

Rikishi of Old

The 62nd Yokozuna Onokuni Yasushi (1962 ~) Part 1

by Joe Kuroda

Most yokozuna conjure up an image of a goliath, with a ferocious temperament and imposing physique, a presence most of us find rather difficult to get casually acquainted with and start a conversation. The 62nd Yokozuna Onokuni Yasushi indeed had an imposing figure, being the only Japanese born yokozuna ever to top 210 kilogram during his reign. Even now, 20 years after his retirement, he still reminds many of an elephant, albeit an unusually good natured one.

During his yokozuna days, sumo fans affectionately called him "Panda". Now, as Shibatayama oyakata, he is actually known more for his sweet tooth than for his former prestigious rank. (He even brought a cake he made himself to his recruit Daiyubu's juryo promotion press conference). His love of sweets is legendary, exemplified by his bestseller book: "The 62nd Yokozuna Onokuni's All Japan Sweet Jungyo Tour," decked with a chockfull of delectable cakes, sweets and deserts he discovered during jungyo tours and independent travels around Japan.

Although Onokuni is not remembered as one of the more distinguished yokozuna in the Showa Era (1926-1989), at least he can say he was the yokozuna who participated in the unforgettable "final bout of Showa", in which he stopped fellow Yokozuna Chiyonofuji's winning streak of 53 bouts.

Born Yasushi Aoki, Onokuni grew up in the town of Memuro, in

Hokkaido's remote Kasei-gun, about 150 km east of Sapporo. His father mostly raised cattle and the young Yasushi helped out with farming chores whenever he could. Yasushi had to travel far to get to his elementary school, a situation that helped to strengthen his legs and lower back but certainly did not contribute to good marks at school as his long commute ate into homework time. He may have hated going to the school but he grew up strong. At school he participated in baseball, swimming and skiing activities but whatever sport he played, without doubt he was exceptional at it.

By the time he entered Memuro Junior High School, he became an irreplaceable member of the local community as he easily surpassed any adult as far as physical strength was concerned. Yasushi simply loved physical exercises and he immediately joined the new school's judo club in his first year. Judo felt natural to him and he eagerly entered local tournaments to test his skill and prowess. In his third year he won the Hokkaido Junior High Judo Championship in the individual category. This was the same tournament the young Hoshi, a year younger than Yasushi, entered but Hoshi lost his preliminary match and a match between them never materialized until they both joined Ozumo (Hoshi subsequently became the 61st Yokozuna Hokutoumi). Nobody in the judo hall that day would ever have expected that in that same room stood two boys who would later fight a match which changed a nation's perceptions of sumo.

Yasushi was such a gifted athlete that it was evident that if he put his mind to it, he could succeed in almost any sport. He was asked to participate in a track and field tournament and, without doing hardly any training, won the first place in shot put. His athletic ability became well known by the time he was in his third year, and he started getting sport scholarship offers from private high schools. The Tokai University Fourth High School in Sapporo repeatedly asked him to join their judo club. Yasushi was more than interested and started thinking seriously of going to the school after his graduation.

In the summer of 1977, fate intervened in the young Yasushi's life. An Ozumo jungyo tour came to his town and the school's judo club decided to go see it even though Yasushi had no interest whatsoever in sumo at this time. It did not take any time before he was recognized for his large physique and he was asked to put on a mawashi to join bouts involving local amateur sumo enthusiasts and jonidan level rikishi. While very few well known figures from Ozumo actually participated in the tour stop, a former juryo from the area, Wakatokachi, witnessed Yasushi's bouts and immediately realized a great potential in him. Wakatokachi contacted an ozeki at his former heya, Hanakago Beya's Kaiketsu, knowing Kaiketsu was planning to launch his own heya after his retirement and was looking for recruits.

