

Menko Corner

1973 Calbee Mini Card Set

by Ryan Laughton

When production of menko stopped in 1964, there was little in the way of cards or menko to carry the hobby through the subsequent eight years. As mentioned before TV was a major contributor to the demise of menko, but was also responsible for the rise of the Japanese mini cards. By the early 1970s, color TV was the standard and by 1975 almost 32 million color TVs were in Japanese households. Color TV allowed for some visually graphic and exciting shows. Television stations started broadcasting, in color, a variety of diverse programs including popular dramas, anime, sumo, baseball and music. TV had turned into the daily life norm for people in Japan in the early 1970s. What this meant was that kids and adults alike wanted to now collect cards of their favorite TV personality, anime series, movie actor and sports hero. Hence the mini card era was born in 1973.

By far the most popular sumo card of the early 1970s with today's sumo card collector is the 1973 Calbee Mini Card Set. These cards were issued in packages of potato chips, but proved to be unpopular and production was halted after only one year. However, the Calbee Baseball Cards were very popular and produced in large quantities starting in 1973 and every year since. Interestingly, it is very difficult to buy a Calbee sumo card for less than \$50 and many of the star rikishi go for even higher. These prices are even more expensive than the woodblock print sumo menko of the late 1800s and trying to complete an entire 36 card set is a very expensive endeavor.

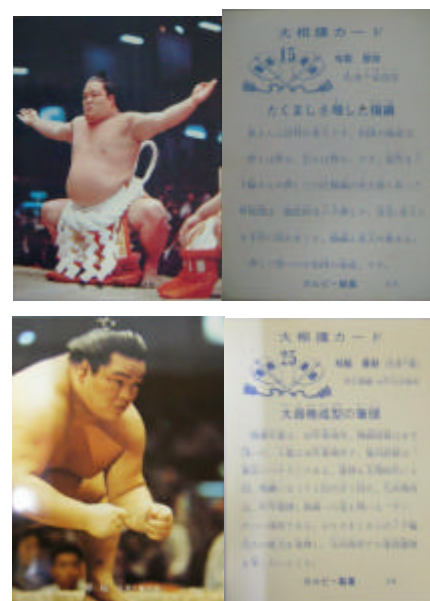
These cards were printed in late 1973 and represent the September 1973 basho. The production quality of these cards is really high and they are printed on fairly thick white-toned cardboard stock. The first 14 cards in the set feature a borderless full length photo of higher ranked rikishi against a blue or green solid colored background. Most importantly, this set contains the first card of Maegashira Takamiyama who a year earlier had become the first foreigner to win a sumo basho.

The backs of these single rikishi cards contain all the vital statistics such as birthplace, heya, height, weight, favorite technique and win/loss record. Above each of the kanji on the back is Japanese Furigana which is really tiny written Katakana or Hiragana and is used as a pronunciation and reading aid for small kids who can't read or write the more difficult kanji. The backs are printed in blue ink. See Picture 1.



Picture 1: Cards #1 & #10

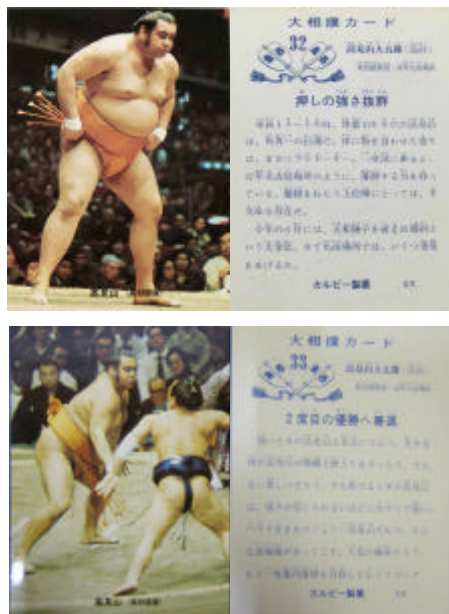
Cards #15 - #25 were devoted to the three Yokozuna of September 1973: Yokozuna Kotozakura, Yokozuna Kitanofuji and Yokozuna Wajima. These cards feature an "action shot" of one of the yokozuna and are set against a natural background usually being the Kokugikan audience. The backs contain a variety of topics used to educate the reader on the different yokozuna. Some contain a list of tournament records and others talk about winning percentages and when the yokozuna debuted in sumo. These cards are naturally the more expensive cards in the set. See Picture 2.



