

Retrospective

Hiroko Suzuki's Classic Match

by Chris Gould

In April 2006, Hiroko Suzuki entered the US Sumo Open for the second consecutive year. She did so as the surprise package of 2005, racing to an unexpected gold medal with an unbeaten record, procured by some fantastic pulling and throwing. Only two women would contest the 2006 Middleweight Final, which was turned into a best-of-three contest. Hiroko's opponent would be Mukharshar Enkhtsetseg, nicknamed Enkhee, a bull-like Mongolian woman wrestler whose 85-kilogram frame was reinforced with massively-thick shoulders.

Physically bigger, she was also at least 10 years Hiroko's junior, staging the odds firmly against the Japanese. The match was played out in the Los Angeles Conference Center, before at least 1500 people, most of whom were firmly behind Hiroko but a sizeable 200-strong contingent of which were local Mongolians. Amid the cacophony of an electric atmosphere, the first match went to Enkhee by virtue of a lightning quick throw. But Hiroko sure had some fight in her, as the following proves.

The first and second matches were separated by a much-needed minute's pause for reflection. Far from breezing to victory, 'invincible' Hiroko had looked distinctly uncomfortable and now needed to win both remaining matches to reclaim the gold medal. It was far more exciting – and evenly-matched – than most had dared to hope.

A shell-shocked Hiroko summoned her remaining



Mukharshar Enkhtsetseg ('Enkhee') with Chris Gould

composure to confidently perform the pre-match ritual. Although unsure how to dominate Enkhee, and aware of the miniscule margin for error allowed to her, she could at least draw comfort from one thing: her opponent's inexperience in US sumo. Forlorn as the hope may have been, there was a chance that the pressures upon Enkhee outweighed those upon Hiroko.

As the mind pictures the medal, the wrestler can be forgiven for thinking about more than the match itself. Creeping concerns about one's mental toughness can cause athletes to doubt even their most recent successes. When both wrestlers were confident, as in the first match, the better one had triumphed. With both wrestlers succumbing to nerves, either one could crack first.

I almost seized up as Hiroko charged into Enkhee for the

second time, panicking at the prospect of her leaning too far forwards and being slapped down – an inglorious way to lose one's title. But the determined Japanese kept her footing, dragged Enkhee towards her and, for once, engaged her in toe-to-toe combat. To Hiroko's chagrin the winning throw would not come – Enkhee's thighs and lower back were simply too resistant. Enkhee then launched her bid for glory and attempted to pivot again. This time, demonstrating her ability to learn from the first defeat, Hiroko was wised up to the move and sought to yank the Mongolian to the mattress with her.

CRASH!

Two bodies fell and Hiroko looked not to have done enough. Spectators, save the Mongolian contingent of course, hummed mournfully as they paid their

respects to Hiroko's lost title. But as the athletes gingerly returned to their feet, Hiroko looked longingly at Shimomura-san, the guest referee from Shizuoka, and gestured to indicate that a Mongolian hand had touched the mat first. A glimmer of hope. Could it be that Hiroko's famed pulling strength and sheer grit had earned her a stay of execution against her toughest ever foe?

Shimomura-san remained stone-faced, refusing to issue a verdict before it was due and directing Hiroko to her corner. Hiroko feigned obedience, but when her post-match bow was due mimicked the placing of hand on mat again. Out came Shimomura-san's gloved hand, with a gloved forefinger pointing downwards, insisting that the reigning champ bow and be silent.

Hiroko bowed. Supporters inhaled. A referee shaped to move. The hand of Shimomura-san rose... and was extended not towards Enkhee but to Hiroko. In his view, the Mongolian's hand had indeed gone to ground before anything else. Now she would have to win the title again. Hiroko Suzuki, deserved champion of 2005, was BACK!