However Yasushi was all intent on

going to the high school and rejected all offers of joining Ozumo by running away every time he learned someone from Ozumo was coming to see him. Kaiketsu was equally determined and decided to take another approach. He invited Yasushi for sightseeing in Tokyo and let him stay at the heya as he knew a young teenager from the countryside would be really excited to get an opportunity to see the capital. Kaiketsu not only paid for travelling expenses and food but also gave Yasushi pocket money so he could experience the big city by himself. It was clear that Yasushi was impressed. His family was not dirt poor but he never even imagined what living in a big city was like coming from a remote country side in the island of Hokkaido.

In early 1978, on the day before Yasushi was to complete his enrolment application to the high school, Kaiketsu called Yasushi. This time he didn't mince his words. Kaiketsu told Yasushi succinctly: "You probably spent many hours thinking about your future, but I can tell you one thing: you won't be able to earn living with judo. Just think about it!" It was exactly what Kaiketsu was told from his own oyakata, Hanakago, when he decided to join ozumo. These words also had the desired effect on Yasushi.

Taking his family name of Aoki as his shikona, Yasushi made his dohyo debut at the 1978 Haru Basho. From this same basho, two notable rikishi also stepped on the dohyo for the first time, the later ozeki Asashio (the current Takasago oyakata) who made his Makushita Tsukedashi debut, and later-sekiwake Mitoizumi, the current Nishikido oyakata. Yasushi got kachi-koshi at jonokuchi level in the following May Basho, and shisho Hanakago Oyakata changed his shikona to Onokuni, derived from his own

shikona of Onoumi.

In his early years Onokuni did not have the massive body for which he was known later in his career. He was 185 cm tall but weighed only 94 kg when he was promoted to sandanme in the 1979 July Basho. However from around this time he started gaining weight. By the 1981 January Basho when he was promoted to makushita for the first time, his weight had ballooned to 115 kg. Onokuni struggled during his sandanme and makushita days. He could beat just about any opponent when he could get his favourite migi-yotsu grip, but more often than not against skilled opponents, he was easily stopped cold and lost rather humbly.

In February 1981, former Ozeki Kaiketsu left Hanakago Beya to found his own heya, Hanaregoma Beya, taking his inner recruits including Onokuni. Onokuni finally made juryo at the 1982 March Basho as a 19 year old. While he fell down to makushita after one basho, he was back in juryo at the 1982 November Basho. Whether because of renewed vigour or refreshed by the new environment, Onokuni started to gain weight more rapidly, almost 20 kg in one year! By this time his weight had grown to 135 kg, not yet massive but increasing massively quickly. The following 1983 January Basho, Onokuni won his first juryo yusho after a three-man playoff. At the following 1983 March Basho when he was still 20 years old, he made his makuuchi debut.

Onokuni not only sharpened up his favourite migi-yotsu, hidari-uwate technique but he became physically imposing enough to stop and defeat most opponents even when he could not get into his form. His weight grew from 135 kg to 156 kg and once he firmly and squarely grabbed the mawashi, no opponent could

physically push him back and stop his yori move any longer.

Onokuni's growing physique and his rapid rise in makuuchi were beginning to be noticed by sumo fans around Japan, and events at the November 1983 basho ensured he became the rikishi not to be missed. In this basho, ranked at maegashira east 3, he faced Yokozuna Chiyonofuji on Day 1, Yokozuna Takanosato on Day 4 and Yokozuna Kitanoumi on Day 6... and defeated them all. Takanosato was on an 18-bout winning streak after his yokozuna promotion and looked to be invincible, but Onokuni hit him squarely from the front and won convincingly. He earned three kinboshi and won his first shukunsho award this basho, finishing with a 10 win, 5 loss record.

He was promoted to sekiwake east 1 in the following 1984 January Basho and, gaining more self confidence, he again won shukunsho. Amazingly, in the ensuing 1984 March Basho, he won a third consecutive shukunsho as well kanto-sho awards by beating three yokozuna and three ozeki. His weight continued to grow during this period and he was competing at 173 kg, likely the optimum weight for his 189 cm frame.

Onokuni fell down to maegashira 1 at the 1984 July Basho but again beat Yokozuna Takanosato, gaining his fourth shukunsho award and promotion back to sekiwake. Once back on the third rank, Onokuni did not display sharpness especially against lower ranked rikishi, but he was good enough to win kachi-koshi in the following three basho, finishing with 8-7, 9-6 and 9-6 records.

