

When Dejima beat Asashoryu

by Chris Gould

As a tribute to Takeharu Dejima, who retired aged 35 on July 23rd 2009, Chris Gould takes us back to January 9th 2007, and one of the finest moments of Dejima's eventful career.

This was absolutely not meant to happen. Least of all so early – Day Three! The arena should not be filled with a patriotic roar and the purple snow of falling floor-cushions. Asashoryu Akinori, sumo's finest active wrestler, is not supposed to be lying pole-axed against front-row spectators. Takeharu Dejima, the lumbering, heavily-bandaged has-been, is not possibly being crowned national hero for the day. The crowd does not consider him as hero material, he does not see himself as a hero, and yet here he is, the toast of Japan, dazedly collecting his kensho from the chief referee.

There had not been the slightest indication of this five minutes earlier, when Asashoryu and Dejima ascended the dohyo. Back then, the yokozuna's formidable shiny shoulders personified pure strength while his opponent's creaking, taped-up frame resembled the polar opposite. No one in the stadium, not even the jingoistic Olympic Oji-san, would have contemplated giving Dejima a chance. The audience easily assumed they knew the score and a morgue-like atmosphere resulted. A couple of dozen crowd members carried out their daily ritual of leaving the arena before Asashoryu's bout, either unable to bear the sight of him or bored stiff with the predictability of his results.

Asashoryu had won his previous



Dejima

18 bouts. His last loss to Dejima had come in March 2003. Since then, the two had fought nine times, with the Mongol winning on every occasion. Three years and 363 days had passed since Dejima had last defeated a yokozuna in Tokyo, and he had managed only three wins over Asashoryu in 17 attempts. Even in his prime, his record against the Mongol was 2-2. In short, there appeared more chance of the homeward-bound train arriving late into Ryogoku than there did of defeat for a nigh-invincible yokozuna.

The early stages of the shikiri-naoshi reflected the conventional wisdom. The blubbery, 160-kilogram Dejima seemed unwilling even to enter the contest. He squatted at the shikiri-sen with an unease which suggested he knew defeat was inevitable barring a huge slice of luck. At nearly 33, he felt too old to defiantly chase lost causes and doubtless wished he were matched against someone nearer his level. As Asashoryu's

eyes became fixated with his own, Dejima appeared overwhelmed by the hopelessness of the situation. Spectators nearly always cheered a Japanese against a gaijin, only desisting when glumness towards their man's prospects intervened. Today, the hoarse cheers from the handful of Asashoryu supporters went completely unrivalled.

Dejima's prospects had not always looked this depressing. As an 18-year-old, he had helped Team Japan win gold medals at the inaugural World Amateur Sumo Championships. Shortly afterwards, he had joined the Musashigawa training stable and adapted to professional sumo with astonishing success. At the peak of his powers in the late 1990s, he regularly troubled the best sumotori of the era, winning the 1999 Nagoya basho and earning ozeki status. He never gave up his family name for an alternative ring-title, and nurtured hopes of emulating Wajima and Kitao, the only two men to achieve yokozuna promotion under their real names. However, injury cruelly struck and he relinquished his ozeki title in 2001. Further injuries in 2002 and 2003, coupled with the despair at losing his prestigious position, relegated him to middle-ranking mediocrity.

Had he been facing Asashoryu six years earlier, he would have carried the hopes of an entire arena into the match and the atmosphere would have approached fever-pitch. Instead, he found himself unable to inspire even half a stadium. Fifty per cent of the Kokugikan – possibly more – lay empty, a silent peninsula of red seats.

Happily aware of the odds stacked against his opponent, the yokozuna effortlessly dominated proceedings, strutting between shikiri-sen and salt-basket with a calmness bordering on arrogance. All the regular poses were there: the meditative facial expression as the referee announced the day's final bout; the elegant, skyward flick of the wrist for the first salt-throw; the cocked left-foot before the fifth crouch-down. There was only one man in the ring who approached each 'meeting of glares' with relish and caused the other to wince. This same man appeared infinitely more prepared to fight at the fifth shikiri, just before the timekeeping judge was due to raise his right hand.

So comfortable was the yokozuna, in fact, that he would have had reason to predict exactly how the bout would develop. The timekeeper would catch the referee's eye, the referee would acknowledge the gesture with the most discreet of nods, and Asashoryu would give Dejima the final look of death before hammering his left hand into his own belt. The buzz from nearby spectators would ripple through the first tier of the arena as the yokozuna would lunge forward for his blue towel, rapidly scrape the moisture from his brow, stoop just as rapidly for a final handful of salt, drag a meaty hand across his lips, drop his sodium chloride and briskly stride back to the centre of the ring, menacing eyes glued to the plump cheeks of Dejima's disconcerted face. Then, at the tachi-ai, Asashoryu would slam into Dejima's bandaged elbow, latch onto the crimson mawashi and swiftly drive the bloated bundle of nerves over the ropes. That was how most of us envisaged it.

But alas, our powers of prediction were found wanting. Asashoryu had placed his left arm on standby for the famed belt-slap but the referee's discreet nod never came.



Yokozuna Asashoryu

A slightly bemused Asashoryu glanced around, saw no signs of communication between timekeeper and gyoji, and awkwardly pulled out of the belt-slap as he trudged slowly to his corner, his shoulders leaning heavily into each plod. For reasons unclear to him or his supporters, he would be required to purify the ring a sixth time. The pace of the contest would have to be adjusted. His rhythm might suffer.

