



Today's Sumo Wrestlers Lack Spirit — Possibility of the advent of Japanese yokozuna

Interview with Hakkaku Nobuyoshi, Chairman of Nihon Sumo Kyokai and former sumo wrestler Hokutoumi by Nagayama Satoshi, ex-journalist for *Yomiuri Ozumo*

Whether you are Japanese or Mongolian does not matter in sumo

Nagayama Satoshi: You were reappointed as the chairman of Nihon Sumo Kyokai in March. Around six months have passed since your initial appointment on December 18 last year. How do you feel now?



Hakkaku Nobuyoshi, Chairman of Nihon Sumo Kyokai and former sumo wrestler Hokutoumi
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Hakkaku Nobuyoshi: I have settled into the position. The outside directors helped me a lot, and I have undertaken my job by trial and error. As a result, I'm gradually becoming more confident. I have had a hectic time since Kitanoumi, the previous chairman, passed away. I have refrained from drinking for a year. Very recently, I have played the occasional round of golf.

The Grand Sumo Tournament is very popular, with every date fully booked. Sumo fans still want a Japanese yokozuna.

Personally, I believe that someone is a sumo wrestler as soon as he starts his career, whether he is Japanese or Mongolian. In reality, many sumo fans often tell me that they want a Japanese yokozuna.

What do you want young Japanese sumo wrestlers to do to become a yokozuma?

I think that many of them have already given up any hope of beating Hakuho or being as strong as him.

In a way, they don't even have a dream. Even if you are not strong enough to push your opponent, you will gradually be able to do it as long as you keep on trying to push. However, today's wrestlers give up too easily.

Hakuho has recently been criticized for his *harite* and *kachiage*. Of course, this demeaning attitude is not acceptable. The other wrestlers are not high-spirited enough to give as good as they get to Hakuho when being attacked. I don't really mean that they should necessarily do the same thing, but they should show their pluck. They should respond to his attack.

Today's sumo wrestlers tend to lack an unyielding spirit. As an active sumo wrestler, I used to attack my opponent when he tried to do *kachiage*, as if I was trying to make a hole in his chest [laughs]. Some tweeted that I was fond of *kachiage*. I tried to cause more pain to my opponent when he tried to do painful *kachiage*, whether I liked it or not. It was the same for *harizashi*. In my view, it is a lack of respect if you use *harizashi* for *yokozuna* and other superior wrestlers. In spite of this, it is a matter of spirit. What is important in sumo is spirit. You should train routinely in order to remain sufficiently spirited.

Do you mean that Japanese sumo wrestlers cannot become *yokozuna* because they are not spirited enough?

Yes, I think so.

At the moment, Kisenosato has the most promise in terms of becoming a *yokozuna*, doesn't he?

Yes. It is admirable that he won 13 consecutive matches. I became an *ozeki* after I won the spring tournament in 1987 with 12 wins and won 13 matches at the summer tournament. At the summer tournament, Onokuni was the undefeated victor. As a result, I thought on the final day that I would not become a *yokozuna*. Although it would have been a shame, I was somewhat relieved. The title of *yokozuna* is such a responsible position. When I became a *yokozuna*, I was determined to take on the responsibility. I thought that I should achieve results about which I could boast to the Yokozuna Deliberation Council that allowed me to become a *yokozuna*.

I heard that you were promoted to *yokozuna* because your wrestling style was outstanding at that time. On the final day, you attacked Onokuni, who had won all his matches, using hand strikes. You showed your strong spirit.

I slapped him from the side for the first and last time. I tried to do everything I could because my opponent was very strong. When I tried to slap him a second time, I lost my balance and Onokuni beat me by *yoritaoshi*. If a wrestler is not very tall or big, he needs to retain a strong spirit.

What does Kisenosato need to do to become a *yokozuna*?

Win a tournament. He has not become a champion yet. You can only be promoted to *yokozuna* if the Yokozuna Deliberation Council gives its approval. However, you need to win a tournament to be promoted. As I already mentioned, winning 13 consecutive matches is really hard. The results achieved by Kisenosato in the past year compare favorably with those of Kakuryu and Harumafuji.

Preserving the tradition since the Edo period

What are you going to do in terms of the new structure?

I am aiming to reproduce the Edo period (1603–1867) so that you can feel it in the air when you enter Ryogoku Kokugikan. The traditions of sumo have remained in place until today. Wooden clappers are struck. The *yobidashi* announces the wrestler's name. The *gyoji* facilitates the match. The *tokoyama*

prepares the sumo wrestlers' hair in the style of *oicho*. The naked sumo wrestlers fight vigorously. The operation is the same as it was in the Edo period. We must preserve the culture of sumo that has been steadily handed down since the Edo period. That is why sumo interests guests from other countries as well. Some people say that we should use music at the venue or replay the matches on Aurora Vision. If we did that, it would spoil the allure of sumo. Audiences would possibly look at the monitor while the yobidashi is announcing the wrestlers' names. The yobidashi's job is one of the most important components of the Grand Sumo Tournament.

