

Legendary Rikishi

Why Chiyonofuji and Takanohana are so popular

by Miho Yagi

It is 20 years since 35-year-old Chiyonofuji and 18-year-old Takahanada fought their epic battle on the dohyo. The match moved millions of Japanese, prompting SFM to ask new columnist Miho Yagi, why does the nation view these two greats with such reverence?

In recent times, it has become widely known that the globalization of Japan and world business has made it evermore necessary to voice one's opinions and feelings for all to hear. The trend is to talk rather than stay silent, and society especially values males who are of the slim, muscly, and slightly macho breed. When a goal is scored in a football match, players hug frantically as emotion consumes their whole body. Baseball appears to host the same emotions. And yet, these trends continue to remain unwelcome in sumo.

In September 2002, when the revered Yokozuna Takanohana returned from a long, serious injury, he found himself under huge pressure when facing a certain ozeki debutant named Asashoryu. The result: a Takanohana victory. Amid the cries of jubilant fans and the scores of zabuton hurtling towards the dohyo, Takanohana's facial expression remained stubbornly unchanged from how it had been before the fight. You might even say he was completely calm. It was the classic sumo case of "respect for the loser, and respect for your opponent."

In sumo, far above the principles of winning and losing are the elements of shin, gi and tai (spirit,



Chiyonofuji at London's Royal Albert Hall 1991 (Doug Gould)

technique and body), in line with traditional budo culture. Takanohana, and the other yokozuna in this piece, Chiyonofuji, are among the rare few rikishi to combine these three elements superbly.

Chiyonofuji, in addition to his overwhelming strength, exhibited sheer beauty when performing his shiko during the ring-entering ceremony. Furthermore, to overcome the disadvantages of his small frame and a tendency to dislocate his shoulder easily, he undertook a rigorous programme of muscle-training. He was affectionately known as Wolf, not least because of his trademark intense staring from the eyes of an undeniably handsome face.

In 1991, Chiyonofuji found himself matched with a genuine young Tiger, the 18-year-old Takahanada, who would of course later change his name to Takanohana. Sumo fans have preserved this match in everlasting

memory, marking as it does the occasion on which Chiyonofuji surprisingly lost to the young upstart and decided upon his retirement. The match is famous for illustrating the power transfer from one generation to the next, but it was not so clear cut as that.

After all, Chiyonofuji himself had once idolized Takahanada's father, the first generation ozeki Takanohana. Many people recall the legend of how this man first advised Chiyonofuji to give up smoking in order to concentrate on fitness development, muscle development and increasing bodyweight. What connects the leading stars, those who shoulder sumo's greatest burdens, together is something of a mystery, but the fact there is some sort of connection cannot be denied. There is something in their destiny.

What Chiyonofuji and Takanohana appear to have most in common is an absolute willingness, and

preparedness, to take on the great responsibilities of a yokozuna under the eye of the Shinto gods in an age-old national sport – and adjust their bodies accordingly. Furthermore, even though their sumo wrestler bodies hardly exhibit perfect physical proportions, their round stomachs and large abdomens look perfectly

cool in a kimono.

Others will forever remember their absolute composure in a sense of crisis. They didn't speak much about their exploits, the reasons behind their sheer strength and sturdiness exhibited on the dohyo, but this is an old Japanese tradition in line with the samurai

code – and it is a cool expression of manliness. And finally, the spirited way in which they faced adversity or injury, staying true to the four-kanji oaths they took upon their yokozuna promotions, was exemplary and – without doubt – moved millions of hearts.