Back the two gladiators came, to the centre of the ring; Asashoryu still keen for flesh to meet flesh, Dejima content with a never-ending shikiri-naoshi. The eyes met again, with Dejima still no more confident in facing down the yokozuna. He would not have long to get his act together, assuming that this was possible. The timekeeper's hand would surely be raised any second, and was currently under the scrutiny of a thousand eyes.

Audience members waited with bated breath for that godforsaken hand to rise. The hour seemed ripe for the yokozuna to unleash his dazzling array of skills, to provide us with another reason to boast about having seen him live. But the yokozuna's disappointment matched the

crowd's astonishment. The timekeeper's hand remained stationary even after the next crouch-down! There must have been some mistake! On this occasion, the chief referee clearly looked for the timekeeping judge's assent and appeared surprised not to receive it. Perhaps the day's schedule was due to end too early, and needed to be prolonged?

Whatever the reason, other judges sensed something was amiss. The bespectacled Izutsu-oyakata, seated behind Dejima, leaned towards the timekeeper and demanded an explanation. Sure enough, after the wrestlers crouched down yet again, time was called, and Asashoryu was able to execute the long-delayed pounding of his belt before stamping into his corner to dry his face.

As the yobidashi handed out the wrestlers' flannels, the Kokugikan atmosphere brightened considerably as the confusion subsided. And yet there was a sense that order had not quite been restored; that the unprecedented length of the preliminaries had not only conferred some unnatural importance upon the bout, but had set the tone for something unusual. As Asashoryu homed in on his starter's line, he would have noticed that for about the only time during the shikiri, Dejima seemed ready to fight. And Asashoryu was not prepared for a prepared Dejima.

Voices rose, including that of the referee, and the two sumotori charged. The majestic yokozuna came off worse. He had been hit by more powerful opening blows but reacted very badly to this one, and the audience were delighted to seize on his discomfort. A roar of encouragement broke out as desperate Dejima capitalised on his superb start, using the crowd's energy to drive harder into Asashoryu's well-formed body. As he did so, spectators released

sounds they never knew they had in them, or at least would never have produced five minutes previously. Before long, Asashoryu was leaning backwards at a terribly unhealthy angle, unable to fend off the thrusting might of his heavier foe. I still half-believed that he would recover, that he would clobber Dejima with his deadly left hook and send him stumbling. But Asashoryu's thick neck was soon at a 45° angle to the ground and as the screams of 4,000 uncoiled sumo supporters crescendoed, I felt I was clinging to a lost cause. So, evidently, did Asashoryu who, rather than come off worst in a war of attrition, opted to swiftly fall as a chess-king does when a player resigns from the game.

As the yokozuna's rock-like shoulder blades crashed against the clay, the crowd rose as one. Withered hands emerged from the mass of smart clothes to applaud Dejima's incredible victory, while a hundred flashlights sought to capture the shock on the face of the yokozuna. And then, as I had seen so many times on television but never in the flesh, the purple floor-cushions began to rain down. They fell sporadically at first, but as the feverish excitement spread, the heavens opened. Pensioners began to feel that if zabuton-throwing befitted their grown-up offspring, it also befitted them. Parents sought to impress young children with their cushion-tossing skills. Such impulses impelled panicked yobidashi to rush onto the dohyo and remove zabuton, as Oga still needed to



Dejima

perform the bow-twirling ceremony. Admittedly, the scene could hardly compare to a legendary moment within the Kuramae Kokugikan, when tiny Takanohana's victory over the gargantuan yokozuna Kitanoumi spawned thousands of thrown zabuton which obscured the stadium ceiling. However, the rushed release of unexpected inner-strength, pent-up passion and unplanned joy radicalised that half-full auditorium, and made the crowd seem far greater in number.

The mood, and the day's significance, had been transformed by Takeharu Dejima's exploits. Now everybody would have a story to tell at the dinner table, regardless of who they were supporting, and not even the most succulent food could distract one's mind from it. The banter among the fans was refreshingly lively as they crammed onto the escalators

leading to the entrance hall. For all we knew, sumo might even regain its rightful place atop the sports stories on the evening news.

Those unable to wait for the seven o'clock bulletin had already flocked to the television screen at the foot of the escalators. The screen was conveying the Asashoryu-Dejima shikiri-naoshi at that very moment and, straining over the shoulders of those in front, I counted the salt throws one by one. For the second time that day, I counted seven. The real-time replay of Dejima's first blow elicited several laddish shouts of approval, which increased in volume and frequency as the yokozuna was knocked progressively nearer the ropes. When the yokozuna's footing finally gave way, it was as if a goal had been scored at an English football match.

Amid the applause and hoots of delight, a grey-suited old man wheeled away from the screen with a gap-toothed grin and broke into mocking laughter, clearly of the view that a certain Mongol deserved his comeuppance. I was a little surprised that a respectable-looking Japanese granddad could suddenly turn so childish. But then again, Asashoryu does not lose many bouts, least of all to Japanese sumotori. It was best to let patriots savour the moments that allegedly help avenge the attempted Mongol invasions of the 1200s. In the present sumo climate, such moments are rare indeed.



