



## Spotlight on ... ... Olympic Ojisan

by Chris Gould



They may not know his real name but everyone who follows sumo has surely come across its most divisive fan. His white, rarely-washed Olympic jacket separates him from the crowd while his golden top hat emblazoned with the Japanese flag is yet more distinctive. He even has a brightly-colored hinomaru paper fan to boot. This is Naotoshi Yamada, far more popularly known as Olympic Ojisan.

Ojisan's love affair with the Olympics began in 1964 when the Games turned up in – you've guessed it – Tokyo. He proceeded to loudly cheer on Japan, in highly conspicuous clothing, at 10 of the next 11 Olympics, missing only the 1980 Moscow Olympics due to Japan's boycott of the event. He announced his retirement after Beijing 2008 and will therefore not travel to London in 2012 – a real shame, as the Ojisan in my home country would be priceless.

Seeing Ojisan cutting a sprightly figure bounding through the Kokugikan seats greeting anyone within range, it is impossible to believe that he is nearly 85 years old. His pace is brisk, his fan-waving ferocious, and he is still not averse to dating, having been spotted on several occasions with a very elegant kimono-clad female companion. He is also a very popular figure in the Hana no Mai restaurant situated barely a few meters from the Kokugikan, where he frequently joins drinking parties after the days' sumo action.

Ojisan certainly loves the limelight and – over several years prowling the Kokugikan, handing out memorabilia and having his photograph taken at every opportunity – has mastered the art of convincing acquaintances that he should share their well-positioned box seat. In recent years, he has specifically targeted the box-seat where he is most likely to be seen on television, situated opposite the camera just to the left of the referee's starting position – so as not to be obscured by the referee's headgear. Such brazen seat-grabbing antics, however, have drawn the ire of certain supporters, especially if his frantic fan-waving and bobbing top hat blocks their view.

For years, the sumo association peacefully accommodated him, heartened by his popularity on TV and his apparent fanbase within the stadium. For a while, Olympic Ojisan memorabilia was even sold from the Kokugikan kiosks. But in September 2010, the sumo



association's patience finally snapped and he was given a warning as to his behavior – and strongly encouraged to sit in his designated seat. (Round about the same time, the sumo association introduced an unprecedented general rule that no spectators with second-floor tickets would be allowed to enter the first floor in the afternoons). In subsequent tournaments, Ojisan has thus been seen more than usual on the second floor of the Kokugikan, presumably building up a new fanbase among the cheaper seats. It is particularly amusing to see children sneaking up to pose behind him while their granddad slyly takes a photograph.

Of course, Ojisan's sheer determination ensures that he still manages to find premium seats on several days. Even in his 80s, he is an immensely passionate sumo fan, and – surprisingly for a patriotic Japanese – has even



embraced the foreign revolution, seemingly becoming an ardent

supporter of Hakuho. This is a far cry from his heyday in the 1990s when he forever fluttered his fan in the direction of Wakanohana and Takanohana, and against the direction of giant Hawaiians Akebono and Musashimaru.

However, judging by the posters he distributes and the singing choruses he tries to generate, his favorite wrestler appears to be Kaio. It is interesting how Kaio symbolizes Ojisan's predicament: trying to keep up enthusiasm and vigor under the handicap of an ageing body.

Speak to Ojisan and the signs of ageing become more clear. Feverishly excited conversation about the present is mixed with shaky recollections of the past – for example, confusing Chiyonofuji with Chiyotaikai. However, although he has retired from the Olympics, it will be a warm winter in Hokkaido before Ojisan retires from the Kokugikan. And, like him or loathe him, no-one can deny the extra element of intrigue he brings to the atmosphere, making our experiences of watching sumo yet more memorable.