

# The Strike of 1932: 75 Years on

**Text by Chris Gould**  
**Photos by Mark Buckton**

*Chris Gould marks the 75th anniversary of the strike that threatened to destroy professional sumo as we know it.*

Sumo is not supposed to fall prey to revolutions. It is supposed to be a stable bliss, built upon merit and tatemae (subordination of the self to the greater good). In recent years, the Japan Sumo Association (NSK)'s idea of 'revolution' has centred upon appointing a female member to the Yokozuna Deliberation Council and finding 12 new names to describe ways of winning a bout. Behaviour that leads to revolutionary media coverage of the NSK must be ostracized at once, as Asashoryu has recently found to his cost. Yet, there have been many occasions throughout sumo history where – much like in the country around it – the threat of revolution has been very real.

Japan and sumo are not nearly as stable as the tatemae society would like them to be.

The root cause of sumo revolution is no different to that which has torn up many a country: economic inequality. The professionalisation of sumo in the mid-18th century was, in theory, supposed to address this issue, freeing sumotori from their serf-like existence under the ownership of powerful Edo warlords. However, by the mid-19th century, it was clear that the wealth gap between sumo managers and sumo wrestlers still remained – and was widening with the sport's increasing popularity.

## **Takasago trouble**

Major signs of sumotori discontent emerged in the mid-1860s, when a

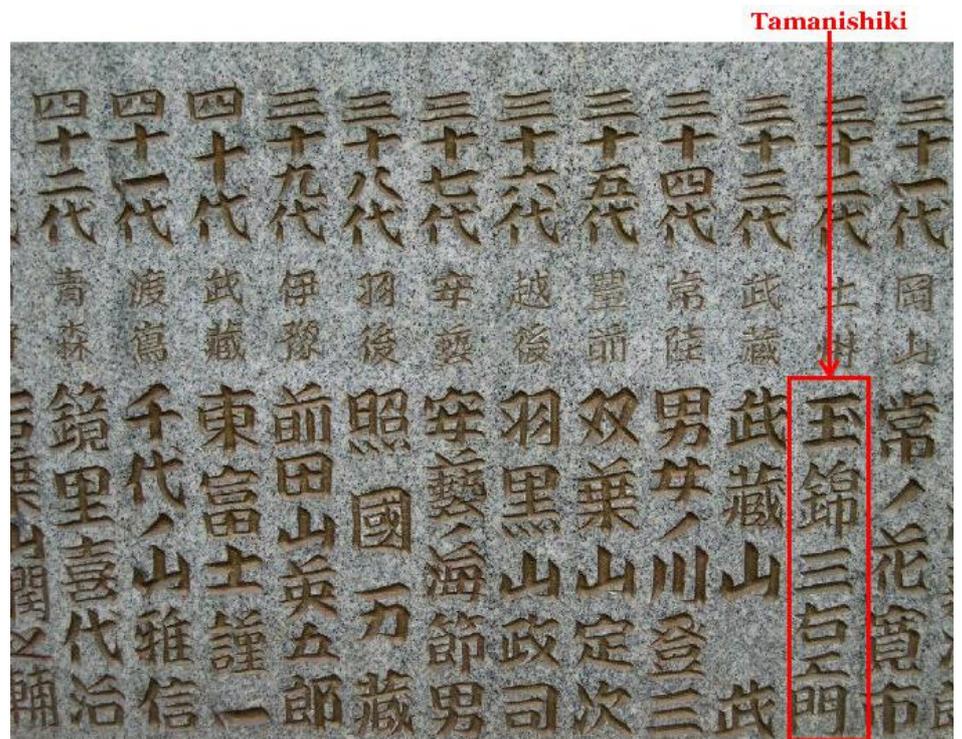
group of senior wrestlers tried to engage the Tokyo Sumo Association (TSA) in discussion over reform. The reform movement lost momentum during the Meiji restoration of 1867-8 but had regrouped sufficiently to draw up a list of demands for sumo reform in 1873. It is alleged that the wrestlers entrusted with presenting these demands to the TSA lost their nerve and betrayed their reformist colleagues – who were sacked from professional sumo in December 1873. With banzuke for the winter basho already printed, the names of the dismissed wrestlers had to be painted over!

