

Kokugi Konnections Takamiyama

by Chris Gould

Due to popular demand, Chris Gould extends the recent series of Youtube-based KKs.

Unsurprisingly, June's edition of KK features the man whose retirement marks the end of an unforgettable sumo era. Every foreigner currently in sumo today, whether dominating the sport or struggling in it, owes his sumo career to Jesse Kuhaulua, otherwise known as the orange-belted Hawaiian giant, Takamiyama.

The first weblink up for perusal features Takamiyama's final and very famous kinboshi upset of yokozuna Kitanoumi in September 1978. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x90qDFdtYWk>. Looking ice-cool with trademark sideburns, the burly Hawaiian in the luminescent sash bounds into the ex-Rijicho, and is almost immediately swung off-balance. (The appalling tachi-ai, more a 'run-off' than a 'jump-off,' was – of course – part and parcel of 1970s sumo). Amid the croaking tones of Kimura Shonosuke, Takamiyama latches onto Kitanoumi's sash while skilfully preventing the yokozuna from securing a migi-yotzu.

From this position, as on numerous previous occasions, the 'High View Mountain' uses his sheer bulk – superior to that of any makuuchi rikishi of his day – to squeeze Kitanoumi into a corner and ultimately over the ropes. The bouncing of his long legs to generate extra force is especially notable. Such a technique was only made possible by Takamiyama's intense dedication to shiko, the key determinant of

his long sumo career, according to the man himself. The 'bouncing leg' technique was later deployed to devastating effect by Konishiki, the fellow Hawaiian who Takamiyama recruited to Takasago beya in 1982.

The second weblink is arguably the most famous bout in sumo history, which was staged in Nagoya on the final day of the July 1972 basho. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZX2bJqbGA4>. Here, a much younger and more slender Takamiyama takes on a famed sumo technician by the name of Asahikuni, a man who somehow held ozeki despite his light weight and diabetic problems. Here, a markedly better tachi-ai sees Takamiyama latch on to the smaller man's belt with a right paw, only for Asahikuni to counter with a lightning-speed inner-left grip.

In a style which was copied by Musashimaru in his early days, Takamiyama leans on his opponent while retaining the migi-zashi, keeping his large body at a slight angle, trying to secure an inside-left while keeping Asahikuni's right hand at bay. After 15 seconds, Takamiyama guides Asahikuni along the tawara, squeezes off all possible escape routes and nudges him over the tawara to become the first non-Japanese official to claim the makuuchi yusho. The Hawaiian later claimed that he was so nervous as to barely be able to walk onto the dohyo. He also somewhat modestly described his yusho-winning feat as 'a proud achievement,' even though it triggered personal congratulations from the American President of

the day.

Takamiyama garnered 12 kinboshi in his career, a record which stood for over 15 years before it was broken by the far smaller frame of Akinoshima in the 1990s. Most of Takamiyama's kinboshi came against Yokozuna Wajima, the man who often looked jinxed when facing him. In clip number three from March 1974, Takamiyama walks straight into an opening harite which would knock any normal man flat. Undeterred, he burrows into the pretty-faced yokozuna, clinging desperately to a precarious right-hand belt-grip.

After the Hawaiian is driven to the rope by the incredible strength of the muscular grand champion (at one stage even being lifted off his feet!), a shimpan signals for a break in the action to allow Wajima's emerald sash to be re-tied. The intervention provides just the relief Takamiyama needs to regain his energy, drive Wajima backwards and over onto his back. The force of the knockdown renders Wajima barely able to stand afterwards. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5dD3xVo3A>.

Next, from the pinnacle of his strength we move to the inevitability of age-induced weakness. Ten years after his crushing of Wajima, Takamiyama found himself on the competitive dohyo for the final time against Tamaryu. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aji3i2u6lM>. Knowing on the May 1984 senshuraku that nothing less than a win would save his juryo status, Takamiyama hurled himself into combat with

reckless abandon despite barely being able to use his injured left arm. Tamaryu cruelly dances round his valiant efforts and, despite almost being caught with a force-out, spins the faltering giant to the ground at the tawara. Boiling over with frustration, Takamiyama punches the air and cries to the heavens, knowing that his 20-year-long professional sumo career is over. The crowd know it too, and many members offer him a standing ovation in the second-last tournament to be staged at Kuramae Kokugikan. Such was the extent of 1980s sumo fever that few seats were empty even for juryo matches. The atmosphere for this contest is barely matched even by the yusho bouts of today.

Takamiyama is particularly

famous for his matches with the comparatively diminutive Takanohana, the father of two future yokozuna. 'I fought him 40 times and I only won about 20,' was how Takamiyama modestly described his classic rivalry with the ozeki. An excruciatingly close match between these two, from 1980, is shown in the following video clip, which was broadcast on Japanese TV on May 23rd 2009 to mark Jesse Kuhaulua's retirement as Azumazeki oyakata.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abwDdtsW3DY>. This clip – for those who can understand the Japanese – is one of the best concise guides to Takamiyama available. Particularly amusing are the comments of former NHK sumo announcer Mr Sugiyama, who even tries to impersonate Takamiyama's husky voice when

claiming that the Hawaiian could not originally tell the difference between snow and sugar. Takamiyama had allegedly never laid eyes upon snow before entering Japan to become the most influential sumotori of his generation.

Those who have never attended a sumo retirement ceremony may take particular interest in the following clip, which contains priceless footage of Takamiyama's hair-cutting event from 1985.

Very few non-Japanese fans will ever have seen this footage, which is a nostalgic snapshot of a Japan at ease with itself, happy with its economy, and enraptured by its sumo.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVQMnanw7xA>.