

Heya Peek Isegahama-Beya

by Chris Gould

Tucked away in the sidestreets between bustling Kinshicho and sedate Sumiyoshi is the new Isegahama-Beya, the cold, grey, steel exterior of which was only completed in December 2007. The new building was integral to an ambitious project undertaken by the 63rd yokozuna, Asahifuji Seiya (see SFM 24) to prevent the decline of the Isegahama name.

So prestigious was this name that it once formed part of the ichimon ('group of heya') title: Tatsunami-Isegahama, and was thus inherited by a host of prestigious wrestlers including the 38th yokozuna, Terukuni. When Ozeki Kiyokuni took charge in 1977, expectations were high that the glory days would continue. However, in 1985, the oyakata lost several close family members in the abhorrent JAL 123 plane disaster, and practically lost the will to live. Consequently, the heya declined to the point where only two active rikishi remained. Then, Asahifuji stepped in.

Fast forward to 2009 and the Isegahama-Beya, post-Ajigawa injection, is thriving once more, with three sekitori, some promising youngsters, a host of koenkai members and a vast media presence at selected training sessions. Interest in the heya has grown steadily with the ascent of a 25-year-old Mongol, formerly known as Ama, currently known as Ozeki Harumafuji. This man's outstanding feats have been supplemented by the perennial giant-killings of Aminishiki, the last man to fight and defeat legendary yokozuna Takanohana, and conqueror of Asashoryu and Hakuho on many an occasion.



Meanwhile, Aminishiki's older sibling Asofuji continues to terrorise the lower rankers in juryo. Until two years ago, he was regularly seen in the maegashira ranks, but a shoulder injury has since consigned him to makushita on occasion. Nevertheless, the siblings continue to make their stablemaster-uncle extremely proud.

Although the current Isegahama-oyakata is a somewhat sleepy figure, and thus unchanged from his wrestling days, the deshi seem reasonably afraid of their coach's wrath. The general Isegahama regime is for one of the deshi to stand guard by the oyakata's elevator, and report to the others when the lights indicate a

downward journey from the coach's quarters to the training area. Upon the emergence of the towering oyakata, who stands over 188 centimetres, the deshi visibly practice harder. On days when the oyakata is completely absent on kyokai business, the atmosphere is incredibly relaxed.

One such occasion, in January 2008, saw the then-Ama start a salt-crystal throwing contest with the junior wrestlers. He began by opening the salt-bag and offering a giant crystal to his tsukebito, whose face was fully perplexed. Ama then motioned for the crystal to be thrown, and before long, a fully flowing game of crystal frisbie was in progress, in full view of watching koenkai members in a



dark suits! At the end of the session, where scarce a practice bout was fought, two onlooking journalists – who seemed respectfully uninterested in a ‘lazy rikishi throw salt crystals’ story, waited patiently at Ama’s side for a chance to talk. They showed Ama a newspaper which carried statistics of his results against Asashoryu, who he was due to fight later that day.

Ama admitted that he could not read all the kanji, and the journalists explained some of it to him. He then poured out his thoughts on the afternoon’s contest, appearing the consummate gentleman. Incredibly, despite taking morning training incredibly lightly, the Peaceful Horse fought the match of his life against Asashoryu, extending the fearsome yokozuna for a full-minute on the belt before eventually succumbing to a sublime throw. It was a classic case of deceptive appearances on Japanese shores.

Another interesting training session took place in September 2007, when Ama appeared to be struggling with a swollen knee. Looking distinctly lethargic in practice bouts, he was even felled by a makushita on one occasion. A disgruntled horse promptly called the boy back for a rematch, easily deposited him over the rope, and then sent him hurtling into the wooden beams of a nearby wall with a bone-crunching shove. That would teach him to upstage the master! The oyakata watched some of that training session, but departed early for a medical appointment on his motorbike. When a junior rikishi announced the news, the keikoba erupted with joy and training finished abruptly, with plenty of jokes thrown in.

Four months later and Harumafuji fever was beginning to peak. On a cold January morning, the keikoba was filled to overflowing as reporters scuffled for the best view of the new Spring Horse. On that day, the oyakata showed his

intimidating side, frequently upbraiding reporters for whom he held obvious contempt. ‘Turn those shaka-shaka flashes off!’ he roared at one stage. ‘This is keiko! My men are trying to concentrate!’

After a series of apologetic bows, the atmosphere became yet more tense as Asashoryu entered for a bout of de-geiko. What followed was one of the most awesome practice sessions ever, as the established yokozuna and shin-ozeki tussled around 12 times, with Asashoryu winning eight and convincingly dispelling injury fears. At the end of keiko, the oyakata departed and reporters began to snap freely. However, they soon made another enemy in Asashoryu, who after joking with the other sekitori, rapidly turned to the press and said: ‘What are you still doing here? Keiko’s finished. Get out!’ He then glared down a group of foreign fans, and told them to ‘go home!’ in English, with accompanying hand motions for good measure.



Isegahama, with its giant portrait of yokozuna Asahifuji at the entrance and a magnificent white tsuna at the side of the training room viewing platform, is certainly an interesting place to visit. Since Harumafuji's rise to ozeki, though, competition for viewing places has become vastly more fierce, and same-day reservations – formerly common – are now often denied.

The atmosphere is frequently enlivened by the appearance of the oyakata's wife and mother, a tiny woman of around 80 years of age who is frequently seen shopping for food in the local neighbourhood. Legend has it that the oyakata's mother frequently asks young sumotori to run errands for her, and that the okami-san frequently reminds her that this is not the proper thing to do! Most noteworthy of all is the

fact that a heya located in a desperately quiet neighbourhood is brimming with a future yokozuna and a sanyaku regular. It is but the latest plot-twist in the fluctuating fortunes of a famous sumo name.