The ring-leaders of the movement, Takasago and Koyanagi, briefly established a 'reform wrestling team' which toured the provinces, but came a cropper when failing to file for a newly-introduced sumo performance permit in 1878. In

the summer of that year, Takasago's wrestlers were reinstated in the TSA, and a number of Takasago's reforms were carried out, most notably the replacement of TSA Directors' appointments with Directors' elections. Limited pay reform was also enacted, but the broader issue of inequality was buried deep inside the proverbial salt-basket – just waiting to be tossed out at a later date.

## **Party like it's 1899**

That date was the 24th May 1899, when the [Japan Times](#) reported 'trouble between Tokyo wrestlers and the Wrestling Association' over 'the dissatisfaction of the wrestlers with their pay.' The report continued: '[Sumo] performances having become unusually popular, the managers have of late been realising large profits. The wrestlers not unreasonably insist that it is unfair



Tamanishiki

to exclude them from their share of the financial success, and threaten going on strike.’

With basic yearly wages of around 25 yen (£75/ \$140 in today’s money), professional sumotori lived no more independently than when serving their warlords, frequently trudging cap-in-hand to the oyakata to cadge for extra allowances. As the Japan Times suggested, the oyakata, and in particular those placed in director’s positions, were well placed to offer handouts. The vast majority of revenue from ticket sales went into their deep pockets; sumotori were paid from the modest leftovers.

Whatever the TSA’s response in 1899, it did not leave wrestlers much better off. In late-1910, revolutionary fervour gripped sumo again as several makuuchi wrestlers delayed the January 1911 tournament when demanding more pay from their sumo masters. Their resolve was perhaps buttressed by a not-too-distant rebellion of kabuki actors against their parent company Shochiku – which was ultimately crushed. This time, sumo chiefs stubbornly refused to give ground, thus laying mines for the years ahead.

### **Mikawashima mayhem**

The 1910s were not exactly happy years for the TSA. The pot for wrestler payments was further emptied on 29th September 1917 when the Kokugikan was burned down while staging a chrysanthemum exhibition. The TSA, dogged by existing debts, suddenly had to find 650,000 yen (around £1.8m/ \$3.6m) to rebuild their treasured stadium – plus an extra 150,000 yen when a typhoon blew down the first reconstruction attempt! The first basho held after the fire was staged at Yasukuni. However, although the Kokugikan was rebuilt, low salaries continued to leave sumotori fuming.

On January 12th 1923, several senior wrestlers demanded better pay and conditions from their employers at a restaurant in Ueno. The TSA responded by firing 64 sumotori and 17 gyoji. With several star performers among the ranks of the dismissed, Tokyo’s sumo followers were unimpressed, and many boycotted the Hatsu Basho opening on January 14th. Jolted by loss of revenue, the TSA employed mediators to reach agreement with the striking sumotori, who had since occupied an office in the Japan Electrolysis Works building in Mikawashima.

Two military figures, Admiral Yashiro and General Osako, acted as mediators, alongside Metropolitan Police Chief Akaike. Grand champions Onishiki and Tochigiya were sent by the TSA to reason with their colleagues after allegedly declaring their ‘strict neutrality’ in the dispute. Mediators and wrestlers’ union chiefs met at the Metropolitan Police Board offices on January 17th, but not until after a ring purification ceremony had been held at the Mikawashima hideaway two days earlier. The TSA was asked to consider 11 demands put forward by those on strike. A compromise was reached at the Kokugikan the following day, when 100 sumotori, gyoji, oyakata and mediators agreed, in principle, to a Sumo Reform Plan – based on a watered-down version of the 11 demands. After initially deferring their decision, the wrestlers accepted the reforms and returned to sumo.

The fall-out from the strike was immense. Yokozuna Onishiki was heavily criticised for his lacklustre negotiating skills, and immediately retired from sumo in shame. Several disgruntled sumotori were uncomfortable with the draft of the reform plan and threatened to withdraw their services from lucrative summer tours unless it was improved. Such discontent

drew an aggressive response from vengeful sumo directors who, enraged by the original dispute, withheld payments due to sumotori from the January tournament. Police Inspector Suzuki, whose Aioi police station bordered Dewanoumi-beya, spent yet more of his force’s time on mediating sumo disputes, with the result that the TSA paid its wrestlers accordingly. Six sumo directors resigned over the troubles and three weeks passed before Superintendent-General Akaike purportedly brokered peace between the warring parties. By May, though, several stars were still refusing to wrestle in protest at the watered-down reforms, with such discontent morphing into a dispute about the Nagoya tournament of January 1924 – and beyond.

