



I was there, I remember!



by *Shunsuke Nakamura*
(*Transcribed - SFM*)

I wouldn't really call myself a sumo fan in the same mould as fans who follow the basho day by day. I am more of a casual fan, the kind of guy interested in the big names and the big bouts as and when they happen or rise to the top.

In that sense my own earliest memorable recollection of sumo was back in the days of Konishiki – the huge Hawaiian guy who eventually took Japanese nationality. I do recall Kitanoumi prior to that but not as well – partly due to age, partly due to interest.

I honestly could not comprehend his (Konishiki's) obvious strength and of course his size. He was huge and his hands were enormous – often clamping themselves around the throat of other rikishi.

No particular bout he had stands out, but I think everyone knows that famous picture of him and Mainoumi about to start a bout. Every now and then you still see it in advertising campaigns.

I am sure he won a couple of Emperor's Cups in his time and

there was something of a problem when he wasn't considered ready for promotion to yokozuna. A lot of foreigners in Japan claimed that was racism, and maybe it was – but you won't get anyone here admitting that openly, and I don't think it was deliberate even if it was in the end something we would call racism today.

Japan is still a long way behind the rest of the world in terms of level playing fields and treating all members of a certain sport equally. Actually, around the same time, I recall talk of non-Japanese baseball players being literally not allowed to play in the fourth batter slot in the Yomiuri Giants as this was always a bit more prestigious than the other positions in the roster.

I don't know how Konishiki got through that time but he did. After that though, he was never the same and the Waka-Taka era started as we all focused on the brothers who eventually made it to yokozuna. Akebono was also active at this time of course – around the early 90s I guess.

Back with Konishiki though – I think that in the end, he just got

too big, and with it too slow.

It is sad to think of him falling down and finding it hard to even stand near the end of his career – that was probably around ten or twelve years ago now when he was up and down the maegashira ranks I guess.ⁱ As far as I know though, he was always a gentleman off the dohyo, loved kids and often appeared on Japanese TV game shows and the like.

A couple of years ago he opened a restaurant – near Tokyo Dome ironically – and I have been past a few times but never inside.

So, whilst I don't really think this constitutes an "I was there, I remember" in terms of famous bouts or career long reviews, my own earliest memories of sumo as more than a TV sport, as something that involved men just like I am today, came by way of Konishiki – a gentle giant in my eyes even with all the ups and downs, and, although I know he wasn't the first American, for most of us under fifty he was – and always will be.

ⁱ Ed – Konishiki retired in 1997