

Rikishi of Old

The 60th Yokozuna Futahaguro Koji (1963~) Part II

by Joe Kuroda

Last time, Joe entertainingly explained the early career of Yokozuna Futahaguro, the last grand champion before Asashoryu to effectively lose his rank to bad behaviour. This time, Joe reveals the exciting conclusion to Futahaguro's story.

In October 1987, Futahaguro apparently became upset over a trivial matter and punched his tsukebito Yamanami. Five other tsukebito all sympathized with Yamanami as they too felt they could no longer take Futahaguro's unpredictable and rough treatment. The six men then decided to run away from sumo together. The punch quickly turned into a major embarrassment for the heya and Ozumo, for it looked as if Ozumo was condoning wanton violence within its ranks. The Kyokai's executives and heya officials furiously attempted to diffuse the escalating crisis and forced Futahaguro to apologize to the six tsukebito. Somehow the worst was averted.

Meanwhile, on the dohyo, Futahaguro's records as a yokozuna remained as unimpressive as ever after he put together two sub-par performances of 9-6 loss and 8-7 in July and September 1987. He was clearly overshadowed by two Kokonoe Beya Yokozuna Chiyonofuji and Hokutoumi (the former Hoshi who earned his yokozuna promotion earlier that year).

Although Onokuni was facing his yokozuna debut basho in November 1987, all the attention was on Futahaguro, with everyone

curious to see if he had been truly rehabilitated and could focus on his sumo. Right on cue, Futahaguro appeared to revive his former awesome self and put together a 13-bout winning streak from day 1. He ended up losing to both Hokutoumi and Chiyonofuji on the last two days and missed out on the yusho again. However, Futahaguro's 13-2 record was his best since promotion and he looked firmly on the road to recovery.

As the basho – and indeed 1987 – closed, it appeared that Futahaguro was finally on the way to fully realising his potential, following in the great footsteps of Tatsunami Beya's super yokozuna, Futabayama. But, just as his sumo future appeared brighter than ever before, what started out as mere innocuous talk spiralled out of control and landed him in an explosive situation, eventually leading to total self destruction.

The story went like this. Futahaguro's shisho heard from one of the heya's recruits that the boisterous yokozuna was complaining about the heya's chanko meals, claiming it to be so bad that he couldn't eat even one spoonful. By this time everyone should have been accustomed to Futahaguro's constant whining over just about everything but, for whatever reason, the shisho took an exception on this occasion. A big fight thus ensued between Tatsunami oyakata and Futahaguro, which allegedly ended with the latter hitting a heya supporter and his stable master's wife who tried to separate them. It was reported that the wife and supporter sustained minor

injuries.

This all happened on December 27 1987. While Futahaguro subsequently locked himself in his house and threatened to walk away from sumo, Tatsunami oyakata promptly went to the Kyokai office to tender Futahaguro's resignation without consent from the yokozuna himself. The Kyokai directors were caught off guard as most were preparing for the New Year celebration at that time. On December 31, the directors held an emergency meeting where they were told that several oyakata headed by then Takekuma oyakata (former Sekiwake Kitanonada) tried to persuade Futahaguro to stay but that his mind would not budge. The directors had no choice but to respect Tatsunami's wish to dismiss Futahaguro outright. They could have chosen the more grave route of expelling him but had no stomach for inflicting such punishment on their yokozuna. Traditionally all yokozuna and ozeki receive a sum of money upon retirement in recognition of their contribution to Ozumo. Futahaguro became the only yokozuna not to be provided with this bonus as he was the only active yokozuna ever to be dismissed in Ozumo history.

Leaving Ozumo not because of injury or reaching one's physical limit, but as if to run away from it in the middle of night, meant that Futahaguro was perceived harshly by the public. The public saw a man of just 24 years old, never fulfilling expectations and wasting away abnormal potential.

