

Kitazakura

Another sumo legend retires

by Chris Gould

He may not have reached the heights of Asashoryu, but his impact on the world of sumo was – in its own way – just as great. On the 3rd day of Osaka 2010, three weeks before the beautiful blooming season of Japanese Cherry Blossom, the man known as sumo's Cherry Blossom called time on a staggering 23-year-long wrestling career. Kitazakura, the veteran whose flamboyant pre-match antics brought joy to so many, will grace the sacred dohyo no more.



Kitazakura forever struck me as a humble man who appreciated sumo's classic values like virtually no other sumotori. He always stressed the importance of a natural tachi-ai, not simply waiting for the warm-up time to elapse, but leaping into action at a time of his own choosing. "You look into your opponent's eyes and you know it's time to begin," he often said. Throughout his entire career, Kitazakura could be seen straining at some invisible leash during the shikiri, forever imploring his opponent to start the match early. Many times he succeeded and an unusually lively contest ensued.

Kitazakura was also humble as a veteran of his training stable. Whereas many senior wrestlers cite their strict sumo upbringing as an excuse to lay into juniors, Kitazakura did not come across as that type of person. Many times during training, he would take wrestlers 20 years his junior to one side and gently explain how they could improve. He was far more restrained in giving advice than others of his rank, and warmly embraced his father-figure responsibilities as his age increased. He should make for interesting oyakata material under the elder name of Onogawa.

The Cherry Blossom's passion for sumo was simply unrivalled – and not only evidenced by his natural tachi-ai. His fighting style was genuinely aggressive and his technical armoury was considerable. Particularly impressive was his defence and the way he utilized his bulky 165-kilogram frame to maximum advantage. His positional sense



was outstanding, and never deserted him, even when his natural raw strength did. Even in his mid-30s, Kitazakura's thrusting attacks were among the most deadly in the business and he remained a feared upper-juryo opponent.

Born in Hiroshima in 1971, Kitazakura joined sumo's Kitanoumi-beya in 1987 but did not become a sekitori for another 10 years. From 1998 until 2009, though, he never missed a single juryo or makuuchi match due to injury, a testament to his fierce determination and his rigorous care for his body. Training for him was a meticulous exercise, and became more of a mental challenge for him as his age advanced. In his mid-30s, he was in no physical condition to train every day and was forced to become very selective about his training area and situations. No-one balanced the needs for rest and practice better



than him.

Asked why he suddenly became so strong in the late 1990s, Kitazakura nobly replied: "I got married and suddenly had a family to provide for. Winning was the only way I could provide for them." His sense of family responsibility was overwhelming and he clearly tried to involve his wife, Megumi, and daughter Alisa in as much of his sumo success as possible. During the Ryogoku local festival, for which the Kokugikan was opened to the public, Kitazakura would showcase the fruits of the hobby he shared with Megumi: making jewellery with his chunky fingers.

Kita would design the jewels and

Megumi would usually make them, with Kita making some special items at festival time – and attracting hoards of interested spectators. Alisa would also come to help, and when she did, it was clear from the conversations that her father had an outstanding commitment to ensuring she had a good education. In June 2009, when Kita became the oldest sumotori to return to juryo aged 37, he made sure that the two most important people in his life, Megumi and Alisa, were in front of the TV cameras to share his joy. Without their support, he would only be one-third the fighter – and the man.

Many people ask why Kitazakura and his brother Toyozakura took

the unusual step of joining separate training stables. Kita's answer was that his father, who was also a sumo wrestler, wanted his sons to always think independently, and not rely too much on each other. Given that both his boys made makuuchi on several occasions, the father must feel his advice was well-justified.

Kitazakura will be best remembered for his massive salt-throws and his emphatic windmill-like gestures before matches – hard-hitting symbols of his indomitable fighting spirit. After September 2008, it became quite painful to watch a man so full of passion suffer so many sumo defeats, simply because his body could no longer match the aspirations of his mind. But Kita always kept up the smile, even with the photographers lining the corridors after his every defeat, expecting their pictures to be the last of Kitazakura in a competitive mawashi. Furthermore, his shikiri-naoshi and shiko-stamping never lost their unmistakable aesthetic quality – a symbol of his unwavering concentration. With his bulky frame, receding hairline and artistic shiko, Kitazakura was the consummate ageing samurai warrior; an impeccable advert for how sumo should be performed.

Although he only made makuuchi a few times, Kitazakura's fantastic efforts in the ring have at least earned him one record which will never be broken. In 2000, he fought Asashoryu for the first and only time. Asashoryu's retirement in February 2010 ensured that Kitazakura is one of very few rikishi to boast an unbeaten record against him. And it is a mark of the man's modesty that Kitazakura was blissfully unaware of the fact until SFM told him!

Farewell sumo legend Kitazakura. If only there were more wrestlers like you.