

The Class of 88 - the Best Ever?

by Chris Gould

In celebration of ozeki Kaio's 20 years as an active sumotori, Chris Gould pays homage to arguably sumo's most successful intake ever: the Class of '88.

Introduction

The DVD accompanying the Sumo Museum's January Exhibition contained a snippet of footage from nakabi in May 1988. At the front of a dohyo packed with novices graduating from maezumo were the Hanada brothers, 17-year-old Masaru and 15-year-old Koji. Somewhere behind them lurked 15-year-old Hiroyuki Koga and a lanky 19-year-old Hawaiian named Chadwick Rowan.

Although faith in anyone named Hanada was integral to the sumo community, few in that nakabi audience would have realised how much brilliance was stored within this legendary maezumo class.

Hanada-mania

After bowing to nakabi fans and photographers in their resplendent kesho-mawashi, Koji and Masaru Hanada embarked upon a relentless assault on the sumo establishment which would attract more column inches than any sumotori before or since. As the latest generation of a sumo 'Royal Family' which had produced 1950s yokozuna Wakanohana and 1970s ozeki Takanohana, sumo fans expected nothing less than world domination from the dynamic duo. So, too, did their stable master-father Takanohana, who beat his sons mercilessly to harden their resolve against any sumo challenge.

Under the initial ring names of Wakahanada and Takahanada, Masaru and Koji breached

makuuchi's borders in 1990. Impressively, it was the younger sibling Koji who entered the top division first (as sumo's youngest ever makuuchi debutant), setting a trend for outperforming Masaru which eventually triggered considerable envy within the elder brother. Koji was also the fastest to make his mark on makuuchi, winning an astonishing 11 consecutive bouts as an 18-year-old in March 1991 and only losing the title with defeats to a yokozuna and ozeki. In the following tournament, he defeated the legendary yokozuna Chiyonofuji so convincingly that the 31-time yusho-winner hurled his flannel at an attendant and privately resolved to quit active sumo. On the 15th day of the January 1992 basho, a frenetic Kokugikan crowd and millions of television viewers cheered Koji to an agonisingly prolonged victory over Misugisato which delivered him his first Emperor's Cup. Fittingly, the basho saw the Hanadas come of age as one, with Masaru collecting the Technique Prize and provoking the retirement of yokozuna Asahifuji with a dazzling inner-arm-throw.

The year 1993 saw both brothers gain ozeki status – Koji again beating Masaru to the title by six months – and drop the family name from their shikona. From henceforth, Masaru and Koji would be known as Wakanohana and Takanohana, by ring names more befitting of warriors. Together, they became the Waka-Taka force which stoically protected sumo from non-Japanese domination throughout the 1990s. Taka was naturally the force's senior partner, racing to

yokozuna status by winning 30 successive bouts in September and November 1994. Waka, despite the lift of capturing his first yusho in March 1993, would take until May 1998 to cement his yokozuna status and ultimately only won five championships to his brother's 22. To date, Waka and Taka remain the only siblings to have both held yokozuna status. Barring remarkable advances in anti-aging treatment for Kita and Toyozakura, and unrealistic levels of improvement from Roho and Hakurozan, this record will remain unequalled for considerable time yet.

In November 1995, Waka and Taka also became the first siblings to face each other in a playoff for the makuuchi yusho. The spectacle marked the only occasion on which Waka could truly claim to have outshone his ototo, driving Taka to the edge and depositing him over the rope via shitatedashinage. The bout remains not only one of sumo's most famous but, alas, highly controversial. Rumours circulated as to whether the pair had been instructed by their father to ensure that Waka won in order to boost his yokozuna promotion push. Taka himself fuelled the debate post-retirement when claiming that he 'failed to go all out' against Waka. However, he also described the playoff as a fantastic experience and regretted not having had more frequent chances to battle his ani.

