

Rikishi of Old

The 4th Yokozuna Tanikaze Kajinosuke (1750 - 1795): Part 1

by Joe Kuroda

On September 26, 2010, on the Aki Basho Senshuraku, Yokozuna Hakuho defeated Ozeki Harumafuji by yorikiri to seize the makuuchi yusho without a loss, accomplishing the fourth consecutive all-win yusho, his eighth 15-0 career yusho, tying for the record previously set by great yokozuna Futabayama and Taiho. Hakuho also extended his consecutive win record to 62 and will reach Futabayama's hitherto unbroken 69 consecutive win record on day 7 of this year's Kyushu Basho if he keeps winning.

If Hakuho wins his day 1 bout at the 2010 Kyushu Basho, he will register 63 successive victories, tying the record set by the 4th Yokozuna Tanikaze, unquestionably one of the greatest and strongest yokozuna of all time. As with all records, it is rather fruitless to compare those of Hakuho with those of Futabayama or Tanikaze as the latter two competed during the time when they only had two basho in one year rather than six. While in no way meaning to diminish Hakuho's achievement, the comparison is not really apt as it took over three years for Futabayama and four years for Tanikaze to set the record while Hakuho could do it in less than one. Not only can a lot happen in three years but to maintain the same high level of standards for that length of time in a physically and mentally challenging sport like sumo is simply astounding.

According to the list of yokozuna officially sanctioned by the Nihon Sumo Kyokai (Japan Sumo

Association), Tanikaze is recognized as the 4th yokozuna after mythical Akashi Shiganosuke. Ayagawa Goroji and Maruyama Gontazaemon. Most sumo historians doubt Akashi and Ayagawa actually existed at all while Maruyama was not given the yokozuna designation during his lifetime. It's been said that Maruyama was an afterthought of the House of Yoshida Tsukasa, brought in to justify awarding the yokozuna license to Tanikaze and Onogawa.

Historically Tanikaze Kajinosuke and Onogawa Kisaburo were the first two rikishi to receive the yokozuna license or certification in November 1789 by the 19th Yoshida Oikaze, then head of the ruling authority of Ozumo, the famed House of Yoshida Tsukasa. While now divorced from the Sumo Kyokai, the House of Yoshida is still striving to preserve sumo culture to this day via the current head, 25th Yoshida Oikaze, Yoshida Nagataka. The 19th Yoshida Oikaze brought a series of innovations to Ozumo to make a then fledgling sport more respectable and gain wider acceptance by the ruling class of the day, regional lords and religious authority.

Yoshida Oikaze's idea was to award a yokozuna license to the most distinguished rikishi to allow them to perform the yokozuna dohyo-iri ceremony adorned with a Shinto tsuna (rope) around his waist to honour the god of land. Both Tanikaze and Onogawa were ranked as ozeki, then the highest rank in Ozumo as yokozuna did

not exist as a rank until the 16th Yokozuna Nishinoumi insisted his name be displayed alongside "yokozuna" on banzuke in 1890.

Nishinoumi felt an ozeki with yokozuna license should not be outranked by other ozeki regardless of his performance in the previous basho. Nishinoumi became indignant when he realized then Ozeki Konishiki (later Yokozuna) was to be placed higher on the banzuke than him and protested loudly to the Sumo Kyokai. To appease him, the Kyokai added the yokozuna rank on the banzuke on an experimental basis and, as we now know, the idea stuck to this day.

Born Yoshiro Kaneko, the first son of a wealthy farmer in what is now Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture, on September 8, 1750, the young Tanikaze quickly became well known around Sendai as he could easily carry a bale of rice weighing 30 kg for 5 or 6 km without stopping by the time he was seven years old. Obviously it helped that he always had a plenty to eat, never having to look for where the next meal was coming from. The fact that his precise birth date is known in this Edo era speaks loudly of how important his family must have been in the region as most farmers were dire poor in the area.

