

Heya Peek - Musashigawa-beya

by Chris Gould

Chris Gould visits the stable which boasts two ex-yokozuna on its coaching staff, neither of whom are of Japanese parentage.

On the hot and humid ninth day of the 2007, Natsu Bashi, I arranged to meet Hanako Dosukoi at Uguisudani Station, fifteen minutes or so from the Kokugikan. The meeting occurred a little later than planned; Hanako having initially waited on the platform while I erroneously loitered at the northern exit. Such relief did we show upon eventually crossing paths, we resembled lovers who had arranged to elope by train and were elated the other had not chickened out. In a way we were lovers; sumo lovers, seeking an outlet for our passion for asageiko at Musashigawa-beya.

Hanako is a freelance sumo journalist; Dosukoi, as SFM's Editor-in-Chief rightly suspected, is most definitely not her family name. Upon seeing her elegantly clad in a short-sleeved blue cardigan and grey office trousers, and with an immaculate complexion, Hanako's Showa birth-date came across as fictitious as her nom-de-plume. Her stylish, thick-framed spectacles and glittery nail polish give her an air of glamour, firmly stereotyping her as a high-flying city dweller, the sort who would blend in well on the London underground. Along with a string of sumo connections, Hanako certainly has the looks, personality and knowledge to earn a place on the Yokozuna Deliberation Committee, should Makiko Uchidate either leave or desire a female debating pal.



*Musashigawa beya –
Chris Gould*

Upon entering the genkan of Musashigawa-beya, the ears of Hanako and I were immediately

attacked by a shrill cry of effort from the heyas interior. After swiftly discarding our shoes and tiptoeing into the training area, we soon discovered the reason behind such a powerful, echoing shriek. The junior deshi must have felt deeply impelled to impress; not only were they being watched by a couple of well-dressed koenkai members, but by two former yokozuna: Mienoumi Tsuyoshi and Musashimaru Koyo.

Mienoumi rested against the raised viewing platform on which we knelt, hawkishly surveying his octet of practicing deshi barely a metre from the dohyo. Having held the Musashigawa elder stock since his retirement from the ring in 1980, he is currently one of the longest-serving oyakata in sumo. He is 59 now, and soon to perform his kanreki; the ceremony which celebrates the sixtieth birthday of a former Grand Champion, or more precisely 'five cycles of 12 years.'

It is custom for kanreki performers to don a red tsuna when they enact their yokozuna dohyo-iri on the Kokugikan clay. However, Mienoumi will don his in the more private surroundings of a hotel, claiming that a Kokugikan showing would prove to be 'embarrassing' for him. His physical appearance at the asageiko suggested he was being harsh on himself; there still appeared considerable power within the biceps protruding from his navy polo-shirt. His body-consciousness was certainly apparent, though; on several occasions did he wedge his white cane between his arm-pits to

practice straightening his posture.

Musashimaru, on the other hand, is still 25 years away from his kanreki. The most recent yokozuna to retire from Japan's national sport in November 2003, he held the record for most makunouchi yusho won by a non-Japanese (12) before Asashoryu came along, a feat which earned him the right to keep his shikona as an elder name. Maru is currently negotiating a five-year grace period offered to him by the Japan Sumo Association (NSK) in which he is entitled to buy up another oyakata's elder stock. However, the evidence suggests he is unlikely to do so and may well seek a life outside sumo from November 2008. At present, he appears to enjoy his considerable coaching responsibilities at the stable and his status as the first point of contact for deshi seeking advice.



*Red tsuna –
Mark Buckton - Courtesy of Sumo
Museum*

While gazing at the portraits of Mienoumi and Musashimaru pinned to the heya walls (miniatures of the yusho-winner paintings which once hung from the Kokugikan roof), one is struck by the fact that both have achieved so much in sumo despite neither being of Japanese parentage.

Maru, of course, was Samoan-born before spending his formative years in Hawaii. Less known is the fact that although Mienoumi was born in Japan, his parents were both Korean. The two oyakata are deeply respected in Japan because of their unflinching willingness to integrate into Japanese society, something epitomised by their fluency in the Japanese language.