Their successes aside, everything was far from rosy for the Hanada brothers. Inside the ring, Waka suffered the ignominy of becoming only the second yokozuna to post a

negative score over 15 days. He also never claimed a yusho while at sumo's highest rank. Taka, meanwhile, made a fatal decision to battle gargantuan yokozuna Musashimaru while nursing a nigh-crippled knee in May 2001. Although his commitment to the yokozuna values of fearlessness and strength in adversity was faultless, it cost him his career that day, resulting in further injury to his knee which sidelined him for a record seven consecutive basho. He fought just 22 more competitive bouts before retiring in January 2003, having characteristically outlasted his brother by three years.

The brothers' problems outside the ring are too numerous to be listed and have been amply documented elsewhere. Suffice to say that the clashes of personality which caused many of these problems were reflected in their contrasting styles of sumo. The tall and sturdy Taka played the role of efficient winning machine, relishing the opportunity to take matches by brute strength alone, wearing down far heavier foes and outmanoeuvring them on the belt. The shorter and lighter Waka, however, preferred to dance fleet-footedly around opponents and deploy a wider variety of techniques. Also, whereas Taka's orthodox sumo style was accompanied by the most impassive of faces; Waka's rotund visage glowed with childish excitement.

Although they suffered from criticism that the 1993 merger of Fujishima and Futagoyama stables precluded them from facing several top wrestlers, no-one can doubt the phenomenal sumo ability of Masaru and Koji Hanada, the graduates from 1988 who dismantled the great sumotori of the 1980s before claiming half the yusho available between January 1992 and May 2001.

The first gaijin yokozuna

Chadwick Rowan once suggested that his proudest sumo moment came at the beginning of his outstanding career. Taking centre-stage in a nigh-deserted Kokugikan, the towering Hawaiian crushed his awestruck opponent over the ropes to a smattering of applause. The opponent was Koji Hanada, son of Chad's stable master's fiercest rival and, in Chad's eyes, a rather spoilt Tokyo townie who had little experience of poverty and life's hardships. The first Chad-Koji encounter ultimately proved key to determining which of the two would hold a winning record against the other. Over 12 years, these two 1988 novices would tussle a further 46 times and share the honours with exact evenness (23-23). Both men would attain sumo's highest grade of yokozuna in the process.

The shikona conferred upon Chad Rowan by stable master Jesse Kuhaulua was Akebono, which is derived from the intransitive Japanese verb 'akeru – the breaking of dawn.' Akebono certainly marked a new dawn for professional sumo. His coming of age, as with that of Brothers Hanada, took place in January 1992 when he recorded 13 victories and finished runner-up to Takahanada. Four months later he won his first makuuchi yusho to earn ozeki status, and joined his Hawaiian mentor Konishiki atop the sumo rankings chart – the first occasion on which the 235-year-old banzuke had been headed by two non-Japanese. Further yusho victories in November 1992 and January 1993 saw Akebono hurdle the biggest barrier of all and become the inaugural 'gaijin yokozuna.'

Having terrorised the makuuchi division with his bone-crunching thrusting attacks of the mid-90s, Akebono's career stuttered

somewhat and it was not until 2000 that he recaptured his finest form. Knee problems constantly featured in the latter part of his sumo life while his vast back was pained by an awkward fall against the tawara in a practice bout with Musashimaru. Psychologically, Akebono was further hindered by the death of his father in July 1993. He did, however, receive a considerable boost when asked to represent the Sumo Association at the opening of the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano. After that, his career recovered and he took his tally of makuuchi championships to 11.

The last of those arrived on Day 15 of the 2000 Kyushu Basho, when he ousted Musashimaru from the ring in a titanic battle of the bulge. Unknown to Musashimaru, Akebono was intent on leaving sumo while at the very top and would never be seen in the competitive ring again. Thus even in retirement did Akebono bring about a new sumo dawn, becoming the first modern yokozuna to hang up his sash after having won a tournament. Although sumo tradition dictates that a yokozuna should only retire once his strength is sapped and he feels he can no longer win bouts, Akebono's achievements have shielded the manner of his sumo parting from excess criticism.

