



# Sumo in Fukuoka: Paradise lost?

by Chris Gould



Before heading to Fukuoka, I was firmly convinced that the Kyushu Basho should be scrapped without shame or reservation. Swathes of empty seats on television not only dented sumo's dignity but failed to swell the Kyokai's coffers ahead of a painful economic recession. The ex-Dewanoumi Rijicho's grand expansion project of spreading honbasho across the land appeared dead in the Kyushu waters.

Fukuoka may have been a sumo town in the 1950s, and certainly in the 1980s when the leading yokozuna boasted a local wife, but the market appeared to have shrunk considerably since then. The time appeared to have come to either remove the basho from the schedule completely, or relocate it to Tokyo. Such an about-turn, albeit a slow one, would surely be too much for proud sumo executives to countenance. However, during my three days of



Fukuoka fun, it became obvious that a sumo tournament on Japan's southernmost main island is a highly special experience, more authentic than anything the Kokugikan can dream of offering.

Many seats may be empty, but the

remainder are filled with more knowledge and understanding of sumo's soul than a week's worth of full houses in Tokyo. There is a curious intimacy among the mid-week Fukuoka audiences, buttressed by the decisions of those at the back of the auditorium to fill vacant seats further forward and huddle around the dohyo. In this cosy situation can every wise-crack and chant be heard, their sound quality amplified by the tremendous echo generated by the empty rear of the hall. Amid quips of 'Nagatani-en, ganbare! – good luck, Nagatani-en' directed at Takamisakari (a reference to his popular TV commercial) can Fukuokans relax and savour a sport which panders perfectly to their worship of the chauvinistic male.

Compared to the rather soulless Kokugikan, the Fukuoka Kokusai Centre far better represents what sumo should be about – despite its modern-day makeover. It





subscribes to the philosophy that sumo should take place in a simple square hall, with crowds tightly packed into hoards of temporary seating and scarcely-safe staircases. The palm-tree boulevard and state-of-the-art bayside area outside are swiftly forgotten once one treads the red-carpeted corridors of the Kokusai Centre, surrounded by flimsy steel poles which somehow uphold large quantities of masu-seki. Most strikingly of all, access to many seats is granted only by using the same walkways as the wrestlers themselves!

The dressing rooms, simply confined to the outermost areas of the hall, are not screened off from fans, and thus besieged by wannabe photographers on a daily basis, much to the chagrin of Kyokai security staff. Unlike in Tokyo, there is no special entrance for the sumotori, meaning that even the ozeki and yokozuna are forced to wade through crowds of commoners and souvenir stalls in the main lobby, and further camera-wielding fans backstage. 'Privacy' is not a word that

Fukuoka sumo seems to recognise. Memorable backstage sights of this basho included that of a sekiwake entering the dressing rooms with fuzzy hair and no



bintsuke oil, presumably after having overslept! Another sekitori, meanwhile, was seen frantically scurrying for taxis with his tsukebito, after being caught without an umbrella in heavy rain after the musubi no ichiban!

In Tokyo sumo, all the cheers are reserved for the stars: the ozeki and yokozuna who make the national headlines for reasons both right and wrong. In Fukuoka, Tokyo is clearly seen as a foreign land whose priorities should have little bearing on Kyushu life. Thus, in the Kokusai Centre, are the cheers lavished – in touchingly traditional fashion – upon the local heroes: the sekitori who were born and bred in Kyushu, especially Fukuoka.

Never before had I seen juryo's Kotokasuga receive such a rapturous ovation; and the impact clearly inspired him to a better overall showing than usual.

Kotoshogiku was also fervently applauded, and recovered from

early poor form to make a confident *kachi-koshi*. Fukuokans make little secret of the fact that their biggest idol, both physically and status-wise, is Kaio, and the Centre was filled with giant images of him. After he unexpectedly went *kyujo* on day 4, the locals generously lent spare affections to the *ozeki* born in neighbouring Oita prefecture, Chiyotaikai. His impressive *tsuppari* defeat of Tochinoshin on day eight triggered many *tsuppari* imitations from a delighted crowd. Having never had to experience his teenage tearaway antics, one can understand why the Fukuokans are more appreciative of his success than his native Oitans, many of whom still refer to him by his feared family name of Hiroshima.

By far the best-supported *rikishi*

was quiet, unassuming *maegashira* Yoshikaze, whose large felt-tipped *kanji* could be seen on various pieces of cardboard around the arena. The crimson-belted lightweight duly lifted his game to post a career-best 11-4 performance in *makuuchi*, once again suggesting the sheer determination of *rikishi* not to lose face in front of hometown family and friends. The most exciting and well-cheered bout saw Yoshikaze of Fukuoka face Homasho of the rival Yamaguchi prefecture.

The contest seemed to take on the importance of the mythical match between representatives of Yamate and Izumo, upon which Japan's destiny supposedly depended. After a mere five seconds, technique and aesthetics were completely suspended in favour of

pure unadulterated aggression, the like of which is seldom seen in any sumo ring. Roundhouse blows flew in from all points of the compass as Homasho and Yoshikaze scrapped for victory at all costs. The crowd, swelled by a large Yamaguchi contingent, loved every second, generating almost surreal levels of backing for two relatively little-known *maegashira*. After a minute of mayhem, Yoshikaze finally got behind Homasho, shoved him towards the rope, and delivered a home win celebrated with as much fervour as victory in the Manchester football derby. It was but a tantalising glimpse of what sumo must have been like before non-Japanese came to dominate it. Such raw expressions of local pride are rare in this unprecedented era which sees foreigners outnumber Japanese in the two highest



banzuke ranks.

Fukuoka also helps deepen our comprehension of sumo by laying bare the stark differences and wealth inequalities between the ranking levels. Whereas lower-division rikishi will likely scoff bowls of cheap tonkatsu ramen in outlets run by ageing locals with fond memories of sumo's glory days, salaried rikishi generally frequent the highly-upmarket restaurants of Nakasu, long-renowned as the gentleman's club capital of Kyushu (where bow-ties, tuxedos and – for glamorous escorts – ball dresses seem a prerequisite). The ageing cooks who run the local izakaya and ramenya can scarcely hide their contempt for such wrestlers, along with the younger Japanese rikishi who shun their business in favour

of fast food outlets. 'The reason we don't have a Japanese yokozuna,' said a grandmother-type owner of one ramenya, 'is that they don't eat enough ramen!' Fukuoka is a city which, despite its appearance of commercialisation, is immensely proud of its locality and heritage. Sumo has been seen as an integral part of that heritage since the addition of the Kyushu basho to the Kyokai calendar in 1958. Fifty years down the line, highly knowledgeable sources seem convinced that sumo's progress in Fukuoka is being held back by poor advertising. It is certainly true that promotional posters are decidedly lacking, especially in the city's transport system. (Contrast this to the Tokyo metro, which exhibits its January basho posters in early December).

The large weekend audiences and the daily smattering of curious gaijin suggests that sumo apathy is not a problem in this fine conurbation. Judging by the extreme emotions elicited by Homasho-Yoshikaze, perhaps the Kyokai should simply play upon local pride. At a time when no Japanese has won the makuuchi yusho for three years, the Kyushu basho could be advertised as a perfect chance to bring the Emperor's Cup back into the hands of Fukuoka – or, at least, Kyushu. Borrowing a theme from the new US President, perhaps campaign literature could read: 'You think a Fukuokan can't win the yusho? With your support every day, YES HE CAN!'