



Yaocho update 23 out, test basho in

by Chris Gould



Named. Shamed. Disgraced. Such was the fate for 23 sumo wrestlers after the Special Investigative Committee into the Match-Fixing Scandal reported its findings on April 1st. At first, it seemed like an April Fool; the same sumo association which had ridiculed match-fixing allegations for centuries now being forced to castigate 23 members for this very practice, despite even lacking concrete proof in several cases. The ramifications are huge, with the rankings chart having more holes than at any time since the Great Wrestlers' Strike of 1932. One hopes it is the first giant step towards eradicating this sinister practice from a beloved national sport.

There are those, like the (somehow) recently re-elected governor of Tokyo, who claim that match-fixing doesn't matter because, in their eyes, sumo is simply a show. These opinions are as misguided as yaocho itself. Yaocho matters because some wrestlers do it and others don't. The ones who don't do it are effectively penalized for being honest, repeatedly denied promotions or dealt undeserved demotions simply because less able foes are forming cliquey alliances. By finally taking a stand in cornering the chief fixing suspects, sumo has at last thrown its weight publicly behind Honesty, and that can only be a good thing for wrestler and spectator morale alike.

In railing against yaocho, sumo has taken the bold step of declaring that a key Japanese

cultural norm should be alien to its confines. Whereas the principle of friends bending over backwards for each other is free to distort business and politics on a daily basis, it is apparently no longer welcome in sumo. The sport is shedding a central element of its traditional Japanese identity, and will doubtless be forced to shed more in the months to come. How the fans will eventually react to the considerable changes is an intriguing question indeed.

But of course, as with everything in Japan, the final decision has not exactly drawn the line as clearly as we would like. The most obvious question thrown up is: if many wrestlers have been fired without concrete proof of wrongdoing, how can the association be sure that the exact number of culprits has been found?

Secondly, is it credible to believe that so many second division wrestlers partake in yaocho, and yet hardly anybody in the top division joins in, as the investigation report suggests? The words "sacrificial lambs" and "it's always the secretary's fault" ring out almost louder than the decision itself.

Thirdly, why are the names long-suspected of yaocho by fans nowhere to be seen on the list, which appears filled with people who few fans would even care about enough to notice whether they were fixing bouts or not?

Especially baffling is the non-appearance of names in the yaocho list who have been publicly

criticized by the sumo association for performing "under-powered sumo." Surely, in an investigation of this kind, public reports of "under-powered" sumo would be the first to be checked. The sumo association is careful to draw a distinction between under-powered sumo (going easy on your opponent without a money exchange) and yaocho (going easy on your opponent because of a money exchange), but the fact the investigation concludes zero overlap between the two is – quite frankly – astonishing. If the sumo association singled these matches out for admonishment among all others, at a time when yaocho was apparently rampant, it must have done so for a very serious reason.

Despite the uncertainty, fans should hope that even if some culprits remain within sumo ranks, they will be deterred from faking victories in future by the severe punishments meted out to the 23 confirmed offenders – most of whom were immediately forced to retire. Enatsukasa, Chiyohakuho and the former Kasuganishiki, however, have – owing to their confessions – received more lenient punishments in the form of two years suspensions. Seventeen stablemasters connected with the wrestlers have been hit with loss of rank or suspension, including such greats as the ex-Chiyonofuji and Hokutoumi. This is, frankly, disastrous for sumo's image.

Justice has thus finally come around for the heroic Hanaregoma, the beleaguered sumo association Chairman who

has fought against match-fixing for his entire career. A test basho now beckons in May, as sumo seeks to repair the damage to its banzuke, which has seen a third of juryo members disappear due to the crisis. Entry will be free for the fans, with charity donations to the

earthquake and tsunami victims hopefully to be encouraged. The road to recovery will be long and painful, but at least the brave words of Keisuke Itai, one of the many falsely accused of making up bout-rigging stories, can finally be put to the test: "Sumo will be

popular if, from now on, the sumo association only does real bouts."

For a peek at the rogue's gallery, please check out this issue's photo bonanza [here](#).