

Menko Corner

2011 Baseball Magazine (BBM) Sumo Cards

by Ryan Laughton

Earlier this year the latest edition of Baseball Magazine (BBM) sumo cards was released and it was the 15th year of BBM's sole dominance in the sumo card market. The BBM sumo sets are typically released at the beginning of the year and the 2011 edition was no different with the rikishi's ranks representing the November 2010 banzuke and available for sale starting at the Hatsu 2011 basho. This was also the 9th year in a row that the size of the set was limited to 99 cards, far lower than the 200+ sets of the late 1990s. Over the past nine months or so, the 2011 cards have slowly filtered over to the US as prices have steadily dropped making it affordable to complete sets for under US \$100. The original sale price is ¥7560/box or ¥315/pack, but boxes can be picked up for ¥2500 or less these days.

First impressions of the 2011 sets are fairly mediocre although the printing and production quality of the cards is second to none anywhere in the world. The high-gloss finish and high-quality paper stock is only rivaled by American card manufacturers. The first 70 base cards are of all the sekitori and feature borderless, "action" shots of the rikishi during the shikiri portion of the bout. Stylistically, this is almost identical to the 2010 set and so the only major difference was the changing of the style of the shikona/rank "box" on the front. The back of the sekitori cards also received a minor refresh from the 2010 set, but only in how the rikishi's statistical information is

presented and not the content. There continues to be a small insert photo of the rikishi in his yukata. All in all, while it is good to see the rikishi with their new rank info and any mawashi changes, there are no major wow factors with the 2011 sekitori cards that really make them stand out. It's unfortunate, because I've seen many different action photos of rikishi from numerous sources throughout the year that would have looked great on these cards, but I understand the Japanese and sumo culture of resisting radical changes too quickly.



Picture 1: Maegashira Kotoshogiku (Card #11), part of the base rikishi set

Beyond the 70-card base rikishi set there are seven subsets that comprise the rest of the 99 cards. The first subset is cards #71 and #72 and features the Shin-Juryo sekitori of the Hatsu 2011 basho: Juryo Nionoumi and Juryo Fujiazuma. This is a standard subset from the early days of BBM. The next six cards, #73-78, highlight the longest winning streaks in sumo starting with Yokozuna Futabayama's 69 wins in a row. There are some nice action shots in this subset and the backs feature some extremely high

quality photos of the yokozuna in their kesho-mawashi. The next two subsets are devoted to Yokozuna Hakuho (Cards #79-#81) and Ozeki Kaio (Cards #82-#85) and highlight accomplishments they both achieved in 2010. Subset cards #86-#90 depict the five yokozuna who've retired since 2000 and show them getting their chonmage cut off during their retirement ceremony, or danpatsu-shiki.

The second to last subset, cards #91-#93, is dedicated to Yokozuna Wakanohana I who passed away on September 1, 2010. He was known as the "Devil of the Dohyo" and the subset is titled as such. The last subset, cards #94-#99, is candid shots of various rikishi during different events throughout the year.



Picture 2: Yokozuna Hakuho (Card #74) part of Subset #2



Picture 3: Yokozuna Akebono (Card #90), part of the Subset #5

The outside of the box states that you can't complete a set by opening just one box of cards and after several of us American collectors opened four boxes this was definitely the case. This was done probably as a marketing ploy to get you to buy more than one box as statistically you could complete one set from one box as there are 24 packs to a box with 5 cards per pack meaning there are 120 cards per box. After we opened up our four boxes, on average we ended up with 35 doubles per box leaving us 14 cards short to making a complete set. The way the cards were collated in the packs, these 14 cards were from the beginning, middle or end of the set so the doubles of someone else's box likely contained the cards that you needed.

There are a small handful of collectors here in the United States that religiously complete each of the BBM sets every year and are a great source of information and expertise when it comes to BBM's sumo cards. Once such collector is Paul Fogarty and he has been collecting for the better part of a decade. I caught up with Paul last month as we discussed the 2011

set and got his thoughts about this latest BBM instalment.

RL: What do you think of the new 2011 cards?

PF: They're nice looking enough, nothing special. Nothing new....same old thing with different highlight colors. I think I could have accomplished the same effect on my home computer. I think the Japanese are too resistant to change or being unique. Bad example, but at least the US based card companies of the 90s and early 00s, knew how to make a unique insert or special card. That's what drove the business down, but the special cards did look nice.

RL: As you alluded to earlier, the 2011 BBM cards don't contain any special insert cards like in previous years. As a collector, is this a good or bad thing?

PF: Both. Of course, inserts drive pack and box prices too high. It takes all the fun out of collecting. Every one charges high prices assuming every pack has the best and highest value card, but it is very cool to get a limited production card of someone you really like. "Game Used" are the best like when they used to have yukata cards, diecut cards, signed cards, aroma cards (they would never do that for the NHL (National Hockey League). I actually sold off or traded most of my inserts to help complete regular issue sets. I kept cards for specific rikishi I like to follow.

RL: What is your favorite year of

BBM cards and why?

PF: I liked 1998 and 1999...they both had huge releases, about four times the amount of cards released today. 1998 had 390 cards, 2011 had 99. I like having the many different cards, because you start getting different views of rikishi. There were Oyakata cards, and historical cards. There were some Tegata cards. I like when they did a series of cards as a retrospective of famous rikishi.

RL: What is your favorite card in your personal collection?

PF: 1999 insert card S4...a diecut Musashimaru card. It's just a very cool looking card. I've included a scan of it (See below). I also prefer cards showing rikishi off the dohyo. For example, I like when they are wearing kesho mawashi, or their yukata, as opposed to in-action only cards. That seems to be all they (BBM) do, over and over, in-action after in-action.



Next issue we'll continue the interview with Paul as well as add an additional interview from another American collector, Wayne Sot. Until then, cheers!