

Rijikai elections

And the new Rijicho is... a comeback king?

by Chris Gould

January 30th 2012 will certainly go down as one of the more perplexing days in modern sumo history. With Hanaregoma Oyakata relinquishing the chairmanship of the sumo association having reached the mandatory retirement age of 65, a new Rijicho (Chairman of the Board) needed to be selected. Luckily, the vacancy at the top coincided perfectly with the Japan Sumo Association's biennial Board Elections.

The last time such elections took place, they were mired in controversy after Takanohana Oyakata refused to support his ichimon (group of stables) official candidates and decided to run himself and was thrown out of his ichimon as a result. He then formed a breakaway group of supporters and ran for office from outside his ichimon, taking advantage of the secret ballot system to encourage defectors to back him. Ajigawa-oyakata, former sekitori Kobo, duly did, ensuring that his own ichimon's candidate, veteran coach Oshima, was ousted! At least he had the guts to confess in a media interview!

This time, the elections passed off far more peacefully, although Tomozuna Oyakata – coach of Kaio and Kaisei – was considerably miffed at losing his seat on the Board. But the biggest surprise of all, which is already drawing ridicule from the general public, was the choice of Rijicho: Kitanoumi Toshimitsu. Hold on a second, wasn't he the guy who...? Yes, that's right. He held the post

before from February 2002 to September 2008 and his re-election thus makes him the first Rijicho to return to the post having previously lost it. And how did he lose it? Well, SFM covered that one three years ago [right here](#).

Oft viewed as arrogant during his wrestling days (although he had more reasons than most to be arrogant given that he won 24 Emperor's Cups) Kitanoumi certainly stayed true to form at his first press conference following re-election, saying that: "If there are dissenting voices about my coming back, I don't hear them!" He then pledged to devote "all my remaining energy and sumo life to the job."

Nice trite words they may be, but his re-appointment can hardly be described as a step forward. Once again seniority barriers have prevented young reformists like Takanohana from becoming leaders, even though they appear to command widespread grassroots support, especially among junior oyakata. The appointment of Hanaregoma 18 months ago was a huge step in the right direction: a fantastic coach who had raised a yokozuna from scratch, and raised him to be gachinko having been a gachinko devotee during his own wrestling days. If ever a face was needed to mark a clean break with the past, and to mount a convincing assault on match-fixing, it was his. Now Kitanoumi is back, the past has apparently returned to haunt Japan's national sport.

Accepting Kitanoumi as Rijicho

means accepting the ridiculously implausible line of events that there was absolutely no match-fixing or inappropriate distribution of tickets during his six-year tenure and that suddenly, just after he stepped down, everybody started to behave badly. Accepting that version of events would mean putting the blame exclusively on Musashigawa, and claiming that everything bad that ever happened in sumo occurred during his very short tenure at the top. Only unnecessary self-censorship of the press prevents Kitanoumi from being pressed very hard on this line of questioning.

There is no question that he is a strong character. But his management skills were found wanting before, and the murkiness surrounding exactly how long match-fixing went on and who knew what and when (for the record, there are even some fans who question the veracity of Kitanoumi's playoff defeats to Takanohana in 1975!) will prove a difficult image to shake.

There are those who have called for ex-Yokozuna Chiyonofuji – the current Kokonoe Oyakata – to be installed as Rijicho. It is clear that his failure even to be mentioned as a candidate this time means that he will never be top dog. The way that the Chiyohakuho scandal was blown up, first when Kitanoumi was about to resign, then again in 2010, shows that he has enemies among his peers. Sometimes it just doesn't pay to dominate a sport too much.