

New Ozeki, New Prospects?

by Chris Gould

All hail Kakuryu! Well, not quite all. Mongolia's new ozeki was accused by some of "being born with a silver spoon in his mouth" due to his father's prestigious employment as Dean of Mongolia State University. But, according to the man himself, his family were not that rich and he was the regular poor boy who came to Japan with a sack in his hand and a couple of notes in his pocket, staring wide-eyed into the rainy sky, searching for any hopes of a path to riches. Ten years after stepping off the plane weighing a mere 65 kilograms, Kakuryu has attained sumo's second highest rank of ozeki. That, whatever your birth circumstances, is no mean feat.

Those same voices who accuse Kakuryu of "silver spoon syndrome" seem conveniently forgetful of the fact that the two most popular sumo wrestlers ever, the brothers Wakanohana and Takanohana, were born into a very well off family. Their uncle was a yokozuna and high-earning stablemaster, their father was an ozeki and a high-earning stablemaster, and their mother had earned a fair bit from television before giving up her career to marry Takanohana. When they collected 27 tournaments between them and both made the rank of yokozuna, nobody seemed to call them "spoilt



little rich boys."

They were, however, called "spoilt little Hanada boys" after a highly dubious merger of father and uncle's stables meant that both boys were precluded from fighting a very high number of talented wrestlers – as no two wrestlers from the same stable can meet in competition. (Amazingly, the rule was based on the assumption that wrestlers from different stables don't do match-fixing... oh dear!)

The wrestlers that Waka and Taka did not need to face habitually upset their closest rivals, something which particularly irked the stablemaster of Musashimaru, Musashigawa. In 2010, in an even more bizarre twist of fate, the very

Musashigawa stable that had battled so valiantly against the Hanadas' Fujishima empire actually became Fujishima stable itself! The stock had been acquired by the Hanadas' erstwhile rival Musoyama, who took over the running of the heya!

Anyway, back to Kakuryu, whose rise has surprised virtually everybody outside of Germany. There were hints that he had huge potential in January 2008, when he suddenly scored 11 wins and made his first serious bid for sanyaku. In 2009, he gained a reputation for fine trickery and agility as a sekiwake, and started to become the nemesis of Baruto. In 2010, he established himself as easily the number one sekiwake, recording victories over numerous ozeki, dancing rings around Kotooshu, upsetting Baruto and humiliating Kaio (when in the mood – sometimes, he mysteriously wasn't).

In 2011, he became a truly formidable sekiwake, and in 2012 he has defeated Hakuho twice in their opening two encounters. His progress has been very steady up until now. The question is: was there enough meat on his silver spoon to give him the aggression, determination and muscle needed to rise any higher? After all, silver is associated with being a permanent number two, is it not?