

# Rikishi of Old

## The 40th Yokozuna Azumafuji Kinichi (1921-1973)

### (Part 1 of 2)

by Joe Kuroda

The 40th Yokozuna Azumafuji Kinichi was the first yokozuna born and raised in Tokyo. Traditionally those who are born and raised in Tokyo are said to share unique personal traits and are often called “Edo-kko”, literally meaning “a child of Edo” (the former name of Tokyo). An Edo-kko is known to be straightforward, assertive, emotional, deeply loyal to their friends and family members, often never able to refuse a favour and having a very short temperament. Azumafuji was known to be a pure Edo-kko in this sense and his career and life can be best understood if we view him from this perspective.

Amid swirling social chaos, unrest and confusion right after Japan's defeat in World War II, Azumafuji more than any other rikishi literally carried sumo on his massive shoulders when the sport was in danger of neglect from a Japanese public eager to throw away old relics and accept the brave new world. He overwhelmed his opponents with imposing size and blinding speed, but despite his unsurpassed strength and power he never managed to achieve consecutive yusho nor all-win yusho. Granted, he suffered rather serious injuries however his peculiarly Edo-kko personality may have had something to do with his rather checkered sumo career. When he was good, there was no one equal to him but when he was not on form, an average hiramaku rikishi could whip him rather effortlessly. This enigma of Azumafuji still fascinates sumo historians a

quarter century after his death as he unquestionably had the physique, potential and skills to equal the yokozuna he most admired himself: the great Futabayama.

Azumafuji Kinichi was born Kinichi Inoue in Taito-ward of Tokyo. He weighed 6.8 kg at birth and by the time he was 12 years old weighed over 75 kg. He was learning judo while attending an elementary school and his prowess became rather well known around his Shitaya area neighbourhood. The news did actually even spread to the sumo world after Kinichi was seen wheeling around machinery weighing over 200 kg on a cart.

Fujigane oyakata (the 4th Fujigane, former Komusubi Wakaminato Yoshimasa) who had just launched his own heya after leaving Takasago Beya was especially keen on acquiring Azumafuji, and passionately recruited him to enter his heya. Kinichi had not competed in amateur sumo but agreed to join the heya after he graduated from elementary school. In 1935, the 13-year-old Kinichi weighed 84 kg but stood only 165 cm tall – less than the regulation minimum height. However, he was admitted without being measured after his oyakata arranged his entry with an examining oyakata.

Kinichi was certainly bigger than other older recruits but he had no basic sumo training and failed to beat anyone else in his mae-zumo bouts. At this time there were only two basho held each year and it

took him full two years to pass through mae-zumo and get himself ranked in Jonokuchi at the 1938 January Basho.

For a while during his Mae-zumo days, other heya mates kept telling the oyakata: “That Kin-boy has no future in Ozumo. Let him go home.” However, Fujigane oyakata saw something else in Kinichi and barked back to the detractors saying: “Where do you guys have your eyes? As far as I am concerned, Kin-boy is the only one I am counting on.” Kinichi burst into tears when he heard the oyakata defending him with such vigour and he resolved to work harder than anyone else at the heya.

Fujigane oyakata obviously realized Kinichi's potentials while all others dismissed him after seeing his mae-zumo performance. The oyakata was a Takasago Beya rikishi and once he founded his own heya he followed their tradition of naming a rikishi starting with the first kanji of his own heya. In this case, he used “Fuji” taken from Fujigane Beya. (The current Takasago rikishi, for instance, have their shikona starting with “Asa” as in Asashoryu).

In case of Kinichi, the oyakata gave him “Fuji” like all his recruits and then “Azuma” stemming from Kinichi's birthplace, Tokyo, as “Azuma” also meaning east is the first kanji of Tokyo. Actually Kinichi's shikona should have been “Fuji-Azuma.” By naming Kinichi “Azumafuji,” the oyakata let the world know Kinichi was a

special rikishi with huge potential, and that he had high expectations of him. He was attaching his conviction to the shikona.