Picture 2: Cards #15 & #25

The last 11 cards in the set, cards #26 - #36, are devoted to more "action shots" of all the non-yokozuna ranked rikishi in the same style as the yokozuna cards. Two of the cards, #32 & #33, are the most expensive and hardest in the set to obtain because they feature Maegashira Takamiyama

and so they appeal to the foreign collector as well as the Japanese Calbee collector. The backs once again contain interesting information and various facts on the rikishi. These were the pre-internet days so this type of information was not always readily available to children anywhere else. See Picture 3.



Picture 3: Cards #32 & #33

As mentioned before, these cards were packaged singly inside special packages of Calbee snack products with the majority packaged with potato chips. They were packaged in a blue wrapper and interestingly many were packaged with a baseball-style wrapper as seen in Picture #4.

There are so few of these still in existence that it is difficult to determine how many were packaged this way.



Picture 4: Card #25 packaged in a baseball-style wrapper



Picture 5: Front and Back cover of the Calbee Album

The most difficult of all Calbee card memorabilia is the album that was designed to hold these cards. It is unknown how this album was distributed or how children would obtain them. So few of these albums have ever hit the auctions that they are nearly impossible to get ahold of. The inside front cover contains information about all the sekitori from the September 1973 basho such as birthplace, heya, height and weight. The back cover of the album contains information about all the makushita ranked rikishi. See Picture 5. Inside the album are clear, plastic pages to hold all 36 cards in the set. The majority of the time these pages are torn missing so they aren't useful these days to store the cards. About one of these albums will turn up every couple of years and it is usually a mad scramble to be the highest bidder. Most of the albums in good condition can go for \$500

while a really beat up and poor condition one will still go for \$200.

I'm not sure if the checklist information has ever been printed anywhere in its entirety, but I am presenting it here for everyone's reference. I hope this will come in handy when trying to complete your set of 1973 Calbee Sumo Cards!

- #1 – Yokozuna Kotozakura (shown as an Ozeki)
- #2 – Yokozuna Wajima (shown as an Ozeki)
- #3 – Ozeki Daikirin
- #4 – Ozeki Kiyokuni
- #5 – Ozeki Daiju
- #6 – Ozeki Takanohana
- #7 – Sekiwake Kaiketsu
- #8 – Sekiwake Asahikuni
- #9 – Komusubi Yutakayama
- #10 – Komusubi Kitanoumi
- #11 – Maegashira Takamiyama
- #12 – Maegashira Hasegawa

#13 – Maegashira Onishiki
#14 – Maegashira Washuyama
#15 – Yokozuna Kotazakura
#16 – Yokozuna Wajima
#17 – Yokozuna Kitanofuji
#18 – Yokozuna Kitanofuji
#19 – Yokozuna Wajima
#20 – Yokozuna Wajima
#21 – Yokozuna Wajima
#22 – Yokozuna Kitanofuji
#23 – Yokozuna Kitanofuji

#24 – Yokozuna Kotozakura
#25 – Yokozuna Kotozakura
#26 – Ozeki Kiyokuni
#27 – Ozeki Takanohana
#28 – Ozeki Takanohana
#29 – Ozeki Daikirin
#30 – Ozeki Daiju
#31 – Sekiwake Kaiketsu
#32 – Maegashira Takamiyama
#33 – Maegashira Takamiyama
#34 – Yokozuna Kitanofuji &

Yokozuna Wajima
#35 – Yokozuna Kitanofuji &
Yokozuna Kotozakura
#36 – Ozeki Takanohana & Ozeki
Kiyokuni

I hope you have enjoyed this little
peek into the 1970s world of sumo
card collecting and we'll see you
again in a few months! Cheers!