



# I was there, I remember!



by Sachie Ikuma

*Starting this first issue of 2008, SFM will be giving more space to the people for whom sumo is so much more than a sport, the folk for whom sumo is a part of their culture, their sense of being, their background – the Japanese.*

*Whether they have been lifelong fans or individuals with merely a passing interest in the sport at one time or another, sumo for most Japanese is always 'there' – no need to go look for it, to learn about it as ardently as fans from afar must. Osmosis a la japonais perhaps – sumo from birth. What do they recall, what do they remember?*

*It is this sense of individual presence, in their almost unnoticeable daily relation to sumo that we will be looking for, and learning about, in a series of articles centering on Japanese nationals with different, but interesting interactions with their national sport in the year ahead.*

I don't recall the exact year, even the month remains a mystery but my first real experience as relates to sumo was probably in the very early 70s.

I remember seeing Taiho compete, the former ozeki, Takanohana hadn't reached his peak of ozeki at that time – still a komusubi or perhaps even a sekiwake. Tamanoumi was strong as was Kitanofuji. The same couldn't be

said about Yutakayama but he was another I recall from the era.

The first time I went to sumo, I was taken along by my late grandparents. My grandfather was a real gentleman of the old school, wasn't much of a talker but had a real passion for sumo. Living on the hill in the traditional Yushima district at the time, he was the perfect contrast to my always considerate and caring grandmother.

At the time, basho were of course held in the old Kokugikan in Kuramae, by the river and now marked by a water treatment plant.

The food served in those days, after submitting a voucher issued to those sitting in masu-seki, forms a large part of my earliest memories. As the bouts were underway, I was happy to sit back and nibble as young girls do, on yakitori skewered chicken or 'kuri' chestnuts but perhaps the most prominent food-cum-snack related memory I have of those times centers on the chocolates shaped as rikishi.

As I grew older and entered my teens, the names on the banzuke changed, and my own lifetime favorite Kitanoumi came to the fore. I actually felt sorry for him. This was a man for whom sumo came naturally. He was brilliant. He beat everybody, but, in the long

run, that was the problem! Being as good as he was, beating all comers and doing it so stoically made him unpopular in Japan – so I liked him because noone else did!

Other greats around the same time included Kitanofuji and Chiyonofuji of course but neither man had the true presence of a real sumotori; both being far too modern for their time and, I felt, unwilling to be the integral part of the team they would need to be in order to be accepted in sumo. There was too much self interest with these pair. Too much 'me, me, me' – for me that is!

Today I have moved on. Both of my grandparents have long since passed on, and so we no longer attend the basho. And, things are different today. The sport is not as attractive as it once was. Of course I recognize the talent of current yokozuna Asashoryu on the dohyo but his personality (as a yokozuna) can be a problem for the Japanese, and so I am hoping Hakuho wins tomorrow.\*

In truth, however, there are no real, decent characters to focus on anymore, and from a personal perspective, there are many more interesting things for me to do such as watching opera and kabuki.

\* - text penned the day prior to the Hatsu Basho senshuraku Y on Y bout.