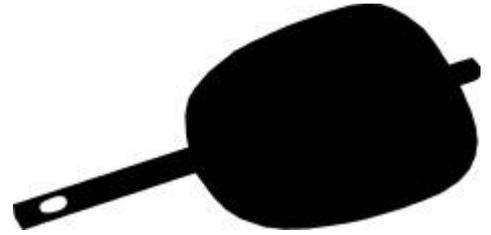




SFM Obituary King of referees dies

by *Chris Gould*



April 1st 2010 saw the passing of a man whose voice will be forever etched in the memory of Showa sumo fans. The 28th Kimura Shonosuke, who died at the age of 81, occupied sumo's highest refereeing position for 18 basho between 1991 and 1993, and oversaw the most radical transformation in sumo history from the closest of quarters.

It was he who refereed the match which delivered Akebono to yokozuna, becoming the first foreigner ever to achieve sumo's highest rank. It was also he who refereed the deciding matches in Konishiki's final two yusho triumphs of November 1991 and March 1992, the first time a foreigner had collected more than one yusho and established himself as a serious yokozuna candidate. He also oversaw the rise of Takahanada, Wakahanada and Musashimaru in a number of his final bouts.

Born Satoru Goto in Yamagata on December 3rd 1928, the 28th Kimura Shonosuke quickly became interested in sumo and even in his childhood was highly knowledgeable on the subject. He enrolled on the banzuke in May 1938 at the tender age of 9, and devoted the next 55 years of his life to the sport he loved. Under the tutelage of the 22nd Kimura Shonosuke (famous for living until 104), Goto rose up the banzuke of

officials speedily and entered makuuchi at the age of 32 in November 1961. From there it took him 16 years to reach the second highest officiating rank of Shikimori Inosuke at the comparatively early age of 50. Unfortunately for Goto, the man above him, the 27th Kimura Shonosuke, was only 51 at the time of his promotion, and thus enjoyed an unusually-long 13-year-spell on the highest refereeing rung before reaching sumo's mandatory retirement age.

Nevertheless, entrenched on the two highest refereeing rungs for 16 years, Goto officiated many of sumo's biggest matches involving several great yokozuna: Kitanoumi, Wajima, Chiyonofuji, Hokutoumi and Akebono. He was the official on the dohyo when Chiyonofuji set the record for sumo career wins, scooping Ozutsu down on the 13th day of the 1989 Aki basho. He also shared refereeing duties with 27th Kimura Shonosuke for the first three-fighter makuuchi yusho playoff in 25 years, during the March 1990 basho.

Alas, he reached the retirement age just before Takanohana took his great leap to greatness by winning consecutive 15-0 yusho in September and November 1994. He also missed the first 15-0 yusho registered by a non-Japanese, Musashimaru, in July of the same

year. His last match was the yokozuna-ozeki tussle between Akebono and Musashimaru on the final day of the Kyushu Basho of November 1993.

It is not just the magnitude of the matches he refereed which will define Goto. It is the style and elegance he brought to them. The theatrical nature of his voice, which mixed the entire range of kabuki-style whining with the lowest of guttural emissions, was second-to-none, as were his heavy-breathed exhortations. His voice projection skills were remarkable for a tiny man and added extra glamour to the already-glittering fixture list.

The voices of subsequent Kimura Shonosuke appear pathetic by comparison, perhaps a damning reflection of the levels of attention a modern referee pays to the theatrical side of his job. The 28th Kimura Shonosuke, as was normal for his mid-Showa generation, took his voice incredibly seriously and practised endlessly until he developed a distinct and powerful sound worthy of respect and high-ranking status. It is for this reason above all else that he must go down as one of sumo's greatest assets in the Showa Period.

His retirement in 1993 was a huge loss to Japan's national sport. His passing three months ago was an even bigger one.