Futahaguro served only eight

basho as yokozuna (his name appeared on the following 1988 Hatsu Basho banzuke though he was long gone by the start). Significantly, he failed to win even one yusho in his eventful career. In the long history of Ozumo, there has not been any yokozuna whose active career was cut short in such an abysmal manner.

It was undoubtedly a personal tragedy of significant magnitude but it was also a great loss to the world of Ozumo. Yokozuna Chiyonofuji admitted after his retirement that if Futahaguro had stayed on longer, his own career may not have been as long or his achievements as distinguished. With Futahaguro able to rival him every basho for yusho, it's an intriguing question whether Chiyonofuji could have accomplished his 53-bout winning streak or attained 1000 wins. Against Chiyonofuji, Futahaguro had a six win-eight loss career record (excluding yusho kettei-sen results). As a yokozuna he lost all three times to Chiyonofuji in his yusho kettei sen encounters. Futahaguro thus never achieved the top banzuke ranking of first East Yokozuna.

After his "retirement" from Ozumo, Kitao decided to earn his living as a sports commentator. He was always interested in working as a sports analyst. Even during his sumo days, he was the first rikishi to acquire a personal computer and start compiling other rikishi's statistics. Calling himself a "Sports Adventurer", he contributed articles to a variety of magazines. Though Kitao initially denied any interest, his Ozumo fans naturally expected him to go into professional wrestling as he was still in his mid-twenties and in good competitive shape.

Thus, in February 1990, did he make a much ballyhooed New Japan Professional Wrestling debut, parading into the mammoth Tokyo Dome with

music composed by current Ozumo commentator Demon Kogure Kakka and then "beating" a well known American wrestler Bam Bam (Scott) Bigelow. Having received special training from legendary Lou Thesz, Kitao attempted to model himself on Hulk Hogan but his wrestling skills never progressed beyond minimal level due to his habit of skipping training sessions.

It was apparent from the moment he stepped into the professional wrestling ring that he expected to be treated like an active yokozuna and king of the ring despite his many shortcomings. His brazen attitude, whether an act or otherwise, never warmed the hearts of wrestling fans. The honeymoon was over before it even began as the fans started to desert him immediately. Even in a heel role, the fans were yelling at him to "go home," turning the hall into a cacophony of jeering and booing. This was quite a contrast to another former yokozuna Wajima, who was greeted warmly by fans when he turned to professional wrestling.

Kitao's break with New Japan Professional Wrestling group came rather abruptly after he made a racist comment against New Japan's star wrestler Riki Choshu, calling him a "Korean son of bitch." (Choshu was actually a resident Korean born and raised in Japan).

At this time another major professional wrestling star in Japan, Genichiro Tenryu, launched a rival professional league SWS sponsored by a major retail chain of eye glasses in Japan named "Megane Super." However, even in this new league, Kitao got himself into major controversy when he was pitted against John Tenta (former Makushita rikishi Kototenta from Vancouver, Canada). While Tenta attempted to engage Kitao in wrestling moves, Kitao plainly refused to go

along and finally lost the match by penalty. After the loss, Kitao grabbed a microphone and yelled to Tenta: "You do nothing but yaocho ("match-fixing"), you yaocho Bastard!" amid loud booing from the crowd. This was still in the days when the word "yaocho" was never publicly used in pro-wrestling circles. Kitao's contract was thus terminated quickly by SWS.

Even after his dismissal from SWS, Kitao could not leave the world of combat sport altogether. In 1992 He participated in Nobuhiko Takada's newly launched UWF International professional wrestling league matches, and then joined tournaments staged by a new martial arts organization: PRIDE. Kitao may have had ambitions of starting up his own martial arts organization: he set up his own training gym, Kitao Dojo, to develop new athletes in 1994. After his first victory in a PRIDE tournament held in October 1997, Kitao announced that he had accomplished all he wanted to do in martial arts and that he would retire from the field within a year.