### **Shunjuen sensation**

The formal merger of Tokyo and Osaka sumo associations under the Japan Sumo Association (NSK) in January 1927 brought a pooling of sumo resources, renewing hope for wrestlers seeking superior wages. However, in October 1929, the Wall Street stock market crashed, sending the entire world economy into disarray. With damaged Japanese businesses less inclined to donate to sumo and unemployed Japanese unable to afford tickets, sumo attendances dropped, thus leaving less money for sumotori wages.

At the time, wrestlers were divided into teams of East and West which competed for the yusho. On January 7th 1932, the entire makuuchi West team criticised the management of the NSK and presented its directors with ten demands, which included: transparent accounting; reduced admission charges; reduced tea-house influence over ticket sales; pension and jungyo reform; increased pay; and a new Wrestler’s Association. In contrast

to 1923, instead of simply refusing to fight, the wrestlers threatened to form their own sumo association if the NSK failed to agree reform within 48 hours. As the NSK perused the radical proposals, the West team founded temporary headquarters at the Shunjuen Chinese restaurant in Oimachi, south Tokyo. Thus began the 'Shunjuen incident.'

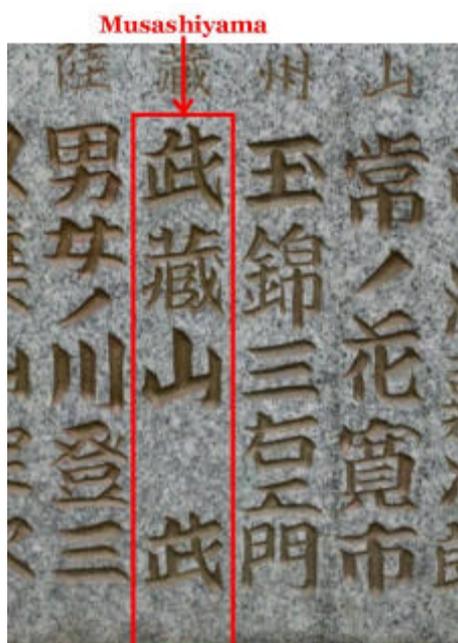


Stone beside yokozuna name stone indicating rikishi belonging to East and West

On January 9th, with the NSK stalling over the demands, 32 members of the West team resigned from sumo en masse – causing the January 1932 basho to be postponed indefinitely. Upon resigning, doubtless after much consultation with their financial backers, the striking sumotori heralded a new organization called: The Great Japanese Body of Uprising Wrestlers. The ring-leaders of the revolt, Musashiyama, Onosato, Tenryu and Yamanishiki, planned to form an executive committee to lead the new organisation. To further spook the NSK, the uprising wrestlers gave concrete details of the first tournament they planned to stage – on 23rd January at Yasukuni Shrine.

On January 10th, the NSK rejected each of the 32 resignation letters

on the grounds wrestlers could not simply resign by handing notices directly to officials. Rather, respect for rank dictated they should submit notices via their 'head wrestler'. The NSK knew that the West team's head wrestler was Musashiyama's stablemaster Dewanoumi, a man who sympathised with the strikers but was duty-bound by high office to preserve harmony and support the existing order. Thus under the pretext of collecting resignation letters was Dewanoumi dispatched to mediate on the NSK's behalf.



Musashiyama

Then came a dramatic plot-twist. Musashiyama, hitherto a key breakaway sumotori, suddenly withdrew his support in order to pursue fame and fortune as a boxer. A statement issued by his patron, Mr Yukinosuke, on January 14th criticised seceding wrestlers, comically on the grounds that they wanted to abolish the yokozuna rank... which ozeki Musashiyama was destined to obtain!

Deprived of a magnetic figurehead to draw people towards their movement, the striking West Team worried about the viability of going it alone and agreed to third-party mediation. The mediation took the form of the

Kanto Kokusai-kai (the Society of Preservers of National Traits). With such a name, and led by a military general, the Kokusai-kai was predictably traditionalist in outlook and firmly on the side of the NSK. Many seceders became disillusioned, feeling that if they had to negotiate with reactionaries anyway, they might as well surrender directly. Several sumotori thus exploited a relaxed curfew on their movements by asking intermediaries to negotiate their re-entry into the NSK.