The old warhorse

Hoping to celebrate 20 years in sumo with a winning score in Osaka '08 is Hiroyuki Koga, now known as the battling warhorse Kaio. By far the latest bloomer of the Class of '88, Kaio is also the longest surviving. It took the Tomozuna giant until 1993 to reach makuuchi and a further seven years to collect his first championship, which part-ensured his promotion to ozeki. En-route to sumo's second uppermost rank, Kaio collected a record-equalling 10 Outstanding

Performance awards and participated in an historic five-way playoff for the November 1996 yusho which involved fellow 1988 graduates Wakanohana and Akebono. Alas, none of our featured fighters triumphed, with the yusho eventually going to a graduate from November 1989: Musashimaru.

At the time of his ozeki promotion, Kaio looked a truly formidable warrior, equipping his ox-like strength with considerable agility. For a good year, even Takanohana never looked comfortable facing him, especially in July 2000 when he was flung down by kiri-kaeshi and forced to go kyujo. Kaio's finest bout came in November 2000 when he executed the most incredible ipponzeioi on Musashimaru, a technique which basically required him to throw a 225-kilogram weight over his shoulder! He collected his second and third yusho in March and July 2001, but failed to grasp yokozuna status and endured a barren 2002. Fourth and fifth tournament wins in 2003 and 2004 failed to mask the fact that his magnificent sumo body was decomposing. Before long, he found himself frequently in danger of losing rank and would hold the unwanted record for kadodan listings (11 tournaments in total). Since 2006, he has struggled to register even nine wins per basho and talk of retirement has intensified.

Although fans are now offered mere tantalising glimpses of the talent he once possessed, Kaio is still an extremely popular sumotori and often receives the biggest cheer during the makuuchi dohyo-iri. In May 2007, he signified an intent to retire with a flourish by unexpectedly downing yokozuna Asashoryu, proving that even at 35 he was capable of competing with injured grand champions. To widespread surprise, he competed brilliantly against a fit grand-champion, Hakuho, in January 2008 – a bout



Kaio - Carolyn Todd

which, although cruelly exposing his lack of stamina, may well go down as the proudest moment of his final years.

The class of '88 in 2008

Having captured an awesome 43 yusho between them, the leading graduates of the Class of '88 continue to lead successful lives external to the sumo ring. Masaru Hanada left the sumo world completely in 2000 and now owns the popular restaurant chain Chanko Waka, which sponsors several of sumo's leading bouts. He is also a renowned television tarento, having tried his hand at sports commentary and reinvented himself as a goofy funny-man while guesting on talk-shows. In a 2001 interview he stated that his children would enter sumo 'over his dead body.' He last hit the

headlines in October 2007 when announcing that he and his wife of 13 years were undertaking divorce proceedings. In February 2008, he attended the retirement ceremony of Tochiazuma in a private capacity.

Koji Hanada was rewarded for his 22 yusho with his own sumo elder stock: Takanohana. He inherited his father's stable in 2004 – re-naming it Takanohana Beya – and continues to preside over professional bouts as a ringside judge. His public approval rating tumbled somewhat after the death of his father in 2005, when he became embroiled in a very public row with his brother over who should act as chief mourner at the funeral. Since then he has kept a lower public profile and – although currently lacking high-

level deshi – is tipped to rise through the sumo association ranks. He was the only oyakata, besides Kitanoumi and Tamanoi, to cut Tochiazuma's hair in February 2008.

Chad Rowan has earned large financial rewards for competing in K-1 mixed martial arts, even if his K-1 results were highly disappointing and caused him to venture into the world of professional wrestling. His pro-wrestling zenith arguably came in

April 2005 when he entered a stage-managed sumo contest at the WWE's Wrestlemania event in Hollywood, which appeared on Pay Per View TV. He also performed a sumo scene with fellow Hawaiian Musashimaru in the 2006 film Ocean's 13.

Hiroyuki Koga is just weeks away from achieving an immense milestone in professional sumo. The discipline is no longer a dream job for him but a grim means of earning that vital extra income to

provide for his family in the future. He will probably retire from active sumo before the year is out but, according to an insider, has given up smoking in a concerted attempt to prolong his career until 'people get tired of him.' A winning score in Osaka may inspire him to carry on until the next encounter with his home fans in Fukuoka, the people before which he would surely most like to bow out... and with dignity if possible.