

Yaocho Scandal

Match-fixing mayhem: Who said what to whom, for how much, where and when?

by Chris Gould

The Osaka tournament has been cancelled and many fans have been wondering: how on earth did we get to this stage? Here's how.

Legend has it that back in the Edo era, a downtown grocery store manager used to play shogi, a game similar to draughts, with sumo elders. He was a fine player, but his matches with the elders always seemed evenly shared. The conclusion was that, out of respect and kindness, he was fixing the odd game to keep good relations. Hence, from this time onwards, the Japanese word for “grocery store manager,” or yaocho, has come to be used for any type of match-fixing – especially in sumo.

The seeds for the yaocho scandal currently engulfing sumo were apparently laid last summer, when the police seized wrestlers' mobile phones as part of an investigation into illegal baseball gambling. While examining text messages, the police seemingly uncovered evidence of wrestlers asking opponents to fix matches and even explaining how they would lose and for what price. Many suspected that sumo, the sport which has relentlessly stayed true to its primitive beginnings, would be undone by technological advances – but certainly not in this way.

Quite how the messages were leaked to the media remains a mystery. One former government adviser cryptically commented: “When you think about who has

access to the messages, and who could put the story in the media, the whole sad chain of events becomes clear.” The interesting thing in Japan is that although it is illegal to gamble on sporting events, it is not illegal to fix them. Thus, if criminal charges are unable to be pressed against sumo wrestlers, the leaking of this information serves as nothing more than a deliberate attempt to undermine sumo. Some may call it pernicious. Whatever the case, someone has an agenda to prove.

As of February, the investigation remains focused on 14 individuals – 12 of whom are active wrestlers and two of whom are recently retired. The latter two are former-maegashira Kasuganishiki and ex-komusubi Kaiho, currently employed in junior oyakata positions and doubtless fearing job losses. The former has allegedly confessed to match-fixing while the latter has refused to comment. Observant readers may remember that Kasuganishiki was pinpointed as a shady character by Russian ex-maegashira Wakanoho, after his own dismissal from sumo in 2008. TV rumors suggest that Kasuganishiki feels as if he is being scapegoated, and has threatened to go to the media with the claim that 70% of wrestlers have participated in fixed matches – offering names, of course – if he is indeed fired.

Of the 12 wrestlers under investigation, two have reportedly confessed to rigging matches: ex-maegashira Chiyohakuho and

makushita member Enatsukasa. The former handed in his resignation notice in early-February, only to see it rejected by the sumo association, who wanted to finish the investigation before sanctioning any departures. Weighing heavily on the mind of sumo executives were the legal consequences of accepting a resignation based on a yaocho confession just weeks after the sumo association had won a defamation case against match-fixing allegations in court. All arrows point to a counter law-suit by Kodansha, the publishing company which printed the match-fixing stories, over the sumo association's alleged “inaccurate comments about match-fixing” during the original case.

The other 10 wrestlers accused of rigging matches are: Kiyoseumi, Shotenro, Shimotori, Koryu, Toyozakura, Kyokunankai, Wakatenro, Shirononami, Yamamotoyama and Kirinowaka. Most of these men have had makuuchi experience, and many have regularly battled demotion from the salaried second division to the unsalaried third-tier. The official line that the sumo association appears to be spinning, and the media appears happy to support, is that match-fixing principally arises in situations where the salaried wrestler is petrified of demotion. It should, of course, be noted that none of the above wrestlers have admitted wrongdoing, with Yamamotoyama denying the allegations outright

and Shirononami claiming he doesn't remember. By March, we will have more idea as to who has been telling the truth, and who has not been saying as much as they know.

Interestingly, Wakanoho, who now lives in America, has been giving interviews on match-fixing in the

past few weeks, and has restated his belief that higher-level wrestlers are involved. In his original tabloid interview, he named three ozeki as conspirators, doubtless something which has led the Nikkan Sports to parade the former Kotomitsuki's photo under the headline: "Maybe his texts were not only about baseball

gambling?"

The bottom line is that the affair has proved sordid in every way, even bringing out the worst in the media. And how ironic it is that a sport thought to be dominated by meat may actually be over-reliant on vegetables.