A chance encounter happened when Yoshiro was 17 years old, called in to build bridges over rivers after severe floods devastated the areas around Sendai. Then Sekiwake Sekinoto Okuemon (and later the second

Isenoumi oyakata) passed by to see Yoshiro easily hoisting rocks as he was travelling to stage a jungyo tournament for his lord in Sendai. He immediately sensed enormous potential in the young Yoshiro. Sekinoto asked one of the clans of his sponsor, the Sendai Lord, Shiraishi Clan to take Yoshiro in and groom him to be a rikishi.

Yoshiro grew so big and powerful that when he made his dohyo debut with shikona of Dategaseki Moriemon at the age of 19 years old, at the 1769 April Basho in Edo (Tokyo), he was immediately ranked as an ozeki. Actually sumo promoters at the time often brought in giant size men to bring in more crowd and curiosity seekers. These men were known as "Banner Ozeki", only having minimal sumo experience with no perceivable ability as their role was to simply stand outside to attract the curious and undecided into the arena. These "rikishi" may have only appeared during dohyo-iri ceremony on Senshuraku and most were never to be seen again after the basho.

Yoshiro endured three basho as a Banner Ozeki but he had so many ambitions and aspirations, believing fully in Sekiwake Sekinoto's insistence that he had outstanding potential in Ozumo. While the result of his first three basho as a Banner Ozeki is considered to be rather meaningless, there was an indication he was more than a banner as his records were 4 win 3 kyujo in his first basho, followed by 1 loss and 7 kyujo and 3 win and

5 kyujo (in this era, even when one of the competitors failed to show, both were treated as kyujo). Fortunately for Yoshiro there were others who thought the same way as him and he was allowed to make a fresh start from Maegashira West 1 at the 1770 November Basho. He made a steady progress to even climb up to komusubi in 1771, though falling back to hiramaku again after one basho. He was close to 190 cm tall and his bouts against super giant 227 cm Ozeki Shakagatake Kumoemon always filled the house with fans awed by their physique.

As he entered the 1776 October Basho at komusubi, he renamed his shikona as the second Tanikaze Kajinosuke. After this basho Tanikaze never relinquished his Sanyaku rank. The first Tanikaze Kajinosuke was a well known rikishi from his benefactor's base, Shiraishi, and was reputed not to have lost a bout in nine years. To receive such a distinction is a reflection of expectations and faith placed on him from the local supporters.

After a seven win and no loss record at the October Basho, Tanikaze was promoted to sekiwake in April 1777, where he recorded 2 win 1 loss and 5 kyujo to go back to komusubi. However, after this point he only lost one bout in the next seven basho to be promoted to ozeki in March 1781. From our perspective it appears that the wheel was turning slow but this was still an era of bouts ending in draws, holds and kyujo. Often, rikishi who felt they had no

chance of winning did not show up or gyoji preferred to call close calls as draws instead of deciding a winner (there were no rematches).

Tanikaze's consecutive winning streak actually started on day 1 of the 1778 March Basho after he was promoted back to sekiwake for good. This basho he finished with a record of 9 wins and 1 kyujo. While he missed the following basho altogether, Tanikaze put together a string of 9 basho from 1778 March Basho to 1782 February Basho to record 63 consecutive wins. The man who stopped his winning streak on day 7 of the 1782 February Basho was none other his main career rival, Onogawa, the 5th Yokozuna. Onogawa stopped Tanikaze's streak by using a rather unorthodox move, grabbing Tanigawa's knee by his left hand and rolling him on the dohyo.

While one can argue that Tanikaze's record ignores a kyujo basho as well as 4 kyujo days, 1 draw and 2 holds, we should be reminded that his consecutive record counted only those basho he had in Edo (Tokyo). If we include his records at the Kyoto and Osaka Basho during this period, his consecutive winning record stands at astonishing 98 bouts, almost impossible to break even for Hakuho. Despite the loss to Onogawa, Tanikaze was actually getting stronger as right after the loss he immediately proceeded to establish a 43 consecutive win record. Thus, had he not lost that match, his Edo record alone would have stood at 106 straight wins!