

Chiyotaikai: Forever against the Tide

by Chris Gould

The inevitable consequence of Ozeki Chiyotaikai's retirement, which finally came on January 13th 2010, is that history will not be very kind to him. Chiyotaikai's final competitive match, on day 3 of the January 2010 basho, was the worst possible ending for him. His final opponent in competition was fellow fading-ozeki Kaio, the man to whom he will forever be compared – unfavourably. Both men grew up in Kyushu, and are treated as returning heroes whenever a tournament is held there. Both men peaked in the late-90s and early 2000s, rising to ozeki and winning the occasional yusho. Both men grew old together and shared the millstone of 'crippled ozeki.' And both men will probably end up retiring this year.

Instinctively, there seems little to choose between these two. However, Kaio's embarrassingly easy victory in their final encounter sets the tone for the post-retirement comparisons that will be made. Kaio not only holds five yusho to Chiyotaikai's three, but a comfortable lead in head-to-head encounters between the two. More importantly, in the eyes of virtually every sumo observer, he boasts a superior technical variety to Chiyotaikai.

Also, whereas Taikai's retirement at 33 is considered nothing special, Kaio's ability to continue past his 37th birthday is viewed as a source of wonder in Japan. And to rub yet more dohyo salt into the wounds, Kaio's final victory over Taikai brought him the all-time record of 808 top division wins, something which will forever overshadow Chiyotaikai's

milestone of 65 consecutive basho at ozeki. (There's an outside chance Kaio may even surpass this).

Kaio certainly highlights the biggest general regret surrounding Chiyotaikai: that if only his belt skills could have been a little better. In his heyday, his thrusting attack was the best in the business. Combined with the mental toughness that came from a life on the streets in Oita, and withstanding an incredibly strict sumo upbringing, Taikai was a formidable fighting force, regularly defeating legendary yokozuna Takanohana and

Akebono.

His thrusting duels against Akebono produced some of the most frenetic sumo action ever witnessed and serve as a fitting tribute to his hand-speed, determination and incredible desire. It will forever remain one of sumo's great mysteries how Taikai failed to develop any recognisable belt-skill under the tutelage of Kokonoe Oyakata, formerly Chiyonofuji, perhaps the greatest sumo belt-fighter in modern history. The fact he got so far on such a narrow range of techniques reveals just how tough he was.



Taikai's impressive resolve was hardened right from his birth. He was born in the traditional sumo breeding ground of Hokkaido, renowned for producing great sumo yokozuna: Chiyonofuji, Taiho and Kitanoumi to name but three. His baby body required not only the physical strength to deal with the Hokkaido cold, but the mental strength to overcome the tragic loss of his father in the first months of his life. Taikai senior's death triggered a move to Oita, Kyushu, where Taikai seemed hell-bent on compensating for his father's loss, excelling at sport and quickly becoming a dominant personality to whom other boys looked up. Perhaps predictably, he engaged with the wrong company, occupying senior positions in teenage gangs and experiencing several run-ins with the police. Indeed, his reputation became so feared that throughout his entire sumo career many Oita locals failed to warm to him, referring to him by his family name of 'Hiroshima-san,' the name of the infamous teenage tearaway.

Sumo seemed the only way to straighten this errant youngster out and – on his mother's encouragement – the young Chiyotaikai enrolled for the sumo entry-level health exams and signed for Kokonoe stable. Chiyonofuji was originally highly sceptical, but subsequently showed great confidence in this fearless youth and even offered him a ring name reminiscent of his own. After racing into makuuchi as a 20-year-old in 1996, Taikai rose to ozeki in January 1999 after winning his maiden yusho, an unforgettable three-match playoff against Wakanohana III.

The amazing thing is that the longest-serving ozeki in history almost lost his ozeki status in his very first basho at that rank. Injury-hit in March 1999, he staggered to 3-7 and found himself in no condition to compete in May.