My viewing of asageiko began with a slight mishap. Unable to recall the identity of the sole white-belt rikishi on early-morning display, a juryo stalwart by the name of Bushuyama, I asked Hanako to verify his identity. Within seconds, a junior deshi with a clipboard (thankfully used for the tallying of bouts and not for blacklisting our names) sternly informed us not to whisper during practice.



Miyabiyama – Carolyn Todd

While silently observing Bushuyama in the morning heat (there was no air conditioning in the heya), I was amazed at how easily he handled the dark-belted lower-division rikishi, who screeched even more loudly as

they desperately tried to compete with him. How dispiriting it must have been for the junior deshi to be humiliated by a man who had lost every juryo bout of the basho thus far. As he waltzed with, toyed with, outmanoeuvred and overpowered them, the juniors must have wondered just how on earth they would bridge the gap between themselves and the salaried ranks. Musashimaru clearly had a few ideas, and occasionally beckoned a junior before him so that these thoughts might be conveyed.

Bushuyama was pivotal in illustrating the fascinating power structures operating at Musashigawa. No sooner had he played teacher to makushita students when he was being taught some harsh lessons himself by the stable's big guns. Musashigawa's makunouchi trio of Dejima, Kakizoe and Miyabiyama emerged from the changing rooms at 8.40, heavily intent on reinforcing their authority over every other stablemate. In the moshi-ai geiko (the winner-stays on sequence of bouts between sekitori), it was Bushuyama who was most often left standing on the sidelines, all-too-often completely overwhelmed by top division trickery and skill.



Dejima - Carolyn Todd

At first glance, neither Dejima nor Miyabiyama looked in fit condition to punish anybody. The former's right ankle was obscenely swollen; in any other environment it would have been earmarked for the



Kakizoe - Carolyn Todd

amputation theatre. The latter, meanwhile, looked to be advertising a local bandage company. With a white verruca sock protecting his right-foot, a giant bandage bound round his left, both hands wrapped in gloves of tape and right-shoulder heavily-strapped, Miyabiyama seemed ripe for withdrawal from the basho. His vulnerability was further enhanced by the presence of a heavy cold which caused him to frequently

secede from the action to blow his nose. A pale shadow of the man who had fought at sekiwake for most of 2006 – let alone the promising ozeki he once was – Miyabiyama's battered body had managed only three wins in eight days, and appeared hopelessly incapable of arresting his slide down the ranks. His performance in training was decidedly unimpressive.

Surprisingly enough, though, the star of asa-geiko was not Dejima – who virtually defied all logic in winning all eight of his competitive bouts – but Kakizoe, who had lost as many matches as Dejima had won. Perhaps believing he had more to prove, and in dire need of reassurance that he could still win matches, Kakizoe approached the session with the greatest hunger, thus compensating for his small frame. He kept low and moved forward with aggression, burrowing into the folds of Miyabiyama's balloon-like physique and easily matching Dejima when deploying the famous Musashigawa thrusting attack. Had he applied the same conviction in the previous day's encounter with Chiyotaikai, he might not have been knocked as far into the audience as he was.



Buyuzan - Carolyn Todd

The most poignant practice bouts were undoubtedly those between the two former ozeki, Dejima and Miyabiyama. As the two excessively-taped, stiff moving warriors creaked into the sonkyo position prior to battle, an eery atmosphere descended over the room. Both the oyakata and the onlooking deshi conveyed awkwardness with their eyes, as if they sensed that they were witnessing two men in painful and prolonged decline, possibly in one of their few remaining training



Bushuyama - Carolyn Todd

sessions. According to a reputable source, the 33-year-old Dejima has survived more basho after demotion from ozeki than any other sumotori in the past 90 years. One wonders just how much more punishment his ankles and wrists can take.