In January 1999, former Komusubi Asahiyutaka of Oshima Beya retired to take over Tatsunami Beya. Even during his days as the heya shisho, there were persistent talks of Tatsunami oyakata's dubious financial dealings and rumours of his siphoning off his rikishi's remunerations. While Kitao never disclosed publicly how he may have been cheated out of all the additional bonuses he had received as yokozuna and ozeki, other rikishi started coming forward with accusations.

The major problem began when Asahiyutaka accused his father-in-law (whose daughter he married to take over the heya) of pocketing all the revenues from his retirement ceremony. Subsequent wrangling resulted in Asahiyutaka divorcing

Tatsunami's daughter and moving the heya out of the building owned by the former oyakata. The former Tatsunami oyakata even took Asahiyutaka to the court for payment of 175 million yen for the Toshiyori Myoseki share of Tatsunami. He ultimately lost the case in Japan's Supreme Court.

With the clear separation of Tatsunami Beya from the former oyakata completed, there was a new movement within Ozumo for a reappraisal of the Kitao's departure from the heya and Ozumo. As an organization, the Kyokai has not yet recognized Kitao's return to Ozumo but Kitao was invited by the new Tatsunami oyakata as a special advisor to his heya. The man who helped to bring back Kitao to the heya was the former makushita and current Kyokai Sewanin, Haguroumi who served as a Tsukebito to Futahaguro. Though both Kitao and Haguroumi have not discussed the original incident publicly, knowledgeable sources agree that most of what was alleged to have taken place was made up by the previous Tatsunami oyakata.

Current speculation revolves around how the former Tatsunami oyakata got himself and Kitao (without his knowledge) involved in money troubles with mobs, thus putting Kitao in an untenable position and leaving him unable to continue his career as yokozuna. It has been reported that the oyakata took all the gift money Kitao received throughout his entire active career, and money given to other recruits from the Kyokai's head office.

The former oyakata was rather well known for his sloppy heya operation and Ozumo's senior oyakata were deeply dismayed with his total lack of leadership skills. It's clear that the Kyokai officials and executives would never have allowed Kitao back even in an unofficial capacity if they believed everything he was accused of. While it is now generally believed that Kitao was wrongly demonised, the ex-yokozuna has never really been rehabilitated. The major reason may be that both the Kyokai and media which reported so lopsidedly against Futahaguro could not readily admit that they

were so wrong in their initial assessments.

As a result whenever Asashoryu's yokozuna misconduct was reported, the media continued to bring up the Futahaguro example without reassessing their original reporting or questioning the dubious "facts" they presented before. While the demeanour and conduct of both Asashoryu and Futahaguro as yokozuna has been remarkably lacking, it's patently clear that unduly negative media reporting overly-influenced the public perception of both rikishi. It is no exaggeration to state that such sensationalism caused by the media eventually catapulted these men out of Ozumo.

Still compared to yokozuna lacking grace even 22 years after his retirement, Futahaguro goes down as a man who left sumo while still a diamond in rough, his true potential never materialising, his presence neither missed fondly nor regretted. It is this fact, more than anything, which underlines the tragedy of Futahaguro Koji.

Futahaguro Koji

Born in:	Tsu City, Mie prefecture
Born on:	August 12, 1963
Real name:	Kitao Koji
Shikona:	Futahaguro Koji
Heya:	Tatsunami
Dohyo debut:	1979 March
Juryo debut:	1984 January
Makuuchi debut:	1984 September
Final basho:	1987 November (active), 1988 January (banzuke only)
Highest rank:	Yokozuna
Number of makuuchi basho:	20
Makuuchi record:	197 wins, 87 losses, 16 kyujo
Winning percentage:	69.40%
Number of makuuchi yusho:	0
Awards:	Shukun-sho (5), Gino-sho (2)
Height:	199 cm
Weight:	157 kg
Favourite techniques:	Migi-yotsu, yori, sukuinage
Toshiyori name:	n/a