The new leader of the revolutionaries, sekiwake Tenryu, took a firm line with the Kokusai-kai, refusing carte blanche to settle the dispute. He also refused to take back the resignation notices which the Kokusai-kai was instructed to return by the NSK. To hasten the return of prized wrestlers, the NSK agreed to the reform committee 'in principle' and offered to welcome back the strikers unconditionally. 'In principle' was not enough for Tenryu, who continually refused to return his men until the committee was functional.

With the Kokusai-kai against the committee, Tenryu concluded that their mediation was biased and could no longer be tolerated. Fearful of having failed his men by agreeing to incompetent mediation, but adamant that he could not re-join the NSK, he resolved to slice off his topknot in shame. The revelation was met with an outpouring of support from the 30 fellow strikers, who felt that Tenryu was unworthy of personal blame. A solitary act of defiance was thus transformed into a collective publicity stunt, with 30 of the 31 strikers simultaneously severing their topknots on January 16th. Thirty severed topknots were wrapped in white paper and dumped in the hands of Kokusai-kai leader General Kida – 'tokens of regret' for not being able to accept his services. The tokens cut little ice

with Kida, who had promised Dewanoumi that the wrestlers would re-enter the NSK that very evening.

On January 19th, several strikers took their attorney to the Metropolitan Police Board to request a license to perform sumo at Tokyo's Hibiya Shrine. Police Chief Hayashi pondered slaying two birds with one stone and offered his own mediation skills to the sumotori. The wrestlers politely told Hayashi to concentrate on catching criminals.

The pace of change hastened dramatically after the visit to the Police Board. The strikers referred to themselves as the Shinko Rikishidan – the 'Progressive Rikishi Association' and resembled a more formal and unified body. Dewanoumi, meanwhile, felt disgraced by his failure to lure the striking sumotori back to the NSK, and resigned his director's position. His resignation in turn sparked feelings of guilt in Musashiyama, who blamed himself for embarrassing his own stablemaster. On January 24th, Musashiyama sensationally reversed his decision to become a

boxer and returned to the NSK, pledging his unflinching support for Dewanoumi. The return of the champ was a huge boost to the NSK but just as the balance of power shifted in its favour, the East team – which had previously remained neutral – began to voice discontent. Fourteen eastern-side wrestlers promptly seceded from the NSK and, instead of joining forces with the West-side, sought to hold their own tournament in Nagoya. The following day, 14 defectors had become 19, the extras doubtless persuaded by the financial clout of Hatsutarō Inoue, a Nagoya building contractor who offered to fund the tournament.

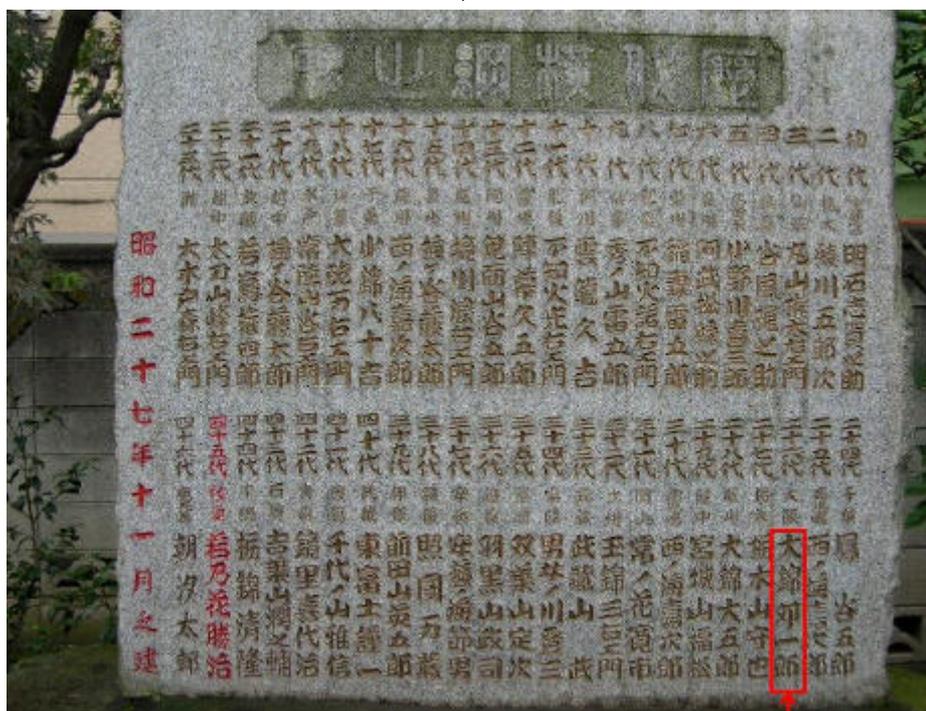
On January 29th, at another extraordinary meeting, NSK directors approved a reform plan penned with the help of the Kokusai-kai. The plan reasserted sumotori rights to 10% of net tournament proceeds and sought to augment wrestler earnings by introducing a third annual Tokyo basho.

