

Menko Corner Stadium Cards

by Ryan Laughton

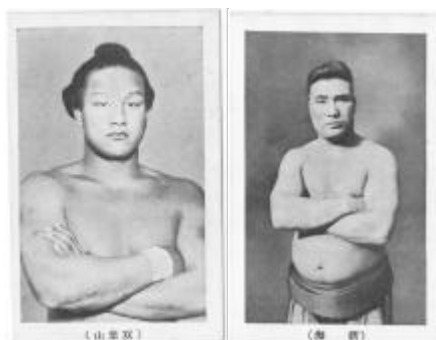
It's hard for kids today to believe that there used to be a time without television and families would gather around the radio for evening entertainment. Such was the family life in the United States and similarly in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. While attending a live sumo match was a rare treat for most Japanese, listening to the matches on the radio was commonplace throughout most households in the 1930s and 1940s. Sumo tournaments were first broadcast in 1928 and some believed that it would diminish the number of people attending the matches in person. This turned out to be quite the opposite and sumo's popularity soared in the 1930s and tournaments expanded to 13 days in 1937 and to 15 days in 1939.

In response to this increased popularity some companies started printing and issuing packs of "Stadium" Cards that had color or black and white photographs of rikishi in the Makuuchi ranks. It is thought that these card packs were sold at the Kokugikan as well as in other sumo related stores. This would allow fans to remember their favorite rikishi after visiting the Kokugikan to watch live matches as well as for fans at home who listened to the matches on the radio. In this 8th article on the different kinds of sumo menko and cards we'll be talking about Stadium/Kokugikan cards or simply, S-series cards.

Unfortunately, like most pre-WWII menko and cards, the amount of S-series cards out there are hard to find because of the

paper drives issued by the Japanese government as well as the heavy bombing inflicted upon the Japanese cities during the second half of the war. Additionally, many people couldn't afford "luxury" items starting in 1943 as the tides of war had turned in the United States' favor and living conditions in Japan started to plummet. Currently there are only six Stadium sets identified as having been printed and sold during the 1930s and 1940s. However, I believe that 14 or so total sets were printed from 1932 to the very end of World War II in 1945. I'm unable to confirm this at this time, but I will focus more research as sets become available.

The earliest S-series set known comes from 1934 and features high quality photos of the rikishi with the rikishi's shikona written from right to left along the bottom. This set has an informal feel to it as all the pictures show the rikishi from the waist up and have their arms folded. The cards measure approximately 1.75" x 2.75".



1934 Stadium Set(S341): The great Futabayama and Shinkai (recently returned from Osaka)

As with all S-series sets, the backs

of the cards are blank. This set is unique since it shows about half a dozen rikishi, such as Shinkai and Ayazakura, that had worked their way back to Tokyo after competing in a separate sumo organization in Osaka resulting from the Shunjuen Incident. These rikishi had their topknots cut and still haven't had time to grow out their hair when the pictures for these cards were taken and printed.

In 1937, the first known color set was produced and featured high quality photos of the rikishi in their kesho-mawashi along with the shikona along the bottom from right to left printed in blue ink. Backs are again blank and size is 1.75" x 2.75".



1937 Stadium Set(S371): The great Futabayama just months away from becoming Yokozuna

The same company that printed and sold the S371 set came out a year later and produced another high quality set in 1938, the S381 set, featuring full length photos of the rikishi in their kesho-mawashi measuring approximately 1.5" x 2.5". It was printed in black and

white and what is unique with this set is that the pictures have no borders and the rikishi's signature is written across the front from top to bottom right over the picture. Unfortunately, this detracts a little from the overall appearance of the set, but the photos are of very high quality.



1938 Stadium Set(S381):
Yokozuna Tamanishiki

The second, and last known, color set is the 1940 Stadium Set (S401). It is almost identical to the S371 set except that the cards measure 1.5" x 2.75". Photos feature the rikishi in their kesho-mawashi



1940 Stadium Set(S401):
Yokozuna Futabayama

with the shikona written along the bottom from right to left.

The strains of war started to show in both of the last two known S-series sets resulting in poorer quality. The set from 1941, the S411 set, is nearly identical to the S381 set in that it features black and white photos of the rikishi in their kesho-mawashi and has the rikishi's signature across the front from top to bottom. However, the photos of the rikishi are very dark and hard to see and the paper that is used is of much lower quality. In some instances the photos are so dark, the signature is unreadable anywhere it overlaps on the rikishi's body.



1941 Stadium Set(S411): Yokozuna
Futabayama

This last set is historically significant not because of who are printed on the cards, but when they were printed. There are less than six known sumo card and menko sets printed between the end of 1941 and the end of World War II in 1945. Commodities were scarce in 1944 and almost everything was being used for the war effort. Paper was rationed, food was scarce and people had

little money to spend on anything but basic living necessities. The companies printing these cards would undoubtedly had to have had special permission to print something not related to the war. Because of all this, the many poor quality features of this set can be forgiven and the historical value of the set can be appreciated. This 1944 set, the S441 set, features a full-length black and white photo of the rikishi in their kesho-mawashi and measure approximately 1.5" x 2.5".

The photos aren't of great quality and the printing process leaves the impression that the printer was trying to ration his ink as many of the photos have a very sparse layer of ink on them. The rikishi's signature is written across the front from top to bottom in black ink. The paper stock is of poor quality and looks to be made of a recycled cardboard.



1944 Stadium Set(S441):
Yokozuna Terukuni

With that, I appreciate everyone tuning in and I hope everyone enjoys their bonenkai and shinenkai. I'll see everyone again in 2011! Cheers!