

Takanohana aged 20

His engagement to an actress and subsequent break-off

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Next year will mark 20 years since the most famous sumo wedding that never was.

In the fall of 1992, a piece of news swept over Japan and its people were surprised and excited. It was an announcement of the engagement of Takanohana, who was famed for being the most promising sumo wrestler, to a very popular young actress.

Takanohana, who later wrestled under the name Takanohana, came from a sumo thoroughbred family with a great sumo history, and was credited with restoring the popularity of sumo, the national sport of Japan. The actress, whose father was Dutch, was so popular that she was even called: "The beautiful female idol of the whole nation." Day after day, the mass media covered the news, which was most unexpected and had a great impact on many Japanese people. Takanohana was 20 and Rie 19 at that time.

Rie, who was a new type of actress, had published epoch-making nude photo books and was indeed immensely popular. One of her photo books, in which she appeared nude except for a loincloth, had caused especial excitement. (Her appearance in this photo book is quite similar to that of a sumo wrestler. The photo seemed to presage her fate: she seemed destined to have

something to do with sumo wrestlers!) Takanohana, at that time, together with his younger brother Wakahanada, who later wrestled under the name Wakanohana, created a so-called Waka-Taka boom and greatly contributed to the soaring popularity of sumo.

Takanohana and actress Rie, though they were greatly popular figures in the same generation, belonged to quite different worlds and were seemingly most unlikely to become engaged. People in Japan were the more surprised and excited because of this. But, before the feverish excitement for the couple had subsided, it began to be rumoured that they would soon break up.

Amid a whirl of guessing and speculation, the actress – alone without her fiancé – appeared before the press. Straightened up and without tears, she announced the break-off of her engagement and answered questions from the press. Many people who saw this scene very much sympathized with her, saying that she knew how to behave even though very young, and that she was worthy of praise due to her courage in appearing before the press and facing a heartbreaking issue head-on.

On the very same day but in another place, Takanohana also

happened to be before the press. Asked why he had broken off their engagement, he answered simply and briefly: "I've just lost my love for her." This simple answer sounded rather thoughtless and it caused anger and misunderstanding towards him in some people. There was also speculation about the reasons for the break-off, among which it was rumoured that the two families hadn't been getting along very well. Some people stood by him, thinking that by giving this simple answer he had behaved bravely enough to shut out speculation and take all public rebuke on himself.

He said these words at the press conference on the day when he was promoted to ozeki at the young age of 20 years and five months. This day marked both his sorrow in his private life and his delight in achieving a sumo career high. The break-off of the engagement came at the same time as his promotion to the second-highest rank of ozeki with the new name of Takanohana.

It was on the 27th January 1993. Takanohana, at the age of just 20, very calmly, ready to accept both rebuke and praise from the public, surrounded by reporters and cameras, had announced both the end of one life, and the beginning of another.