Onokuni actually may have been blessed with banzuke luck a few times in his career. After he made his makuuchi debut, he made sanyaku in only his fourth makuuchi basho with hardly

spectacular records of 8-7, 6-9 and 8-7. As expected, he was able to stay in komusubi for only one basho, finishing with a 6-9 record and falling down to maegashira east 3. Then he bounced back again to sekiwake with 10-5 record, returned to maegashira east 1 again, and then posted another 10-5 to earn a longer spell at sekiwake.

The banzuke luck continued for Onokuni as after the 9-6 record at the 1985 March Basho, which he followed up with a 10-5 at the 1985 May tourney, winning shukun-sho yet again. He then went one better, registering 12-3 at the 1985 July Basho for a runner-up spot, as well as earning the kanto-sho award. While his three consecutive basho record of 9-6, 10-5 and 12-3 fell short of the 33 wins commonly considered as ozeki form, Kyokai executives felt Onokuni fulfilled his sekiwake responsibility well and decided to proceed with his ozeki promotion, despite calls of upholding more rigorous and stringent standards for promotion.

Onokuni did not appear to be fazed by the controversy and was involved in the yusho race for three straight basho after his ozeki promotion, finishing with 12-3, 11-4 and 12-3 records, garnering two jun-yusho. However he soon started to depend too much on his physique alone, by this time hovering around 200 kg. Often his sumo was based on being passive, waiting for his opponent to take initiative and hopefully make a

mistake. Due to his increasing weight, Onokuni was more susceptible to falling face down by hatakikomi (slap down). Lacking sharpness in execution and decisiveness to complete his moves, Onokuni's trials and tribulations continued for one full year.

By the 1987 March Basho, Onokuni had seen Futahaguro – one year his junior – leapfrog him to yokozuna. Furthermore, his Hokkaido judo-mate Hoshi, renamed Hokutoumi, now had two makuuchi yusho and looked yokozuna material himself. It was clear even to Onokuni that Hokutoumi would be promoted to yokozuna ahead of him, and he resolved to win his first yusho and become a yokozuna in a year.

Onokuni himself knew he could not rely on his banzuke luck any longer and proceeded to start winning with a vengeance in the following 1987 May Basho, displaying what made Onokuni a successful ozeki by using his physique with precision and determination. He raced to 12-0, then faced yokozuna Futahaguro and Chiyonofuji on Day 13 and 14, beating them both with conviction. After that, he had to face his rival Hokutoumi on senshuraku, who was at 13-1 with an excellent chance of being promoted to yokozuna after the basho. Hokutoumi wanted more than anything else to defeat his chief rival to finish the tourney with a good impression and a chance of winning consecutive yusho. But on

this day, Onokuni was truly unstoppable, winning his first yusho by setting aside the yokozuna-bound Hokutoumi cleanly.

In the following 1987 July Basho, Onokuni finished with 12 wins and 3 losses and won the jun-yusho again. The Onokuni luck did not materialize this time as he lost to Hokutoumi on the senshuraku and the Kyokai decided to wait one more basho before pondering his promotion to yokozuna.

At the 1987 September Basho, he again won the jun-yusho with a 13-2 record and barely missed winning the yusho. While the yusho was won by Hokutoumi, Onokuni beat Hokutoumi this and his three previous basho records of 15, 12 and 13 wins were looked upon favourably by most members of the Yokozuna Deliberation Committee as well as by Kyokai executives. The Onokuni luck was still alive and well after all. From the next yokozuna promotion, that of Asahifuji in 1990, the rule was again tightened to make the yokozuna promotion mark to be two consecutive yusho at ozeki rank, effectively making Onokuni the last yokozuna to be promoted with two jun-yusho records prior to his promotion. But there was only so long his luck could last, and when it was pulled from under him, the consequences were disastrous for himself and seismic for sumo as a whole. Continue reading next time to find out how it all ended!