The following day, the Shinko Rikishidan declared that it had found a venue for its first ever tournament. As licenses could not

be obtained for Yasukuni or Hibiya Shrine, the basho would take place at Nakanegishi, in Tokyo's Shitaya district. The breakaway basho, scheduled for February 3rd, received a surprise boost from Dewanoumi, who offered a 300-yen gift by way of congratulations. A further boost came from the defection of five NSK gyoji two days later. The secession came as such a blow to NSK executives (still unable to comprehend the rejection of their reform plan) that 22 out of 24 directors resigned within hours.

The first public signs of unity from East and West came on February 5th when Mr Inoue, backer of the Eastern defectors (now known as the Kakushin Rikishidan – 'Federation of Reformist Rikishi'), forged a tentative merger agreement with Tenryū. The deal was all the more remarkable given that it came in the midst of the breakaway tournament at Nakanegishi in which Tenryū was competing! Tenryū's resources were further strained by negotiations with the Kokusai-kai. Luckily for him, Chief Hayashi underlined police obsession with sumo disputes by re-tabling his offer to mediate. This time, the offer was accepted by both Tenryū and the Kokusai-kai.

Almost every day of Tenryū's breakaway tournament was witnessed by a capacity crowd of several thousand. Although profits were low after expenses were deducted, the ability of Shinko Rikishidan to draw crowds and competing wrestlers (314 in total) far exceeded expectations. Shocked by the success of its rival, the NSK rapidly proclaimed that February's Hatsu basho would see admission prices greatly reduced. Their resolve to succeed increased on February 12th, when police mediation broke down, resulting in a cemented alliance between East and West camps. Within a month, East and West were planning their first joint-



Onishiki

tournament in Osaka under the banner of the Dai Nihon Sumo Remmei (the All-Japan Sumo Federation).

Alas, 'All Japan' did not sign up to the 'All-Japan Sumo Federation,' most significantly Musashiyama and Tamanishiki, the two most impressive sumotori of the day. In 1933, the Federation lost 12 more key wrestlers after the NSK offered to take them back at their former ranks. The grim truth was that for all their determination, the All-Japan Federation faced an uncertain future, never sure if a venue would be available, never sure if a license would be granted, never sure if the spectators would turn up. Having failed to secure a permanent stadium by 1939, Tenryu's team disbanded, thus ending one of sumo's greatest adventures.

### **Conclusion**

Post 1932, sumo's revolutionary rumblings have been more earth tremors than earthquakes. Although a 1957 Japanese Diet investigation into ticket distribution lambasted the power of sumo teahouses and uncovered compromising information which led to NSK Chair Dewanoumi's attempted disembowelment, modest ticketing reform and the introduction of two extra annual basho slammed the lid on events. Recently, the shadow of revolution has comprised five silhouettes: an Osaka governor, a crazed Kokugikan spectator, a retired yokozuna, an active yokozuna and a deceased sumotori. The first two figures are both female, and both (albeit for different reasons) wish to overturn the sumo convention that forbids women from mounting a professional dohyo.

The ex-yokozuna, Takanohana II (III if counting a non-family member fighting under different kanji in his shikona), earned a stern rebuke from current NSK Chair Kitanoumi for discussing sumo salary reform on live TV in 2005. The active yokozuna, Asashoryu, has mooted holiday reform and raised new questions about the degree to which sumo individualism should be tolerated. Finally, and sadly, the death of Tokitaizan poses questions as to whether standards in sumo heya should be more formally monitored.

As ever with the unstable compromises of a tatemaie society, surface level stability is forever waiting to be disrupted.