

Yaocho Scandal Is Match-Fixing New?

by Chris Gould

Sunday 23rd September 1989. The giant Onokuni takes the stage for the final Tokyo bout of the decade knowing that his and sumo's credibility is on the line. The awesome, fearsome champion of two years before has given way to a quivering nervous wreck which has scraped together only 7 wins in 14 days. A loss today and he becomes the first yokozuna to post a negative score over 15 days, disgracing his rank, embarrassing the sumo figures who put him there and entailing an automatic offer of resignation.

Frantic discussions were held over Onokuni's predicament, some of which reached a conclusion that he should throw the match for the good of the team. His opponent that day, who had nothing to fight for and has since been implicated in the baseball gambling scandal, would surely have been game. Alas, ever the proud clean fighter who had never thrown a bout in his life, Onokuni was adamant: no dodgy dealings, no easy way out. He fought the match gallantly, full-bloodedly, and lost. He chose the heroic route and ended up lampooned as a useless yokozuna. That is the price he paid for honesty and generations of wrestlers, both before and after him, have been acutely aware of it.

Twenty-one years on and the man who coached Onokuni so cleanly, Hanaregoma Oyakata, finds himself head of the sumo association, bowing in front of TV cameras to apologize for the match-fixing actions of several wrestlers in his ranks. It was an absurd situation: a man so clean

throughout his active wrestling career, and so keen to preach honest fighting to his rikishi having to apologize for match-fixing. The media conference will have hurt him deeply, marking him as the first sumo association chairman to admit to pre-arranged matches, a practice he despises to the core. Rest assured, there is no man better placed to root out match-fixing than this fine crusader, and he must be supported to the hilt, politically, legally and operationally.

The legal and PR advice he has received thus far, though, has been nothing short of appalling. To be quoted branding match-fixing a "new problem" is a development as barmy as it is unnecessary. Talking about time frames is simply self-defeating. It is, after all, barely three months since the sumo association won a defamation suit against Japanese publisher Kodansha over allegations of match-fixing. The Chairman thus cannot claim that match-fixing is a long-running problem, because this is not the line the sumo association pursued in court. However, claiming that it is a new problem leaves him open to ridicule, suggesting that the wrestlers were not fixing matches at the start of the bout-rigging court case, but started to fix them during the course of it! For all the jokes made about sumo wrestlers' lack of academic clout, none of them could possibly be that stupid.

Whenever it started is now secondary. More important is how the sumo association reacts to the confessions of match-fixing that

have now been obtained. The implications of this development are perhaps the most astounding since the sport was established, leaving decades' – if not centuries' – worth of events open to reinterpretation.

One of the earliest mentions of match-fixing was in the 1790s, when awesome yokozuna Tanikaze – featured in the last two SFMs – admitted that his one defeat sandwiched by 106 wins was fixed. Equally under-reported is the interview with legendary sumo patron Count Itagaki, who was questioned about suspicions of match-fixing in 1916.

After that, the bout-rigging issue became taboo, and usually caused casualties when it was mentioned. In the 1960s, the current Governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, was fired from the Nikkan Sports tabloid for mentioning the issue. The gist of his story was corroborated – with names – by Isegahama Oyakata in his off-the-wall tabloid interview in 2004, which also led to his dismissal from sumo.

In the 1980s, a university professor claimed that one ozeki, who later managed Asashoryu, was winning an unusually high number of make-or-break matches. His analysis was backed up by American professor Steve Levitt in the early 2000s, himself inspired by events of 1996. This year saw Onaruto Oyakata and his friend Seiichiro Hashimoto made further bout-rigging claims in a sensational book, only to both die on the same day in mysterious

circumstances.

In 2000, Onaruto's ex-disciple, Keisuke Itai, claimed that he himself had fixed dozens of matches in an interview with Time Magazine and even provided his own secret tape recordings of an ex-Chair of the Sumo Association saying: "This practice has GOT to stop!" Then, in 2007, the Shukan Gendai magazine named more than a dozen wrestlers as having colluded in recent matches, prompting the sumo association to sue them. This investigation saw another secretly-taped conversation come to light, that of Hakuho's ex-coach who quoted names, dates and payment fees. He too was dismissed – and claimed that the medication he was taking made him say crazy things. The following year, recently-fired Russian troublemaker Wakanoho fired a

parting shot at the sumo association naming wrestlers with whom he had colluded, only to suddenly and very publicly retract his statement weeks later.

The allegations of the last few weeks have turned all the above developments on their head, and virtually demand a complete re-writing of historical interpretation. The above people were clearly not completely misguided or doped up as previous versions of history suggest, but actually on to something. Ishihara Shintaro has understandably been gloating of late, telling his former employers at Nikkan Sports in a jubilant interview: "Match-fixing has obviously been going on a long time. But does it really matter? I mean people go to kabuki for the show and still enjoy themselves, so why not the same for sumo." His parting shot was equally truculent:

"I have been invited many times to be on the Yokozuna Deliberation Committee, and I have always rejected such requests. Now it seems it's a damn good job I did."

One expects further swipes from people like Keisuke Itai and Wakanoho in the weeks ahead, demanding they be given a fairer hearing. And the most interesting development of all will stem from Kodansha, the company who remains 100% convinced that its reporting of match-fixing was true. They will now surely try to get their court decision quashed, or even reversed. If that happens, the consequences will extend far beyond the cancellation of the 2011 Osaka Basho. The minister of education is already preparing to wield the axe on state funding for Japan's tortured national sport...