



I was there, I remember! My earliest memories of (O)zumo



by Michiko Fukuda

Being born and brought up in a provincial area in Kagoshima Prefecture in the southern part of Kyushu, as a child I couldn't go to watch 'honbasho.' Even 'jungyo', unfortunately were out of reach as the regional tours were performed far away from the village in which I lived. As a youngster therefore, I could only watch sumo on TV with my parents; and for that reason my memory of Ozumo during my childhood is limited to what I saw on the NHK broadcast.

In retrospect, the first rikishi to claim me as a fan was Takamiyama (currently Azumazeki Oyakata). I guess it was due to my mother being a fan too – the voice of my mother cheering him on perhaps imprinted unconsciously upon my early hearing. Later on, I myself started to understand that Takamiyama had probably had more difficulty in entering sumo than his fellow Japanese wrestlers as he had to accustom himself to the world of Japanese sumo (as the first rikishi from the US) and so I supported him from the bottom of my heart as he showed great endeavour and perseverance in coping with his new life – and of course there was also his pleasant smile.

The other rikishi I found myself cheering on during my childhood were Takanohana (the father of current Takanohana Oyakata), Wajima, Fujizakura (Nakamura Oyakata at the present time), Kirinji (Kitajin Oyakata), etc. Personally speaking, Takanohana looked very attractive, because, in spite of his slender body he was so strong, and he seemed to try to retain his cool at all times. I really hoped he would make yokozuna.

As a yokozuna, Wajima was powerful and the golden 'mawashi' he wore seemed to symbolize a man at the top of his sport. Recalling Fujizakura, the first thing that springs to mind is his ball-like belly; I used to dream of sitting on his big tummy because it looked like it would be such a comfortable cushion for a small child.

As for the matches I recall, Kirinji's stand out. I started to support Kirinji due to a mistake in my understanding of his name. As a child, I felt his name was cuter than any other shikona in the sport as 'kirin' meant a cute mammal – a giraffe – to me at least. It was only much later that I learnt that 'kirin' also referred to a legendary Chinese animal, and that the word 'kirinji' meant 'child prodigy'.

Another couple of memories from my younger days revolve around jungyo I never saw for myself but that were enjoyed by friends or family: after I became a high school student, one of my classmates informed me that when she was a child, her own village hosted a regional tour, and one rikishi stayed overnight at a house close to hers; the host family taking the precaution to reinforce the wooden floor lest it should break as a result of the weight of the rikishi, and therefore run the risk of injuring the wrestler. Regrettably, she didn't remember the name of the rikishi.

Another story recounted from my brother-in-law centered on Ozeki Ouchiyama who stayed the night at his house when a jungyo visited his own village. As Ouchiyama was

a very tall rikishi; over 2 meters, when he took a bath, he got stuck in the low-ceilinged, small bathroom. Apparently, Yokozuna Kagamisato stayed the night at another house belonging to his family.



Ozeki Ouchiyama - Mark Buckton

The next day, bouts were performed atop a 'dohyo' built extempore in front of the harbour. It was still in the early 1950s, but the visit was still the talk of the neighborhood – a most precious experience for such a rural village in Kagoshima at that time as jungyo played an important role in keeping up the spirits of those in the middle of the postwar reconstruction.

Personal, hands-on experience of sumo came later when, as an elementary school student, during the PE class we practiced sumo; an account of my own heroic exploits in my third year at the school being the time I won the girls



Yokozuna Kagamisato - Nihon Sumo Kyokai

tourney (in my class) with the prize being a chance to go against a male student whose height was almost the same as my own.

(Un)luckily, I flung him to the dohyo using wither a kotenage or a sukuinage move, and the boy began to cry – his huge tears rolling down his face. I honestly didn't know what to say to him, and even felt sorry for him.

Upon arriving home, I told my mother what had happened and she said, "Well done, but, next time make allowances a bit." In those days, girls hurling boys around was almost impossible in the feudalistic mindset of Kagoshima. Whether it is a good thing or a bad thing, my next chance to face a male classmate never came – the teacher didn't let me fight a boy again.

Today, I'm not sure if sumo is still a part of the physical education curriculum, but on the fifteenth night of a 'lunar month' - 'Jyugoya' - children take part in sumo bouts as well as in tug of war events - at least in Kagoshima. My own sister

and I used to participate in the sumo tournament when younger but as girls were not allowed to grapple; only 'Ken-Ken Sumo' was permitted in my village (although this did depend upon the region and just a few years ago, my nieces took part in an event that did permit actual grappling matches).

As for myself and my sister, even if it was only 'Ken-Ken Sumo', we enjoyed it very much, and the prize of an article of stationery only added to that excitement – if we won.

Later on in life, after growing up, I never had the opportunity to dabble in sumo. However, my late mother, my sister, and I would always enjoy 'thumb and / or arm wrestling' when we had to decide who should do a tedious job or who could eat the last piece of cake.