

Kokugi Konnections Chiyonofuji

by Chris Gould

Why is it that Kokugikan audiences still fervently applaud the name 'Chiyonofuji' nearly 20 years after the retirement of the bearer? This issue's Kokugi Konnections completes its recent YouTube trilogy in attempting to answer this question.

The weblink in question is: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7-ERVNXcH4>. It contains precious footage of key yusho-winning bouts fought by Chiyonofuji, the current Kokonoe Oyakata, and the man who the Japanese still name 'Wolf' for his famed intensity and predatory glares in the shikiri-naoshi.

It is important to remember, when watching this video, that this man was never tipped to dominate sumo. For a start, he was considered too light, and his rib-cage-revealing frame even struggled in juryo during the mid-1970s. Secondly, until the age of around 25, he was a heavy smoker, and was advised by his idol, ex-ozeki Takanohana, to quit in order to further his promotion chances. Thirdly, it was impossible to see how he could play anything but the underdog to the mighty Kitanoumi, who was only two years his senior. And yet, after the first victory screened on this video, Chiyonofuji consistently defied the odds, collecting an incredible 31 makuuchi yusho and smashing the all-time record for sumo career wins (1045).

Wolfmania began with the weblink's first bout, the footage of which has reduced many a Japanese to tears. The bout tells barely half the story. Only moments before it, sekiwake

Chiyonofuji and yokozuna Kitanoumi had clashed in the final match of senshuraku in January 1981, with the grand champion's superior bulk easily winning the day. Few gave the slender sky-blue-belted Chiyonofuji a chance as the combatants mounted the dohyo again, but the Wolf claimed in a later documentary that he had noticed Kitanoumi fall on his left knee during the regulation match. Believing this knee to be the giant yokozuna's weakness, Chiyonofuji placed severe pressure on it in the playoff, swinging his far larger foe from side to side before pulling him down with the most skilful of dashinage. This legendary moment is considered to be a watershed in 20th century sumo.

The next encounter is, of course, the one that half of Japan tuned in to watch: Chiyonofuji v Kitanoumi, the re-match. This spectacle was played out in the Nagoya Basho of 1981, and saw Chiyonofuji's stablemaster – former yokozuna Kitanofuji – reduced to tears as his well-muscled protégé flipped Kitanoumi sideways and shoved him into the audience. The reward for such showmanship was a second makuuchi yusho and promotion to the revered rank of yokozuna. As few even countenanced the prospect of his regular success against Kitanoumi, the victory was wildly celebrated as a rare triumph of superstar looks over a grand champion who had ruled sumo for too long. Fast-forward to the 2:30 mark, and we see another classic encounter which serves as an epitaph for bubble-era Japan; a carefree audience blissfully unaware of approaching economic woes as their rippling hero

consolidates his position on sumo's throne.

Chiyonofuji finds himself against his tricky 200-kilogram rival Onokuni here, who would later make yokozuna himself only to see his form sink with the Japanese economy. The weblink's match is edited, but the full version is still screened around Ryogoku and lasts for over two minutes. Onokuni is a very big 21-year-old and Chiyonofuji displays incredible strength and stamina to grapple with his phenomenal weight for 120 seconds. And yet his 30-year-old body, which has suffered from a number of shoulder injuries, shows no signs of declining as 1985 draws to a close, with Onokuni swung and lifted off balance twice before being nudged over the ropes. The match appears the perfect riposte to those who dismiss sumo as controlled by an oligarchy of blubbery giants. Another Chiyonofuji-Onokuni affair shown around the video's six-minute mark is almost equally entertaining, and won by a daring inner-leg-trip.

Several of Wolf's clashes against the towering Kitao/ Futahaguro are also recorded, and resemble a textbook definition of how to handle a far taller and supple opponent. Fittingly, for this SFM issue, we also see Chiyonofuji in action against the star of the Rikishi of Old section, Asahifuji, a man renowned for his fabulous repertoire of techniques. The match against Hokutoumi, over eight minutes in, marks the first occasion on which two yokozuna from the same stable faced each other in active competition – in

this case, in a playoff for the Nagoya yusho in 1989. It would have been very un-Japanese for Hokutoumi to have upset his mentor, especially just a month after the death of his baby daughter, and the Wolf easily downs his junior with a wonderfully-executed throw.

As Chiyonofuji came to impose himself over the entire top-division, he understandably became celebrated for some of the matches he lost as well as won. His defeat against Onokuni on the final day of the 1988 Kyushu basho – the last bout of Japan’s Showa

era before the death of Emperor Hirohito – ended Wolf’s dumfounding run of 53 makuuchi bouts without defeat. His loss to Terao in 1989 is equally monumental as no-one – perhaps not even Shikoroyama Oyakata himself – can remember a single match that Terao won on the belt, let alone against such a distinguished yotsu-zumo artist. Wolf’s titanic mawashi-struggles against fellow yotsu-specialist Hokutenyu are fitting tributes to a scintillating rivalry which was spiced up by a training incident involving Chiyonofuji and Hokutenyu’s brother. But perhaps

his most entertaining defeats of all came against the present-day Onomatsu Oyakata, formerly known as Masurao. Being of similar build to Chiyonofuji, Masurao ensures that the contests display considerable muscle and athleticism, culminating in a stupendous utcharri, the likes of which have rarely been seen in the sumo ring before or since.

The aforementioned losses can be studied via these links:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lLc_GFSwM2Y and

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jv5O3eluL7I>.