

Rikishi of Old

The 40th Yokozuna Azumafuji Kinichi (1921-1973)

(Part 2 of 2)

by Joe Kuroda

With his renewed enthusiasm as well as rigorous training provided by Futabayama, Azumafuji developed into one of the most exciting young rikishi coming up the banzuke ladder. He passed through juryo in only three tournaments and was promoted to makuuchi at the 1943 May Basho. Ranked at maegashira east 8, Azumafuji faced Yokozuna Akinoumi and Terukuni on his makuuchi debut and left with a credible 10 win-5 loss record (10-5). As a 21-year-old, his physique matured into a 131-kg, 176-cm frame, and his impressive dohyo presence was quickly recognized by Ozumo fans and his peers alike.

Unfortunately, in the following 1944 January Basho, Azumafuji injured his lower back and had to withdraw, finishing with a 7-4-4 (kyujo) record. However, at the 1944 May Basho when ranked at maegashira east 2, he returned to fine form, winning six bouts and losing four (of which two losses were against yokozuna). The record was good enough to propel him to sekiwake at the 1944 November Basho, which turned out to be truly memorable for him. On Day 6, Azumafuji faced his master teacher Futabayama for the first time in a hon-basho, after many training sessions together. The bout saw Azumafuji jump out quickly at the tachiai and tackle Futabayama hard, grabbing the left of the mawashi and pushing in with his body. When Futabayama tried to circumnavigate him, Azumafuji seized the opening and threw him hard with a spectacular uwate-nage.

When Azumafuji paid a visit to Futabayama later in the dressing room, Futabayama told him: "Kin-boy. What was that all about? You had to throw me so hard and so cleanly, didn't you?" But Futabayama's smile told the real story as he added: "I have nothing to worry about anymore and I know I can retire well now." It was the loss that caused Futabayama to retire, although he was persuaded to stay on for one more basho for the sake of post-war morale. Azumafuji went on to finish the basho with 9-1, the same record as the eventual yusho winner.

In March 1945, during persistent air raids over Tokyo, Azumafuji tragically lost his mother and sister and was evacuated outside Tokyo himself. Amid devastation and tragedies abound, he somehow found a life-long partner in the shape of his wife, Fumiko. Throughout his sumo career and after his retirement, Azumafuji was well known for adoring his wife. Perhaps buoyed by meeting her, in the 1945 June Basho when ranked at sekiwake east, he posted 6-1 and was promoted to ozeki.

At the 1945 November Basho, the first after Japan's World War II defeat, Azumafuji lost only to Yokozuna Haguoyama who went on to win the yusho with a 10-0 record. In the same basho, his senior heya mate Wakaminato retired and took over the Toshiyori myoseki of Fujigane, deciding to leave the Takasago group and join Futabayama Dojo. This made Azumafuji an orphan without a real heya and he thus

became a name-only Fujigane Beya rikishi while he temporarily worked from Dewanoumi Beya.

Prior to the 1946 November Basho Azumafuji severely injured his left ankle but, as an ozeki, felt a special obligation to participate in the basho to help revive Ozumo's post-war popularity. This was his Edo-ko personality in full force, duty bound and eager to accept a challenge willingly when asked. However, November 1946 was a very trying basho for him, and he barely managed to finish with kachikoshi. It was revealed later that Azumafuji suffered complex fractures in the ankle which contributed to his uneven performance levels later in his career.

At the 1948 May Basho, though, Azumafuji was feeling exceptionally well, overwhelming his opponents with quick railroading yori-kiri sumo. When going this good, he was unstoppable, literally bulldozing his opponent off the dohyo in a flash by applying pressure with his massive weight of 170 kg. Often, it was as if he had no opponent, his poor foes feeling they had been hit by a runaway train, ousted in mere seconds. He finished with 10-1 to win his first yusho but the question still lingers on many observers' minds as to how he managed to lose one bout when he had so much going for him. One plausible answer may be that Azumafuji was never able to keep full concentration throughout the whole basho. Indeed, he had a habit of dropping bouts he should

definitely have won.

There is an interesting anecdote concerning his first yusho parade. Being an Edo-kko, Azumafuji wanted as many Tokyo people in as many neighbourhoods to see him holding the yusho cup. He came up with the idea of driving around on a convertible so everyone could see him better and borrowed one from Rikidozan. He thus became the first yusho winner to parade in an open-top car – a tradition that has been copied by every yusho winner since.

In the following 1948 October Basho, Azumafuji was again almost invincible, going 10-1. Though he got himself into the yusho kettei-sen, he lost out to Masuiyama. However the fact that he accomplished two consecutive equivalent yusho was enough to merit the yokozuna promotion. Azumafuji became the last yokozuna to be promoted by the House of Yoshida Tsukasa, before the Sumo Association assumed grand champion promotion rights. On his yokozuna debut, 28-year-old Azumafuji showed he was indeed worthy of the highest rank, finishing with 10-2 and one draw. The dawn of the Azumafuji era seemed to have broken.

Due to his great strength, sumo fans promptly placed high expectations on Azumafuji that no yokozuna could possibly live up to. Unfortunately, perhaps due to his chronic ankle injury, Azumafuji finished with an 8-7 the following basho, losing every bout from Day 11 onwards.

