

Rikishi after my own heart

by Dorian Marcellin

The Aki Basho which has just ended marks for me, somehow, the anniversary of my passion for sumo (see my first article in SFM issue 37). I don't think I am going too far when I say that this year was very special for sumo, and we were able to see many things happen. Good ones and significantly worse ones. I will pass on the issues of scandals, exclusions, and the cancellation of the March tournament, because I don't think I am the best qualified to comment on these problems.

I would like to write a little about my perception of current rikishi. Now that a year has passed since I first developed an interest in the sumo universe and I have been watching tournaments, with commentary from people like Hiro Morita and Ross Mihara, I can finally claim to know a few wrestlers. To be precise, I have had time to learn a little more about the ones I wanted to support each basho. So I'll give my two cents-worth about these rikishi and explain my feelings.

This may seem a bit opportunistic, or a mere echo of the news, but Kotoshogiku is my favorite. I think it's his stature which first drew my attention. And it seemed to me that it is this physical strength coupled with a "bulldozer will" that impressed me the most. To see him win with his Gaburi-ori, convinced me that Kotoshogiku had some kind of "inexorable force" which deserves to be followed closely. No need to describe my excitement when I realized just before the Nagoya Basho this summer, that he had the opportunity to become Ozeki. The victory over the Yokozuna

during the 11th day was a moment of intense satisfaction. Not that I do not like Hakuho, on the contrary, but that was for me a true feat for the wrestler from Fukuoka, and I started to cheer. You can imagine the disappointment that followed with the defeats in quick succession against Wakanosato and Okinoumi, which ended the hope of the sekiwake. The Aki basho has been for me a kind of revenge (it's easy for me to say... after all I am as frail as a matchstick and I am not on the dohyo myself...) and a great joy to see Kotoshogiku finally succeed, after a small delay, in becoming the first new Japanese Ozeki after Kaio's retirement. I sincerely hope that the shin-ozeki will be able to assert his rank and his strength with confidence from now on.

My other favorite is also attracting positive news coverage at the moment. Finally after a relatively long career, he came to be promoted to sanyaku, likely to become sekiwake, whereas until now he had always remained on the edge, at M1. For those who have not yet recognized him, I am talking about Homasho. Again, his stature and appearance made him very easy for me to identify during tourneys. But I became a fan of Homasho when I realized he had a frank vision of sumo. By listening to feedback from tournaments, I was surprised how much his sincerity was credited as a strength as well as his resistance. It seems that Homasho respects these sumo ways that make it a spiritual discipline, because of its religious origins, as much as a martial art. I can understand why Homasho never dodges the shock

of the tachi-ai, even when his opponents are real juggernauts. I was also impressed by his very expressive and open face, and how he bows deeply and respectfully to his opponents, whether victorious or defeated. Finally, I would describe his fighting style as very defensive, which brings drama to his fights. He withstands the assault, before turning the tide to defeat his opponent. He has such strong legs and such stability to resist! After the very good 10-5 in September, I would like the rank of sekiwake to be a real trigger for the "honest rikishi."

A word also on the Oguruma Beya rikishi, Yoshikaze and Takekaze. Although they are far from equaling the strength and genius of some of their more famous opponents, I admire the fighting spirit they have demonstrated this year, when they have managed to rise to very respectable positions in the banzuke. Of course, when they topped the maegashira ranks, they hit trouble and bad scores, but I have to admit that I always enjoy seeing them fight! I was particularly impressed by Yoshikaze during the Nagoya Basho when, after a catastrophic day 9 make-koshi, he fought back with a run of six victories in the last 6 days of the tournament, to get a respectable score of 7-8. For me this shows courage. As for Takekaze, even if his style is probably somewhat poor most of the time, he remains for me the very first rikishi that I was able to recognize, two days after I started watching sumo on a daily basis, during the Aki basho 2010! I still enjoy seeing his flat face, with high cheekbones, and his very rounded body. Sweet memories!

Other wrestlers still have a place in my heart, even if they have less opportunity to shine than the better ranked ones! First, Sagatsukasa, whom I discovered this summer. His size and his ability to defeat opponents much larger than him, impressed me. I am delighted that he is able to demonstrate an explosive and fierce fighting spirit against his opponents. And his ipponzeoi against Tochinowaka during the Aki Basho live, while I was taking breakfast (time difference, time difference...), was a real kick in the head. What a talented performer! Another rikishi: Takanoyama has the right to a little mention, too, thanks to his unusual physique and his ability to triumph "against all odds." I hope that his future results allow him to win in a somewhat more regular way,

because I find him far from embodying the ideal of sumo wrestling, because of his very light weight.

To end on a general note, I must admit that it's always a pleasure to see Hakuho bouts. I truly discovered sumo at the time the Yokozuna was chasing the record for the longest winning streak. And I realize now, that you can really feel that he was alone at the time, like Atlas, with the whole sumo world on his shoulders. Each one of his fights, even when he is no longer on the way to a Zensho-Yusho, is a demonstration of power. On the other hand, I had always seen Harumafuji been hurt, or in poor condition, and so I was completely stunned during the Nagoya basho, to watch the Mongolian ozeki fight with a

extremely dominant style and character. What a surprise! And what a pity he did not continue in this direction during the Aki basho! Last but not least: Kisenosato. If he develops more consistency and willpower, I think he has all the cards to move to the next level. I like his style, his technique and his behavior. I think it would be good for everyone to see him make it to ozeki!

I'm going to end this short overview of my taste in sumo with a very simple wish: I hope the coming Kyushu Basho will bring as many intense emotions and beautiful fights as the last two tournaments, which reminded me definitively how much I love sumo!