As typical of an Edo-kko, Azumafuji Kinichi was prepared to go all out to reward those loyal and devoted to him. His oyakata's faith motivated him no end and once he was in Jonokuchi, he was no longer a weakling. He endured the most brutal training sessions on a daily basis and he improved so much that soon became the best rikishi in the heya. Azumafuji passed through jonokuchi in one basho, jonidan in two basho, and by May 1940 he was in makushita. At the time of the 1942 January Basho Azumafuji was already a juryo man.

Just prior to his juryo promotion, Azumafuji had an encounter that would influence the rest of his sumo life. It was the encounter that provided him with the inspiration to aim for yokozuna one day. It happened during a jungyo tour in the Korean Peninsula (then occupied by Japan). Yokozuna Futabayama was giving training sessions to sanyaku level rikishi, almost

effortlessly tossing one sekitori after another out of dohyo. After Yokozuna Futabayama went through every man several times, he yelled out: "All right then! Who will be the next?" Hearing this, Azumafuji rushed into the dohyo only to be quickly stopped by a group of rikishi who, while slapping him, scolded him with the words: "You idiot. You are nothing more than a plain makushita. What do you think you are doing?" By rushing in, Azumafuji committed a clear breach of sumo protocol which stated a makushita was crazily impudent if he wished to tussle with a yokozuna.

Azumafuji understood all this in his head but he still wanted to test himself against the great yokozuna. As he stood at the side of the dohyo doing his best to observe the practice, he could not stop the tears flowing down his cheeks. While Azumafuji knew full well how invincible Yokozuna Futabayama was on the dohyo, he did not yet know about Futabayama's unique sumo life and the sacrifices made to achieve such invincibility. After demolishing the high ranking rikishi, Futabayama called out

loudly: "Let me borrow this dohyo for a while!" and looked over to Azumafuji. "Kin-boy," he continued, "you come up here and let's have a session together!"

It was unimaginable for a yokozuna to give a training session to a Makushita rikishi who was neither from his own heya or Ichimon. But there it was for all to see - a truly magical moment. Makushita Azumafuji could do nothing except storm into the great yokozuna's chest with his head and hope for miracles. The event left a long-lasting impression: Azumafuji fondly recollected it long after he retired from Ozumo. It was the beginning of long enduring relationship between the two as, from that day on, Futabayama never neglected to invite Azumafuji to his training sessions, even after Azumafuji was promoted to juryo and makuuchi. Being an Edokko, Azumafuji obviously never forgot such kindness shown to him by the great yokozuna. He thus pledged to dedicate all his days and nights to become a rikishi that Futabayama entrusted, and who might one day become a yokozuna Futabayama could be proud of.

### Azumafuji Kinichi

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| Born in:                  | Taito-ku, Tokyo                                |
| Born on:                  | October 28th, 1921                             |
| Real name:                | Kinichi Inoue                                  |
| Shikona:                  | Azumafuji                                      |
| Heya:                     | Fujigane, Takasago                             |
| Dohyo debut:              | 1936 January                                   |
| Juryo debut:              | 1942 January                                   |
| Makuuchi debut:           | 1943 May                                       |
| Final basho:              | 1954 September                                 |
| Highest rank:             | Yokozuna                                       |
| Number of makuuchi basho: | 31   |
| Makuuchi record:          | 261 wins, 104 losses, 1 draw, 1 hold, 54 kyujo |
| Winning percentage:       | 71.50%   |
| Number of makuuchi yusho: | 6  |
| Awards:                   | n/a  |
| Height:                   | 179 cms  |
| Weight:                   | 178 kgs  |
| Favorite techniques:      | yori   |
| Toshiyori name:           | Nishikido, until leaving sumo in December 1954 |
| Date of death:            | July 30th, 1973                                |