

Menko Corner

1997 BBM Special Edition

by Ryan Laughton

We're going to take a break from the older sumo menko cards for an issue or two and jump ahead to the late 1990s to highlight a few of the modern Baseball Magazine Sha (BBM) sets. It's very interesting to note that from the time the sumo menko era ended in 1965 until 1997 there was no concentrated effort to produce and distribute sumo trading cards. Apart from the 1973 Karubi Set, the 1975 Mini-Card Set, the 1979 Amada Sticker Collection and sporadic trump (playing card) sets with rikishi depicted on them, no company attempted to mass produce high-quality sumo trading cards marketed toward kids and card collectors.

Then, in 1997, Baseball Magazine Sha, famous for publishing numerous sports magazines in Japan, decided to get into the sumo card market. BBM had been in the baseball card business since 1991, so this wasn't an entirely new endeavor for them, but it did mark the start of the modern sumo card era and the first time in over 30 years that any company devoted significant time and money to printing sumo cards.

Up until 1994, I was an avid American baseball card collector. Then in 1994 the American trading card market became saturated with dozens of overpriced limited edition, special and short print sets which also significantly drove up the cost of the low-end basic sets which I was collecting at the time. It became more about getting the great "pull", or great "expensive card", from a pack rather than getting your favorite player. In 2000 I became a collector again, but this time a

collector of old sumo menko. Even though I couldn't get rid of the sour taste in my mouth from the (still) on-going American card market fiasco, I still had a desire to also collect modern-era cards. I finally decided to try again a few months ago, but this time in the Japanese card market, and chose to take a look at BBM's line of sumo cards since it naturally fit in with my sumo menko collecting. It only made sense to start with their very first set, the 1997 BBM set. I am glad I did, and BBM definitely didn't disappoint.

Fortunately, unopened 1997 boxes are some of the easiest in the older BBM sets to come by and I picked up a couple of boxes for around ¥500 each which is a great deal considering the original selling price of ¥6000. In this inaugural year, BBM printed a 180 base set with 23 subset cards for a total of 203 cards broken down in the following ratios: 40 makuuchi rikishi, 26 juryo rikishi, 50 oyakata/toshiyori, 14 gyoji, 12 yobidashi, 9 Tournament Winners, 10 Showa-era yokozuna, 10 Top-10 in total wins, 5 Sumo Museum Collection, 4 Checklists, an 18-card Limited Yokozuna Takanohana/Akebono Dohyo Iri/Tegata Puzzle Piece Subset, and a rare 5-card Yokozuna/Ozeki Card Subset.

Each box contains 30 packs with 8 cards per pack for a total of 240 cards per box. After talking to several collectors on Yahoo's English Language forum group, SumoCards, I knew I probably wasn't going to get a complete set with one box. And, in fact, I didn't, and ended up with 162 base cards, 4 Limited Tegata Puzzle Pieces and 74 doubles. This lined up with

BBM's disclosure that you'll get no doubles in individual packs, but one box will yield about 20-30% doubles, about 3 Dohyo Iri/Tegata Puzzle Piece Subset Cards and about 1 Rare Yokozuna/Ozeki Subset Card. The biggest issue I saw with distribution was there were more yobidashi and sumo museum cards than what would be considered random leading me to believe that more of these cards were printed than the others. This could be due to me only showing the results of one box, but it's not unlikely that there were "hot zones" in the print run resulting in more cards printed around certain numbers. As is, it looks like 1 box will yield about 90% of the base set, 1:9 packs will yield a Tegata Puzzle Piece Subset Card and 1:30 packs will yield a rare Yokozuna/Ozeki Subset Card. Fortunately, Wayne from the SumoCards Group helped me round out the holes in my collection and now I own a complete base set of the 1997 BBMs!

