

Why Asashoryu Had to Go

by Chris Gould

In February 2010, the sumo world finds itself mulling the unpleasant question of how to attract fans without the lure of its most awe-inspiring talent. On February 4th, Asashoryu Akinori, winner of 25 Emperor's Cups and clearly sumo's biggest crowd puller, became only the second yokozuna in 250 years to effectively lose his rank to bad behaviour. (See Rikishi of Old for the other yokozuna who did so). But, anyone who thinks Asashoryu is leaving sumo simply because he allegedly broke someone's nose and tried to cover it up is deluding themselves. There are a multitude of issues at play in the upper echelons of sumo, and SFM tries to explain them here.

Basically, Asashoryu had to go because:

1) His number had been marked for years

Asashoryu has scarce been one for concealing his fiery temper. Every year, his name is paraded over media reports which cry: 'scandal!' Particularly irksome to the Kyokai was the feud between Asashoryu and fellow Mongolian, which seemingly began in earnest in May 2003. During that basho, the two fought a close match which Kyokushuzan won. Asashoryu disputed the decision with everyone in sight, glaring down a shimpan and the gyoji before squaring up to Kyokushuzan, clunking shoulders and aggressively removing his sagari in disgust.

The following basho saw Asashoryu gain a pyrrhic revenge, becoming the first yokozuna to be disqualified in a match for yanking

his opponent's hair. Two days after this, the two allegedly squared up again in the locker rooms and had to be separated by Kaio. Shortly after this, Asashoryu was also alleged to have punched the mirror of a car driven by one of Kyokushuzan's supporters, which led to another flare-up.

In 2004, when the feisty Mongol allegedly destroyed his own stable's door after an argument with Takasago oyakata over his wedding plans, a furious YDC stepped up their briefing against him in the media, with one anonymous member claiming: 'Were he not the only yokozuna in sumo, he would be fired tomorrow.'

2) He was nearly fired in 2007

Few fans can forget the infamous events of summer 2007, when Asashoryu won the Nagoya tournament and then submitted a doctor's note to exempt himself from the gruelling summer practice tour. He was then filmed playing soccer in a charity match back home in Mongolia, at a time when he should have been resting his body. Whereas such an event would perhaps be looked upon as a minor transgression in western sports, it was condemned by sumo and most of its fanbase, who perceive yokozuna to be moral standard bearers. Asashoryu became the first yokozuna to receive a two-tournament suspension and then compounded public scepticism towards him by refusing to eat or train and slumping into depression. Certain members of the YDC felt he should go, and the Kokugikan even stopped selling Asashoryu bento

for the September Basho. Many inside and outside the sport felt that the NSK Board should have taken a firmer line against Asashoryu, and the decision not to sack him is widely perceived to have cost former NSK Chair Kitanoumi his job.

3) Sumo's new Board wanted to vent its frustration

Two days prior to Asashoryu's dismissal, the Sumo Association selected its new board after an unusually bitter election contest. (See this issue's elections article). This bitterness had to be taken out on someone, and Asashoryu was the perfect target. The new Board not only wished to demonstrate a break with the past and make a powerful statement of intent, but to correct perceived undue leniency in 2007. Some members had clearly been waiting two and a half years to punish Asashoryu for the soccer scandal circus he created, and it showed.

4) The sumo association can take revenue-damaging decisions

Were the Sumo Association a private company, it would be experiencing severe financial difficulties. The number of empty seats in Kyushu is simply astonishing. A private company would be unable to offload its prize asset for no compensation. However, as sumo is Japan's official national sport, its status is effectively guaranteed by the government. Thus, decisions which potentially lead to revenue loss can afford to be taken, as proved the case on February 4th. The Kyokai, of course, does not treat the issue of offloading star assets lightly, as is evidenced by

the desire to keep Asashoryu, Chiyotakai and Kaio for longer than their behaviour or skills should permit. Clearly, over the last three years, it has felt that the profile of Hakuho, Kotooshu, Harumafuji, Baruto and Kisenosato has risen sufficiently to generate excitement without Asashoryu. Its hopes of achieving a long-term gain after a medium-term hit thus appear more realistic.