Around this time Azumafuji was asked by Maedayama to formally transfer to Takasago Beya and being a typical Edo-kko, never able to say “no” when asked, Azumafuji accepted. However, Dewanoumi Beya rikishi felt cheated, believing Azumafuji to have deserted them as soon as he became a yokozuna. The handling of this transfer created more enemies than friends

for Azumafuji and may have contributed to his eventual departure from Ozumo.

By 1951, Azumafuji was weighing close to 180 kg, the heaviest yokozuna in modern Ozumo history. His weight did not help his chronically injured ankle and he was losing flexibility and agility. However he remained as mentally alert as when he first entered Makuuchi, and never forgot the teachings of the great master, Futabayama. It was in this year's Aki Basho that Azumafuji achieved legendary status, winning his fourth yusho in incredible circumstances. From the start of the basho, Azumafuji was suffering from acute pneumonia and was told not to continue by doctors at the University of Osaka Medical Hospital as well as an Osaka Region Police chief. When Azumafuji flatly refused their counsel, they even had him sign an affidavit stating he was fully aware of the grave risks of competing.

The legendary bout took place on Day 12 against Ozeki (later yokozuna) Yoshibayama. His high fever still persisting, Azumafuji wanted to end the bout quickly and immediately pressed himself into Yoshibayama, the two men falling off the dohyo at the same time. After a mono-ii, the judges ruled Do-tai and asked for a rematch, which ran so long that a mizu-iri (water) break was called. After the break there was another mono-ii and the judges asked for another rematch. However, by this time Azumafuji was in no condition to continue as he desperately held on to a bucket outside the dohyo, and he asked the judges to give the decision to Yoshibayama. However the judges decided otherwise and asked Yoshibayama if he agreed not to continue. To Azumafuji's relief, Yoshibayama assented and the match was recorded as a 'hold.'

Azumafuji's cycles of brilliance and mediocrity continued into

1952 and 1953 as he won two yusho and finished runner-up once, but also withdrew from basho due to injuries, failing to finish seven from 11 tournaments between January 1952 and September 1954.

On Day 7 of the 1954 March Basho, Azumafuji tumbled from the dohyo with his opponent Futatsuryu and suffered multiple fractures in his right shoulder, lower back and ribs, withdrawing from the tourney the following day. He missed the next basho but attempted a comeback at the 1954 September Basho to inaugurate the opening of the new Kokugikan in Kuramae (near Ryogoku in Tokyo). He started the basho with two consecutive losses and then, after easily losing to then maegashira west 4 Naruyama by yorikiri on Day 7, realized he had reached his physical limit and announced his retirement.

As any decision by Azumafuji made in haste became a subject of debate, it would be remiss not to mention another angle to his retirement story. At this basho, Ozeki Tochinishiki won his second straight yusho, arguably guaranteeing his yokozuna promotion. However, there were already four yokozuna: Azumafuji, Chiyonoyama, Kagamisato and Yoshibayama. If the Sumo Association directors opted to promote another yokozuna, there would be five yokozuna, something unprecedented in sumo's long history. Association Directors reportedly decided to refuse Tochinishiki's promotion despite his fine record.

Upon learning the dilemma faced by the directors, Azumafuji quickly volunteered to step down so Tochinishiki could be promoted. When Tochinishiki heard about Azumafuji's decision, he was so horrified that he went to see Azumafuji personally to plead with him not to retire for the sake of someone else's promotion.

Normally, Eddo-ko Azumafuji would have changed his mind, but he was so moved by Tochinishiki's emotional plea that he felt Tochinishiki indeed should become a yokozuna right away and thus retired after the meeting. Half a century has passed since then and we are still yet to see five simultaneous yokozuna.

When retiring, Azumafuji already possessed a Toshiyori myoseki of Nishikido. However, when he gave notice of his Nishikido share to the Sumo Association office, factions within Takasago Beya and Tatsunami Beya waged fierce verbal battles for the rightful owner of the Nishikido stock as each group felt it belonged to them. Reverting to his typical short-tempered Edo-kko character, Azumafuji said he had

no need for such petty squabbles, returned the Toshiyori share and left Ozumo for good.

Shortly after his retirement, a major supporter introduced him to former sekiwake Rikidozan, who became a very successful professional wrestling star after leaving Ozumo. They believed a distinguished yokozuna like Azumafuji would attract a great deal of interest in professional wrestling and convinced Azumafuji to join. Rikidozan sent Azumafuji to Hawaii the following year for training and Azumafuji made his successful ring debut in Hawaii, still wearing his mage as he did not even have a retirement ceremony. However Azumafuji never warmed to professional wrestling and, after being forced to work as a sidekick to Rikidozan,

quietly left pro-wrestling scene in 1956.

Azumafuji later managed a small restaurant in Tokyo but closed it after only two years. During the early days of sumo telecast, Azumafuji became well-known as a sumo commentator for Fuji TV and TBS TV from 1959 to 1966, and wrote a sumo column for the Nikkan Sports Daily newspaper until 1971. He showed good business acumen as the president of consumer loan firm Fuji Finance and expanded their network throughout Japan. Just as he appeared to thrive in the business world, he fell ill, stricken by colon cancer and passed away on July 31 1973. Azumafuji Kinichi was only 51 years old.