

Kokugi Konnections

by Chris Gould

For this issue, Kokugi Connections takes a well-deserved break from its trailblazing introductions to obscure and specialised sumo websites, instead focusing on something more obvious, but no less invaluable to understanding modern-day sumo.

Today's featured website is youtube and – in particular – certain sumo matches captured on it. In the summer of 2008, a generous fan posting under the name of 'usuvecao08,' uploaded the entire collection of Kitanoumi's bouts from his final makuuchi yusho of May 1984. Kitanoumi went undefeated throughout this tournament, belying his advancing years to execute some truly outstanding sumo along the way. Particularly impressive is his one-arm demolition of Ama's stablemaster (then-maegashira Asahifuji) on Day 10 and his incredible rearguard action against a determined and muscular Wakashimazu on Day 14. (See list of links below).

However, these videos are about so much more than Kitanoumi winning. They are special because they include the entire four-minute warm-up to every bout, so that the full intensity of certain rivalries – especially that of Chiyonofuji-Kitanoumi (Day 13) – can be studied through the glares of a shikiri-naoshi. As the footage is the NHK original, it also includes real Japanese commentary (some of which is provided by the legendary yokozuna Taiho), replete with astonishing detailed statistics about each wrestler and

outstanding insights into a bygone sumo era. Even those whose Japanese is a little rusty can learn much about the culture of sumo commentary from the clips, simply by listening for the repeated use of the words: 'hai – yes' and 'ne – isn't it so?' Sumo commentators like to be as polite as possible on air, and hence forever agree with each other.

These clips revive the spirit of the long-forgotten era when Japanese completely dominated their national sport, and foreign wrestlers were barely seen in makuuchi. This was a time when the top rikishi were truly revered; and when everybody in the audience – as evidenced by the frenzied cheering – genuinely believed that they were watching the finest athletes their country had to offer. The supply of powerful up and coming pretenders to Kitanoumi's crown, such as Asashio (Day 8) and Onokuni (Day 5), appeared never-ending.

This was a time when Japan felt good about itself; its economy was booming, kensho were overflowing, sumo stadiums were full. Kimura Shonosuke XXVI, one of the finest and longest serving chief referees ever, has to shout at the top of his voice even to be heard above the searing enthusiasm distinctly absent from the Kokugikan of today. This was also a time when tachi-ai were genuinely awful, and soon to prompt a drastic tightening of the rules by the then association Chairman Futagoyama Oyakata.

To further deepen our

understanding of sumo 25 years ago, 'usuvecao08' has thankfully posted some other key bouts from May 1984. Chiyonofuji and Hokutenyu (Day 12) provides a snapshot of a scintillating rivalry which stemmed from the former allegedly mistreating the latter's brother in sumo practice. Hokutenyu-Takanosato, on Day 13, is the infamous match which decided the title in Kitanoumi's favour.

Hokutenyu and Kitanoumi were stablemates at the time, and the former's triumphant swivel towards the latter (who was seated at ringside) after upending Takanosato has become an iconic sumo image. Most importantly, any clips of Hokutenyu in his prime provide a poignant reminder that even remarkable physical specimens – so fit, so lean, so handsome – are not immune from dying young.

May 1984 also marked a seismic change in sumo with the retirement of one of Kitanoumi's most tricky rivals, Hawaiian giant Takamiyama. At the time, Takamiyama was the only foreigner officially recognised as having won the makuuchi yusho, and the final-day tribute to his career reveals the phenomenal success of his efforts to break down prejudice and become a Japanese hero. In May 2009, exactly 25 years after the video tribute, Takamiyama – now Azumazeki-oyakata – will retire from sumo once more. It is doubtful if anyone has shaped modern-day sumo more than him.

Kitanoumi bouts[Day 1 v Hoshi](#)[Day 2 v Kirinji](#)[Day 3 v Dewanohana](#)[Day 4 v Hoo](#)[Day 5 v Onokuni](#)[Day 6 v Koboyama](#)[Day 7 v Sakahoko](#)[Day 8 v Asashio](#)[Day 9 v Sadanoumi](#)[Day 10 v Asahifuji](#)[Day 11 v Kotokaze](#)[Day 12 v Ozutsu](#)[Day 13 v Chiyonofuji](#)[Day 14 v Wakashimazu](#)[Day 15 v Takanosato](#)**Other key clips:**[Hokutenyu v Takanosato \(Day 13\)](#)[Hokutenyu v Chiyonofuji \(Day 12\)](#)[Takamiyama retirement tribute](#)