5) Asashoryu was perceived not to fit the Japanese model

Underpinning everything in Japan is the philosophy that the group is more important than the individual. The phrase 'go-kyouryoku kudasai' ('your cooperation is much appreciated') is recited over public address systems and splashed onto large posters repeatedly. Anyone who has ridden a rush hour Tokyo train, got stuck in a holiday traffic jam, witnessed obscene hours of overtime or repeatedly queued for 15 minutes at an ATM will appreciate the meaning of 'go-kyouryoku.' It acknowledges that there are many things that really anger individuals but urges people to avoid complaining for the sake of maintaining the harmony of the group. In Japan, millions obediently follow this rule – unquestioningly. Those who complain are thus deemed to be selfish, and should be ostracized and punished (or at least 'seen to be.') Asashoryu is seen as one such person who disrupts the peaceful bliss of the group, and has had his character assassinated accordingly.

6) Asashoryu did not distinguish public and private

Equally important in Japan is the cavernous distinction between public and private. 'Go-kyouryoku' does not apply to one's private life in Japan. You can do anything you want in your house or behind closed doors, so long as you don't show your 'selfishness' to the general public. Appearance is

infinitely more important than reality. Search through the newspaper internet archives and many instances of sumo wrestler misdemeanours can be found. The Mainichi Newspaper's January 1932 story of the drunken wrestler who rampaged in a bar and beat up several police officers is particularly memorable. Sumo wrestlers are human beings and, despite showing exceptional physical and mental strength to overcome a nightmare training regime, they make perfectly human mistakes. But, crucially, so long as they confine their misdemeanours to their (private) training stable, Japan sees no reason to criticize them. (That's why the Tokitsukaze-beya scandal was so shocking for the public; the general layman has no idea of just how rough a sumo heya is because it's considered private and never reported upon). Asashoryu, though, has caused discord in public on several occasions, and so can immediately expect brutal media treatment.

7) Many Japanese are genuinely angered by his attitude

There was a famous pop song some years back entitled: 'It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it.' While it may be questionable to cite Bananarama as prophetic philosophers, it is beyond doubt that sumo takes this rule to the extremes. Since taking to the professional dohyo as an 18-year-old, Asashoryu has mastered sumo's techniques, seemingly invented some new ones, and shown himself to be a truly great warrior. However, his 25 yusho, his 36-bout winning streak and 84 wins from 90 matches count for nothing in the eyes of the public, and especially the Yokozuna Deliberation Council (YDC), if he is deemed to be a dislikeable person. Japan has an unremittingly strict seniority system in both education and business, whereby juniors basically have to do everything

seniors tell them. Seniors certainly take full advantage of their rights. In sumo, senior wrestlers rule their stables and doubtless come down hard on youngsters in ways which would be deemed unacceptable in public. But, so long as they are nice in front of audiences and cameras, they will be treated as sumo heroes.

The sumo world is not conducive to expressing one's own identity, meaning that mindsets, values and degrees of accepting the system vary little between wrestlers in private. However, if divergent styles of behaviour appear in public, the media, the people and the YDC will certainly pick their favourites and hate-figures. Thus has the YDC's only female member, Makiko Uchidate, persistently torn into Asashoryu at every opportunity. Even though some ozeki (on which the YDC is licensed to comment) have underperformed for years on end, their characters are deemed nice and Uchidate's harshest words are always for Asa. Thus, also, did the media bill Asashoryu's duel with Hakuho in January 2008 as a battle between Good and Evil.

8) Japanese organisations have great power over employees

In 2007, when Asashoryu was censured for playing soccer in Mongolia instead of attending summer jungyo, he became the first yokozuna to be confined to his house indefinitely. The sanction reveals just how much power Japanese companies and organisations have over employees. That a company could confine an employee to their house is unthinkable in the west, but not so unusual in Japan. Highlighting the vast differences between employee rights in Japan and the west would take an entire book.

After winning the 2010 Hatsu basho, Asashoryu once again publicly apologised for something

he had done. In Japan, once wrongdoing is admitted, remorse must be shown, preferably with tears. Asashoryu did just this during his resignation speech. The Kyokai knew that letting him go would damage sumo's popularity

for the foreseeable future. But, so important are the needs of the group (in this case, the Kyokai), that the seemingly unruly individual is often shown the door even if he is of use to them. A bad outcome is okay in Japan, so long

as everybody takes the hit. This certainly seems to be the Kyokai's thinking. And yes, the "kyou" of "kyou-ryoku" and "kyou-kai" is the same Japanese word.