up his son easily as his eldest son died young and he needed Yajiro to take over the plantation.

What Yajiro and his father did not know was that this Tomozuna oyakata never took 'No' for an answer. It was no accident that later in his life he had well over 150 rikishi belonging to his heya. He not only produced Yokozuna Tachiyama but also four notable ozeki, Isenohama, Yahatayama, Tachihikari and Kunimiyama as well as Sekiwake Kaizan. Tomozuna oyakata was from Kochi Prefecture where many adventurous young men in the early Meiji Era left for Tokyo to follow their political ambitions and visions for a new Japan. One of them was Taisuke Itagaki who later became the Home Minister of Japan. Itagaki in fact helped Tomozuna build the first Ryogoku Kokugikan in 1909.

Tomozuna did not waste his time after visiting Yajiro and his father in Toyama. He returned to Tokyo quickly and enlisted the help of his friend, Itagaki; the Minister of Internal Affairs Judo Saigo (younger brother of well known Takamori Saigo, a hero of the Meiji Restoration); national and local police chiefs; and politicians. The Oimoto family was simply unprepared for such an onslaught when all these people descended on their modest farm. In the end Yajiro's father had no choice but to send his son to Tokyo.

Itagaki subsequently came up with Yajiro's shikona after thinking

about a mountain in Toyama called Tateyama and the great yokozuna Hitachiyama. Though Yajiro already had a large physique (around 185 centimetres by this time), he was hampered by an injury which caused him to miss a whole year before he could make his dohyo debut. Actually this time away turned out to be beneficial for Tachiyama as he had no prior sumo experience and had no idea what to expect from his opponents. Tachiyama was given sufficient time to learn fundamental sumo techniques and skills thoroughly from the heya's master tacticians, notably later-Sekiwake Kaizan and later -Ozeki Kunimiyama. He was also blessed with plenty of competitive training partners as, at this time, Tomozuna Beya became a major force in Ozumo, even rivalling massive Dewanoumi Beya.

Tachiyama made his dohyo debut at the 1900 May Basho as a makushita tsukedashi and quickly progressed to make his juryo debut at the 1902 January Basho, finishing with 6 wins, 3 losses and 1 draw. At the following May Basho at juryo east 3, he recorded 10 wins and no losses, and was promoted to makuuchi at the 1903 January Basho.

Tachiyama gained more weight to boost his muscular 90 kilogram frame and it made his tsukioshi/tsuppari a formidable weapon. Unfortunately, as this was still an era in which sumo operated an east-west banzuke system (where wrestlers could not cross sides), Tachiyama could not climb up the banzuke despite his winning records. Above him were Yokozuna Umegatani, Sekiwake Kunimiyama and Komusubi Araiwa, all full of vitality. Tachiyama also had trouble gaining more weight due to his digestive system ailments.

By 1909, the year of the opening of Ryogoku Kokugikan, he had sufficiently recovered from illness

to earn promotion to ozeki after the January Basho. He had already won two equivalent yusho and every sumo fan looked forward to seeing his crushing tsuki-oshi. Hitachiyama and Umegatani had combined to build the golden age of Ozumo, and after their retirements, fans found something fresh and new in Tachiyama's sumo. Unlike traditional styles represented by Hitachiyama, Tachiyama blew into the dohyo with hurricane-like force and bullet-like speed.

The realization was already keenly felt by the House of Yoshida Tsukasa as they conferred the yokozuna title upon Tachiyama after he won two consecutive yusho in June 1910 and February 1911. Tachiyama was 33 years old by this time but he never slowed down, instead utilizing every sinew of his 190 centimetre, 150-kilogram frame. At the following 1911 June Basho, proudly competing as the 22nd Yokozuna, Tachiyama won all ten of his bouts. His winning run continued until he was defeated by Ozeki Nishinoumi on day 8 at the 1912 January Basho – 43 bouts. Then from the day following that defeat until day 8 of the 1916 May Basho when he was beaten by then Komusubi (and later Yokozuna) Tochigiya, he won 56 consecutive bouts. Had he not lost to Nishinoumi in between, he would have won 100 consecutive bouts (barring a couple of holds and kyujo).

