

Aomori Giant Iwakiyama Retires

by Chris Gould

He was big, balding and occasionally brutal, but outside the dohyo, the recently-retired Iwakiyama cut a remarkably refined figure. The Aomori University graduate was rarely seen without his intellectual-looking spectacles during interview, and indeed when stomping through the streets of Ryogoku after a match. He showed his human side more often than most of his peers, frequently chatting on his cell phone while waiting for his taxi ride home. Renowned for his considerable bulk, totalling some 180 kilograms, he was a damn good wrestler too.



Iwakiyama, named after a famous mountain in his native Aomori prefecture, joined professional sumo in 2000 at the age of 24, turning his back on a high school teaching career to do so. He had previously excelled in amateur sumo, something which drew him to the attention of his sumo stablemaster, Sakaigawa – an ex-university champion himself. The two developed a particularly fruitful relationship, with Sakaigawa Oyakata tutoring Iwakiyama in the expert thrusting skills that had taken him further in pro-sumo than most observers would have imagined.

Although a fearsome thruster, Iwakiyama was also a highly skilled belt-technician, as Asashoryu found to his cost on more than one occasion earlier in his career. Indeed, those defeats really seemed to hurt the Mongolian, who spent the best part of 2005 and 2006 avenging them in spectacular fashion, lifting the 180-kilogram Iwakiyama out by tsuridashi on one occasion and battering him into the Osaka audience on another, leaving the giant with an almighty gash to the head. Even nearing his 33rd birthday in July 2009, Iwakiyama showed enough technical flexibility to join the joi-jin and beat them, famously downing Chiyotakai with a sukuinage – perhaps his last 'big' win.

Iwakiyama was unfortunately plagued by injuries right from the start of his professional career. He started out as a makushita by virtue of the fast-track privileges granted to university champions, but soon found himself in sandanme. After regaining his

strength, he earned promotion to juryo in March 2002 and makuuchi eight months later. His heyday came in September 2003 when he posted a makuuchi career-best of 11-4, delivering him his first sanyaku berth. He hovered in and around sanyaku for the next three years before suffering an horrendous 2-13 make-koshi in November 2006. From there, he never quite recovered his momentum, appearing in juryo several times and generally eking out a comfortable existence at the lower end of makuuchi.



Signs that his strength was on the wane came earlier this year when he lost to Kakizoe for the first time ever – after gaining 17 straight victories over him. He still achieved kachi-koshi in both January and March, and had actually achieved a maegashira 5 ranking for May 2010 when he shockingly succumbed to a stroke. The resultant kyujo forced him to miss every match in May and July, and it was expected that

Iwakiyama would find himself in makushita for the first time in a decade.

Due to other demotions incurred over the gambling scandal, and the general goodwill of the sumo association, Iwakiyama was

unexpectedly ranked at juryo 14 for September 2010, but had lost so much weight and strength that competing was rendered impossible. Allegedly on the advice of his wife, but also from the grim realisation that he would never recover his full strength even while

pushing himself to the limit and risking his health, a visibly emaciated Iwakiyama officially retired on the final day of the September tournament. He said that his one wish was to step into the training area again.