As the training session closed with the customary prayer, led by Dejima in front of the mini shrine to the left of the room, Hanako ushered me to the genkan with rapidity. During her ushering, I caught sight of the gargantuan frame of Musashimaru oyakata, gamefully blocking out the morning sunlight that sought to creep through the door linking the changing rooms with the street. To my delight, after swiftly returning shoes to feet, Hanako led me in Musashimaru's direction, outside the genkan entrance and round the corner to the doorway he had

blocked. On a low wall just outside the door, Maru was perched, deep in conversation with a young apprentice. Much of his 480-pound frame protruded between his pillow-sized pectorals and Christmas-turkey thighs. Only a super-sized green t-shirt and equivalently large jeans could contain it. His wrists, meanwhile, were the size of rocks that would not look out of place in a prison riot.



Nakano - Carolyn Todd

The intimidating qualities of Maru – represented, not least, by the impassiveness in his bloated face – soon disappeared when subjected to the charms of Hanako Dosukoi. Maru’s demeanour in private is vastly different to that of the reserved figure he cuts in public. In front of microphones and TV cameras, he is frequently described as ‘shy,’ often content with offering single-word responses to questions. In a less intrusive setting, though, he was transformed; firstly joking in Japanese with Hanako before recounting sumo stories to me with considerable excitement.

While Hanako took a well-earned cigarette break and simultaneously purchased some iced-teas for Maru and his interviewer, the giant Hawaiian expanded upon key talking points of the asageiko

just elapsed. ‘Miyabiyama has been fighting through this tournament with injuries,’ Maru confirmed. ‘His shoulder was taped up because he took a hard blow there. He doesn’t wear the tape in the Kokugikan, but he does in training, because the shoulder’s giving him some pain.’ How deeply surprising it was that after this interview, Miyabiyama proceeded to win six of his last seven bouts at the basho, finishing with a 9-6 score which should propel him back to the sanyaku borders.

Fans of Natsu Bashos will best remember Maru for his infamous 2001 kettei-sen against the retired Japanese yokozuna Takanohana II. I had always wanted to ask the Hawaiian what was going through his mind on that fateful day, almost exactly six years before our interview. By way of providing background, Takanohana entered senshuraku with strained knee ligaments and still needing to defeat the awesome Musashimaru to claim his 22nd yusho. Maru easily felled him in the first match but sensationally lost the second.

‘I didn’t want to fight that day,’ was how Maru began to reflect. ‘I didn’t want to fight. My body didn’t feel like it. I mean, come on, the guy turns up with a busted knee! How do you expect me to fight him? I didn’t even think he’d show up.’

‘After that match, I got so down I didn’t want to fight for a long time. It took ages to recover from that experience.’

It took Takanohana an age to recover too. In relying on an injured knee to throw down a 510-pound Hawaiian, Takanohana sidelined himself for 16 months and consequently missed a record seven consecutive tournaments as a yokozuna. During that time, Maru’s determination to avenge his kettei-sen defeat grew to unbearable levels.

‘I said it on TV after I won a tournament in 2002,’ Maru recalled. ‘I said I was waiting for Takanohana to come back so I could beat him.’



Koshinoryu - Carolyn Todd

In September 2002, Maru’s chance finally came about. Takanohana survived the first fourteen days of his emotional comeback basho and once again faced Maru on senshuraku with an outside chance of claiming the yusho. This time the Hawaiian, devoid of sentiment and fully-focused, ensured that he won the match, which turned out to be his last against Takanohana.

‘That was a good victory – a lot of pressure of my shoulders,’ Maru admitted. ‘You know, until that play-off, I was beating Takanohana all the time at the end of his career. I learned to do the scoop-throw, you see, and that really helped me against him. Earlier on, whenever we fought I was like: “Oh no, it’s Takanohana!” but after I picked up that scoop-throw technique, I beat him very often. I’d just grapple him into the right position, wait for the right moment and then throw him.’

Having provided a fascinating insight into the one of the greatest sumo duels of the previous decade (the rest of which will be saved for



Minaminoshima - Carolyn Todd

another day), Maru declared his intention to cycle, as has seemingly become an everyday event. 'I weigh 220 kilograms now,' he revealed, 'and I want to get down to 180.' I pointed out that this was Miyabiyama's weight and he seemed contented.

Then off he cycled into the morning sunshine, buoyed by his reflections on a career so fine and mentally preparing himself for his afternoon trip to the Kokugikan, where the white-belted sumoists of Musashigawa had so many points to prove.