The road to this record gave rise to many myths and legends surrounding Tachiyama. On day 3 of the 1910 June Basho, Tachiyama looked as if he could not control his power and blew poor Komusubi Kohitachi right out of the dohyo. Kohitachi ended up putting his foot through a wooden floor and driven to kyujo from the next day on. A story surfaced later that the supporters of Kohitachi decided to get Tachiyama drunk the previous night hoping to give

him a hangover so their rikishi could get advantage. In hindsight, the plan backfired disastrously. Another version of this event was that another rikishi hired a prostitute to spend the previous night with Tachiyama so he would go sleepless. The moral of the story is that sleeplessness or drunkenness did not make any difference to the mighty Tachiyama.

There is also a story of Hiramaku rikishi known as Yashimayama. He was said to have been so scared of Tachiyama's Tsuppari that after the tachiai that he jumped out of the dohyo. The kimarite (or announced decision) of the bout was apparently "nirami-dashi" (literally "stare-out") though the veracity of this is questionable. It is also reported that during a jungyo tour, Tachiyama told ten makuuchi rikishi over he would give several hundred thousand yen to any man who could push him out of a one meter circle he drew inside the dohyo. The story goes there was not even one rikishi who could do it.

Although Tachiyama was well-known for his super-powerful tsuki-oshi (push-out) move, he was also known for another rare move called yobimodoshi. The move is said to require tremendous power as one needs to crush his opponent down by brute force after pulling him in tight and literally using his whole body to push him down to the ground. Sekiwake Ayanami once eluded Tachiyama's tsuppari and grabbed the mawashi but he became a victim of yobimodoshi and reportedly broke his lower back as he was flattened down. Tachiyama's arm strength was said to be superhuman as he was reportedly seen carrying a 500-kilogram cannon shell with one arm on more than one occasion.

As with his tsuppari move, Tachiyama set a groundbreaking precedent in the yokozuna dohyo-

iri. While Tachiyama himself stated he followed the Tate Gyoji 16th Kimura Shonosuke's advice and performed the Unryu style, many sumo historians believe Tachiyama should be considered as the father of the current Shiranui style as he was the first yokozuna to extend both arms wide as he lifted himself up from a crouching position. Noted contemporaries of Yokozuna Unryu and Shiranui stated that both yokozuna performed what we call the Unryu style dohyo-iri as they did stand up with only arm extended from the crouching position. Tachiyama was the first yokozuna to extend both arms during the dohyo-iri so if we want to be rather strict in terminology, we should call the current Shiranui-style "the Tachiyama style" of dohyo-iri.

Another first attributed to Tachiyama is a Kanreki dohyo-iri performed by distinguished yokozuna today. Kanreki (60th birthday) is celebrated in Japan as a significant milestone in man's life and it is a custom to wear a red clothing and eat red food (red rice called o-seki-han). Tachiyama accompanied by dew-sweeper Tachinoumi (former maegashira 3) and sword-bearer Tachihikari (former ozeki) performed the first Kanreki dohyo-iri ceremony adorned with red mawashi at a well known western style banquet hall and restaurant, Seiyo-ken, in Tokyo's Ueno Park in February 1937.

In the 1916 May Basho Tachiyama won his 11th yusho and displayed he was still the king of the dohyo. But three months away from his 39th birthday, he knew the day of reckoning was arriving soon after he suffered a loss to speedy Tochigiyama on Day 8. Tachiyama served as a bridge to the speedy style of sumo represented by Tochigiyama from the more traditional immobile yotsu sumo of Hitachiyama. Tachiyama won the yusho but he felt he was no

longer an overpowering presence on the dohyo.

At the following 1917 January Basho, Tachiyama was somehow able to beat Tochigiyama on day 6, but he must have felt he could not do so for long. On the Senshuraku, Day 10, he faced another unbeaten rikishi, Ozeki Onishiki, who was rivalling Tochigiyama for Ozumo supremacy by this time. Onishiki seized the moment to show that he could carry the torch from then on. Onishiki was promoted to yokozuna after the basho and Tachiyama, injuring his right foot in training after the basho, could not make a comeback. He remained on the banzuke for two more basho but announced his retirement formally at the 1918 January tournament.