Aesthetically, the cards are very well done. All cards have a high gloss finish on both the front and back and the images are super crisp. The front of the cards feature a borderless photo of the rikishi, oyakata, gyoji, etc. by himself and, fortunately, not wrapped up grappling some other wrestler with an odd look or weird grimace on his face. Very well done! The 1997 BBM logo appears in the upper right on all the cards and a simple box contains the rikishi's current shikona in both kanji and romaji as well as their heya information or other information depending on if it's an oyakata, yobidashi, gyoji, etc.,

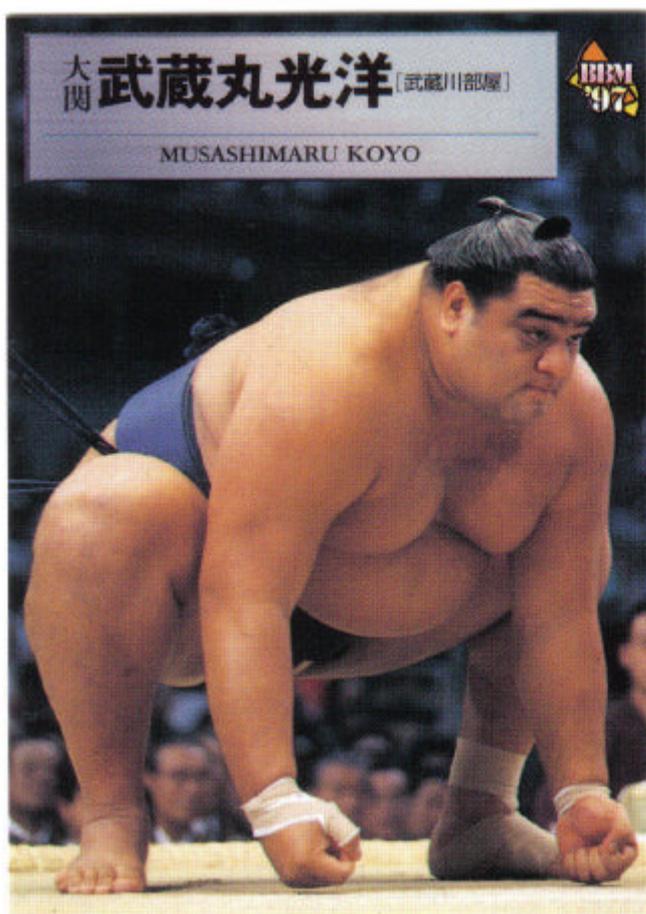
card. Like I said, very simple and great images. The backs are equally well done with the typically birthplace, height, weight, divisional debut dates, winning percentages, etc... all in Japanese of course! What I really like about the backs of the rikishi cards is that they have a nice color photo of the rikishi in their keshomawashi. The oyakata cards are also interesting in the fact that they show a picture of the oyakata during his wrestling years giving a nice image of what they used to look like. More of the standard statistics appear in Japanese on the back of these cards as well. The rest of the cards in the set are equally well done and round out the set nicely. There were a couple of issues I saw with the aesthetics though. First, almost half of the card backs are off-centered resulting in a thicker border on one side or they weren't cut straight resulting in a thick border on the top that gets skinnier as you

move down. Secondly, about 12 cards in the box had a scuff mark along the whole left side of the card that actually dulled the gloss coating. It looks like the feed wheel that grabbed the sheets of cards was slipping as it fed the sheets into the cutting machine producing these skid marks which is kind of annoying since already 5% of the cards coming out of the box are not in mint condition.

The actual rikishi depicted throughout the set are typical of what you'd expect to see in a sumo card set; the full complement of makuuchi and juryo rikishi, oyakata, gyoji and yobidashi. Basically, just about all the important figures one associates with running the Sumo Kyokai. Considering this is the first modern era sumo card set, all the cards with rikishi depicted are considered "Debut Cards"; a term I coined in the last issue of SFM that's synonymous with "Rookie

Card". It's great to see active rikishi show up in this set like Sekiwake Kaio, Maegashira Dejima, Juryo Chiyotakai, Juryo Kaiho and Juryo Kyokutenho. This set also has some high caliber yokozuna material with Yokozuna Akebono and Takanohana as well as Ozeki Musashimaru and Wakanohana, not to mention the great yokozuna of the past that were still holding toshiyori stock back in 1997 and finally getting their debut cards some 20 years later.

All in all, I'm pleased with my decision to get back into modern era card collecting and especially with BBM's sumo cards. I hope BBM's subsequent sets produce the same euphoric effects as I bust open more boxes. I'll continue to bring you these BBM updates along with the older sumo menko articles in upcoming issues of SFM. Until then... cheers!



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