

Kokugi Konnections

The impact of Konishiki: 25 years on

by Chris Gould

January 2010 marked the 25th anniversary of the opening of the current Ryogoku Kokugikan. The current building is infinitely more hi-tech than anything sumo had before, and is well on course to capture the record for most years acting as sumo's permanent home. That record is currently held by the previous Kokugikan at Kuramae, located barely two kilometres up the river from sumo's present stamping ground, which was effectively in use for 34 years between 1950 and 1984.

September 1984 marked the last basho at Kuramae, before the building was sold and later demolished to make way for a sewage treatment plant. That tournament was one of the most bizarre and exciting ever witnessed, heralding an explosive performance from a blubbery Hawaiian which shook the sumo world to its knees. His name, of course, was Konishiki. And the videos, of course, make for fantastic viewing.

The wonderful thing about the older videos posted on You Tube is that they illustrate perfectly the Japan of the late Showa Era (1926-89). In these clips, we are constantly confronted with images of dominant Japanese yokozuna, of foreigners kept to a premium and of a Japan relaxed and comfortable with itself, revelling in the riches of the Bubble economy. When one watches the lengthy warm-ups, listens to the reactions of the crowd and notes the sheer precision with which the sumo rituals are performed, one is left in doubt that this is infinitely more

than just a sport. To be honest, Showa sumo appears far more about ordinary Japanese people enjoying their new-found wealth over a few beers in the sumo hall than about who wins a yusho. It is this special feeling which sets sumo apart from the west.

Foreigners were never expected to fit into this environment, so it came as the utmost surprise to Japan when first Takamiyama and then Konishiki did. The Japanese have, perhaps rightly, always perceived themselves to be physically smaller than westerners. However, the one arena where the Japanese never thought they would feel small was the sumo ring. Imagine the shock, then, when the 184-centimetre, 200-kilogram Konishiki burst into the top division in 1984, and started beating opponents by virtue of his sheer size alone. For traditionalists who believed that technique could overcome everything, Konishiki's exploits were alarming.

The match against handsome and slender ozeki Wakashimazu, day 12 of the September 1984 basho, illustrates exactly why the purists were alarmed. In repeatedly repelling Wakashimazu's attacks on the belt, Konishiki is actually demonstrating considerable technical skill – and admirable movement for a man of his size. However, the way it looked to a partisan crowd was that he was relying on bulk alone, and the shock and disappointment that greets the result is clearly audible. Konishiki is then invited to an interview. Nowadays, the foreign

wrestlers are subjected to questions at native-speed Japanese. Back in 1984, though, it was merely assumed that Konishiki could not speak Japanese merely because of the way he looked, and the questions are asked in infant-level language. Western fans view this as patronising; Japanese fans view this as an act of kindness on behalf of the interviewer. Whatever the interpretation, the interview style is very different to that of today. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsovN1jOyaA>

With Wakashimazu unable to stop the giant Hawaiian's progress, hopes were then pinned on the darling of sumo, Chiyonofuji, to teach Konishiki a harsh lesson. The 115-kilogram Chiyonofuji, of similar weight to Wakashimazu, was approaching the peak of his game and expected to triumph by virtue of sheer handspeed and belt-technique. Alas, to the astonishment of the watching public, Konishiki rises splendidly to the occasion in his first encounter with the Japanese legend, clubbing him with roundhouse after roundhouse until Chiyonofuji steps out to avoid serious injury. This is the moment where Konishiki truly arrives.

The commentator, Mr Sugiyama, famously declares: 'Konishiki simply cannot be stopped! Yokozuna Takanosato couldn't do it. Ozeki Wakashimazu couldn't do it. And now even Yokozuna Chiyonofuji can't do it.' Japanese commentary on the replay refers to Konishiki's 'boxing style' –

seemingly an attempt to portray it as unrefined.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLvPnSAVwQU>.

For the record, Konishiki was actually 'stopped' from winning the yusho by fellow maegashira Tagaryu, who posted 13-2 to Konishiki's 12-3.

Great fighters always learn from their mistakes quickly and, come the following tournament of November 1984, Chiyonofuji already had a game plan for Konishiki. By 1985 he had perfected it and the match shown here provides the proof. Not for nothing did this man win 31 Emperor's Cups – the sheer

strength on display is unbelievable.

The fact that Konishiki could readily compete with him shows just what a huge impact he made 25 years ago.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeOxnVxkv3s>.