Whenever a subject of the greatest yokozuna of all time comes up, Tachiyama's name is often overlooked. His Makuuchi winning percentage of 87.8% is the best among all past yokozuna except Jinmaku who served only one basho as yokozuna. As a grand champion, Tachiyama was simply awesome, losing only three times, never giving away even one kinboshi. Purely from a perspective of overwhelming power and achievements left on the dohyo, there is no question that Tachiyama should be considered as one of the greatest yokozuna of all time.

While Tachiyama's accomplishments were as magnificent as Hitachiyama's, he was not viewed fondly by his contemporaries. In fact his sumo techniques were considered to be unrefined and rough compared to Hitachiyama's more traditionally-graceful yotsu-sumo style. In a way this prejudice holds true even today as oshi-zumo rikishi are often looked upon with something to be lacking in their techniques and they are sometimes urged to acquire more traditional yotsu

sumo styles. Tachiyama was also not as blessed as Hitachiyama in having a great rival like Umegatani.

Perhaps there may be another factor. Hitachiyama was well known for his generosity. He was often magnanimous in giving away his money and peppered friends and strangers with gifts. It may not have been a fair characterization but nonetheless the impression persisted that he was more "heel" than the baby-faced Hitachiyama.

Even during his active days Tachiyama heeded well the advice of his shisho, Tomozuna oyakata's, and cultivated many recruits to become a successful Heya master long before he retired and inherited the Azumazeki toshiyori share. Unfortunately his unpopularity from the active days followed him around as an oyakata as he was not elected to a position of Auditor in the Sumo Association directorial election of 1919. It was a rather painful realization to him that he was not well-liked among his peers.

True to his nature, he quickly handed his recruits over to Takasago Beya and left the Ozumo world for good. He knew he had better things to do in his life, such as painting. Under the tutelage of Japanese master Kotei Fukui, Tachiyama became a great painter. His paintings of Mt. Fuji came to be especially in demand as they were recognized for their grandeur and beauty (an example can be viewed here at <http://www.nagai-bunko.com/list/shoga/hito/tatiyama.htm>). In the early Showa Era, most regular oyakata in Ozumo were earning just enough to get by, so in that sense Tachiyama may have had the last laugh as his paintings of Mt. Fuji enabled him to amass a vast fortune.

In an age when many rikishi died young, Tachiyama survived many

of his contemporaries. He had a digestive illness early in his life and was known to have especially guarded against overeating and overdrinking. Tachiyama's best rival up to his ozeki days was (later Ozeki) Komagatake who was three years older than him. Their encounters were always exciting and full of thrills, and looked forward to eagerly by the sumo

fans. However once Tachiyama became ozeki, he had no trouble against Komagatake. He was only 33 years old at the time. Wealthy but diet-wise, Tachiyama lived 30 more years than his one-time rival, passing away on April 3, 1941 at the age of 63.

When Kaio became ozeki in 2000, Tomozuna Beya supporters

believed that they finally had a rikishi to carry the torch passed on by Tachiyama, the last great Tomozuna Yokozuna. Although this wish will no longer come true, the torch will certainly be passed on to future generations by a highly-popular rikishi, an attribute meant for Tachiyama but which sadly eluded him all through his life.

Tachiyama Mineemon

Born in:	Toyama City
Born on:	August 15th, 1877
Real name:	Yajiro Oimoto
Shikona:	Tachiyama
Heya:	Tomozuna
Dohyo debut:	1900 May (makushita tsukedashi)
Juryo debut:	1902 January
Makuuchi debut:	1903 January
Final basho:	1918 January
Highest rank:	Yokozuna
Number of makuuchi basho:	31
Makuuchi record:	195 wins, 27 losses, 10 draws, 5 hold, 53 kyujo
Winning percentage:	87.80%
Number of makuuchi yusho:	9 (plus two equivalent yusho)
Height:	185 cm
Weight:	139 kg
Favorite techniques:	tsuppari
Toshiyori name:	Azumazeki, until leaving sumo in May 1919
Date of death:	April 3rd, 1941