

Heya Peek - Sadogatake-beya

by Mark Buckton

Sadogatake Beya is one of the biggies we have yet to visit at SFM. Based near Matsudo to the east of Tokyo in Chiba Prefecture, the heyas are known for their friendly attitude towards foreign visitors lacking in Japanese. Even on the road during Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka basho, Sadogatake throws its doors open to all-comers. Down in Osaka, roughly 30 minutes out of town towards the south east of Japan's culinary capital, exiting a small nondescript station (as many tend to be in this part of the nation), navigating a handful of even smaller, even more nondescript streets and a couple of veggie fields – with a Seven Eleven convenience store slammed right in the center of one – and a handful of the colourful banners seen blowing in the wind outside all sumo stadiums comes into view.

These banners mark the Osaka base of one of the sport's oldest and most prestigious of heyas. Several minutes from the convenience store, through the middle of a pair of trash-filled drainage pools and back into a small – you guessed it: nondescript – neighbourhood, and a long prefab / temporary building appears on the right just beside a small temple.

Most visitors stand outside looking in through the glass doors, just feet away from the temporary dohyo, with the residential area on the second floor overhead and the main parking area for the heyas' cars and people-carriers to the rear as you look in.

On the day SFM visited,



accompanying several US-based sumo first timers, the main sekitori were all in action ahead of their nakabi bouts. Kotomitsuki for the most part was interested primarily in the teppo pole in the corner away from the camp's glass walls. 'Osh,' on the other hand, was far less active, seemingly more interested in remaining stationary than getting down and pressing the flesh – in similar form to his other fellow top dogs. Much more active were the junior makushita and lower-ranking rikishi with the usual round-robin set of practice bouts; words of wisdom and encouragement thrown at them every few minutes from the attending oyakata.

Simple, yet functional, Sadogatake a la Osaka is a heyas built for business. The comforts of home are 560 km back up the Tokaido in the region surrounding the Japanese capital. What you see in Osaka, as with so many other

areas of this industrial city, is what you get.

Viewing courtesy of the open wall-cum-glass access windows, the oyakata's sitting position can be seen to the left. Sadogatake Oyakata is the former sekiwake Kotonowaka, who – upon his retirement at the age of 37 in November 2005 – had fought for an astonishing 97 basho in sumo's top division. He often prefers to sit on boxes placed next to the windows in a position closer to his deshi and fellow Sadogatake warriors of old; a position that brings him a lot closer to the locals for whom the heyas' presence means so much.

Among the warriors of old are ex-sekiwake Kotonishiki, who famously captured two makuuchi yusho as a maegashira. (Together with ex-stablemate Kotofuji, he became part of the first maegashira pairing from the same

stable to win consecutive yusho in 1991). Also among them are Kotoinazuma, (famous for his receding hairline and for defeating yokozuna Takanohana on his komusubi debut at the age of 33), and Hasegawa, fast approaching Kyokai retirement age having dazzled sumo audiences as a sekiwake in the 1970s.

The people who worship these men – regular men and women out working in their fields, stores and businesses are the people who support heya like Sadogatake year-in-year-out during out-of-town stays. Proximity to training is thus ever so meaningful to folk for whom sumo means so much more than man against man and shiroboshi vs kuroboshi.

