

Asashoryu His impact on sumo

by Chris Gould

How will Asashoryu be remembered? The most prolific yokozuna of modern times certainly did his best to deflect attention from his outstanding achievements in the ring – the manner of his retirement proving a classic case in point. Indeed, his conduct after his retirement – which includes abuse towards the Japanese press and scathing criticism of the Japan Sumo Association – threatens to erase the memory of his sumo exploits altogether.

Asashoryu will certainly forever be remembered as a hero in his homeland. All Mongolian interview footage since his departure, and other reliable evidence, suggests that he is more popular there than Hakuho ever will be. “How would you feel if England created a baseball team which went over to American and whipped everyone?” was how one magazine editor once put it to me. Many Mongolians entered sumo before Asashoryu, but none of them even made ozeki let alone collected a yusho. Yet, back in May 2001, in only his third makuuchi basho, Asashoryu provided the ultimate hope that Mongolia could “whip” the Japanese at their own game. In that amazing tournament, he downed four Japanese ozeki and Hawaiian yokozuna Musashimaru, throwing the latter’s 225-kilogram with jaw-dropping ease. No-one, not even Japanese legend Takanohana, could throw Musashimaru around like that. This guy was obviously extremely special.

Hailing from a wrestling family, Asashoryu came to Japan’s fourth

main island of Shikoku at the age of 14 in 1995 to attend Japanese high school and pursue a sumo career. At the time, Hakuho’s father was alleged to have scolded Asashoryu’s father with the words: “What have you done, you idiot? You have allowed the future champion of Mongolian wrestling to slope off to Japan?!” In fact, Asashoryu’s phenomenal success would change Hakuho’s father’s mind to such an extent that he allowed his own son to enter sumo four years later.

Those who criticise Asashoryu’s lack of understanding of Japanese culture seem blissfully unaware of the fact that he attended Japanese high school for three years. Furthermore, he did not attend a modern, inner-city Tokyo high school but an establishment in the ancient city of Kochi, formerly a haven for some of the most famous samurai in Japanese history. He knew Japanese culture alright; he simply vowed never to let it compromise his own values. And this state of mind was bound to cause problems during his sumo career.

Asashoryu took just 12 tournaments to rise from mae-zumo to makuuchi, a record ascent which was only surpassed by Kotooshu in 2004. In May and September 2001 he felled a total of seven ozeki opponents and two yokozuna foes, earning promotion to sekiwake in the process. At sumo’s third highest rank, he won 42 out of 60 bouts to attain ozeki status in July 2002. He spent but three basho at that rank, winning two of them and romping to yokozuna honours in January 2003. He was but 22 years old,

and the sumo world seemed at his feet.

From the moment he donned his first white grand champion’s belt, Asashoryu set his sights higher and higher. After collecting three yusho in 2003, he plundered a further five in 2004, setting a contemporary benchmark of 36 consecutive bout-victories in the process. With Takanohana and Musashimaru recently retired, and ozeki Musoyama fading, there seemed no plausible rival to Asashoryu’s dominance, and the great Chiyonofuji spoke of his attaining 50 yusho. The then-Japanese Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, was also impressed and audaciously challenged Asashoryu to win all six basho in 2005. The majestic Mongolian did just that, winning a record 84 bouts in a calendar year to do so, which resulted in Koizumi travelling down to Fukuoka to personally hand him the final Prime Minister’s Cup of the year. By that time, Asashoryu had already won the Japan Sports Personality of the Year and various honours of recognition from the Mongolian government.

Unfortunately, his magical 2005 created unrealistic expectations and added pressure that even Asashoryu was never likely to live up to. Late-2005 saw handsome, muscular European Kotooshu upend him twice and emerge as a serious contender to his domination. Early 2006 saw the rapid improvement of Hakuho, who outwitted Asashoryu in three consecutive encounters – although the last of them was heavily mired in controversy. Yet more problematic to Asashoryu was the

onset of injury problems, something that he had never seriously contended with in seven years of sumo. His surprise defeat to Wakanosato in May 2006 left him nursing a knee-injury and gifted Hakuho his first yusho, something that boosted the younger Mongolian's confidence immeasurably. Although Asashoryu somehow managed to collect four yusho in 2006, he looked a shadow of the force which swept the board in 2005. Shortly after collecting his 20th yusho in January 2007, his career took a sharp, and permanent, spiral downwards.

Hakuho skilfully tricked Asashoryu in March and overpowered him in May to

become a yokozuna himself. Seasoned observers sensed that the balance of sumo power was shifting, and shifting fast. The increase of bandages on Asashoryu's elbows, rapidly becoming troublesome, served as cruel symbols of a grand champion in decline. Although he collected the yusho in July 2007, his attempted return to form was ruined by the football scandal, which forced him to miss consecutive tournaments and decreased his match-fitness. A fantastic showing in the January 2008 yokozuna souken, where he went 5-2 against Hakuho, was undermined by crushing defeat to Hakuho in the tournament itself.

From then on, Asashoryu would

play second fiddle to his younger rival, and rest content with picking up odd yusho on the rare occasions Hakuho faltered. Three consecutive kyujo basho at the back-end of 2008 suggested the end of his fine career was nigh. The tears he shed for his unexpected yusho triumph in January 2009 were those of a man who knew his powers were waning.

One year and two yusho later, the end abruptly came. However many controversies he caused off the ring, no-one can doubt his brilliance upon it. And he had to be pretty brilliant to ensure that the many scandals he caused do not dominate sumo obituaries such as this one!