Only the protective ranking system of the time, which allowed a wrestler injured in a tournament to safeguard their rank for one extra basho, spared him demotion. Few would have imagined at that moment just how big an impact the non-demotion would later have on the record books.

Two more yusho followed, in July 2002 and March 2003, but despite widespread hopes that he would become the first grand champion trained by Chiyonofuji, Taikai failed to make the final great leap to yokozuna. He simply lacked the technical versatility to defeat the very best consistently, and once the Mongols rose to the fore with their new brand of attacking sumo, 'Taikai' was 'all at sea'.

As has happened to so many great tsuppari artists, over-reliance on thrusting ultimately crippled Taikai's wrists and elbows while severely damaging his fingers. As the 2000s advanced, the number of withdrawals and kyujo increased and Chiyonofuji's protégé was placed in increasing danger of losing his prestigious rank. He ultimately retired with the unwanted record of 14 kadoban, something which only Kaio is in danger of surpassing.

2008 was the year when permanent decline set in. In September 2007, the unfortunate Taikai was laid low by injury and sickness, and then damaged an elbow when suffering defeat to Hakuho at the close of the year. The dangers facing an unfit Taikai were laid bare in January 2008 when he fought seven matches with only one hand – losing every one. Having already captured the record for most basho at ozeki, here was the time when Chiyotaikai should have called it quits – for the sake of a favourable sumo obituary.

It seems, however, that dignity was not his main concern. From his childhood, Taikai has shown

no fear in anything he has done and forever prefers to fight rather than gently walk away – even at the risk of irreparable self-harm. When the pain in his arms subsided, his tsuppari could still destroy most people and for 12 months he made a living from 8-7s, persistently avoiding kadoban when required. Then came Osaka 2009, where he posted the worst ozeki score in history: 2-13. Here again it seemed that retirement was inevitable, but Taikai's fighting spirit was indomitable and rallied him for a very narrow escape from demotion in May. Unfortunately, the dubious manner in which he completed his comeback, rallying from 5-7 to 8-7 by defeating two ozeki and a tough sekiwake with minimal effort, caused irrecoverable damage to his credibility.

This undeserved kachi-koshi cruelly laid bare the fact that his injuries were becoming chronic. Sure enough, after a lacklustre July and injury-hit September, Taikai eventually but inevitably lost his ozeki rank in November 2009, having held it for every basho of the decade.

November 2009 was the first time that Taikai openly spoke of a retirement scenario, stating he would hang up his sash if he failed to register 10 wins in January 2010 – the number required for automatic re-promotion to ozeki. No matter how difficult things got, Taikai's spirit held firm, equipping him with the genuine belief that he would recover from his injuries and yet deliver form worthy of sumo's second highest rank. Unfortunately, the longer he held this incredible self-belief, the longer he subjected himself to having his expectations crushed on the dohyo. Consequently, thoughts of his sheer fighting spirit disappeared from the public conscience, replaced by general feelings of disdain and perceptions that he was holding up the progress of younger fighters.



True leaders have shown that public opinion can be fought against eternally. However, no single wrestler can overcome the seismic power of the sumo association. As Chiyotakai failed to boost crowd numbers for yet another Fukuoka basho in 2009, it became clear that his battered body was of little use as a marketing asset. Fukuokans didn't merely want to see him; they wanted to see him win. A bigger problem was that Chiyotakai's accumulation of kadoban, and ability to hold ozeki despite countless lame defeats, was causing the sumo association to question the entire kadoban system.

Faced with the choice of putting pressure on the system or on an ozeki, the sumo association upped pressure on Taikai and demanded higher standards from him. Taikai knew these higher standards were beyond him and lost some 10 kilograms prior to the January 2010 basho – as if preparing himself to retire before fighting a single match. Ultimately, he learned as a teenager and he learned as an ozeki: in Japan, the system always wins. But my goodness did he put up a terrific fight against it.