When watching the matches on television, you might think that the process of facilitating the matches is a little too long. However, you wouldn't think this if you actually saw the matches at the venue. Each sumo wrestler motivates himself every time the gyoji facilitates a match. By watching the matches in real life, you will understand how sumo is performed.

It is traditional to wear a kimono when watching sumo matches. I would like to respect the tradition of wearing traditional Japanese clothing for sumo. For the present tournament, we have specified it as Kimono Day. If you come to watch the tournament wearing a kimono, you will receive a nice gift. This offer has been favorably accepted, especially by female sumo fans.

The potential of sumo in the worst situation

I understand that the Nihon Sumo Kyokai Association changed its PR methods around the time you became the PR manager.

I was the vice manager of PR when scandals (e.g. illegal baseball gambling and match-fixing) were discovered (2010 to 2012). I learned a lot from these issues. I now understand that this tough experience was important for me. Ever since I entered the sumo world, people have judged me based on my hard training or winning a tough match. But I have rarely apologized or bowed down to others. At that time, I was almost ignorant of public relations. A certain master told me that PR only meant having a drink with journalists. However, as soon as I became the PR manager, swallowing his words, I had to apologize publicly in front of journalists.

I remember that we united under the leadership of Chairman Musashigawa. I worked for the headquarters of the Kyokai together with Master Oguruma, and established a relationship of trust with him. I therefore appointed him as the senior executive manager.

I realized the potential of sumo because I experienced the worst situation. The venues were always nearly empty at that time. Particularly at the Kyushu Grand Sumo Tournament, I felt sad to see that there were very few guests. This situation would have been impossible when I was an active wrestler, always wrestling in a fully occupied venue.

In spite of this, we tried many new things because sumo was not very popular. When I was the PR manager, we started to use Twitter. If we had always had a large audience, some may have stopped us.

How do you currently prevent scandalous affairs?

We held training about problems such as anti-social forces and drugs before the latest summer tournament, inviting all of the associated people including the wrestlers. The popular sumo world inevitably attracts bad people as well as good people. You should not readily trust someone who is an

acquaintance of someone you know. If someone in the sumo world does something wrong, such as illegal baseball gambling, it results in a serious matter. Having had this bitter experience, I now attempt to lead young wrestlers in the right direction.

Nikoniko Cho-kaigibasho since 2014 and Hakkiyoi KITTE since 2015 are topical as your new initiatives.

Some people still think that we should not promote sumo. However, we should appreciate our audiences and fans. Some of the audience members may have come to watch sumo for the first and only time in their life. Sumo wrestlers need to work hard for the audience to show their determination. It is essential that the quality of the sumo be satisfactory. The audience will not come back if the quality is poor, even if we successfully attract a large number of guests as a result of PR activities. This is the most important thing to keep in mind at all times.

How can the sumo world attract many newcomers?

It is important to attract many newcomers to the sumo stables. The annual number of apprentices has been below 100 for the past ten years. This figure has not increased, even when sumo became popular again.

That's right. I am working for the Kyokai to enable sumo to maintain the current situation, even in 100 years. However, it is difficult to attract new apprentices. This is a major concern for me.

I go to many places around Japan to scout for wrestlers. When I went to the judo tournament in Hokkaido, I found that the number of young participants had dropped down to half or a third of what it was in the past. This is because today's children don't want to face the rigors that they are supposed to experience at the sumo stables, but it is also due to the decline in the number of children. Many sports are competing for a limited number of children. It is difficult to scout now. However, the masters need to take action to gather their apprentices. Parents will agree to leave their children with the masters if the masters are considered to be trustworthy.

The remuneration for sumo wrestlers is another issue.

Yes, indeed. Masahiro Tanaka (the baseball player who plays for the New York Yankees) earns billions of yen a year. Sumo wrestlers don't (wry smile). The income surplus is 200 million yen a year in grand sumo tournaments on the premise that the tournaments at Ryogoku Kokugikan are booked up, and many regional tours are held. Accordingly, it is difficult to raise the salaries for the wrestlers.

In the past, sumo wrestlers essentially accepted their salaries depending on their status. In a way, today's youngsters are more calculating.

What the young masters think

Today, children have fewer siblings than they did in the past. As a result, it can be a bit difficult for them to begin sharing a large room with the other wrestlers as soon as they become apprentices.

The masters need to think about this issue. Each sumo stable is run privately by a master, so each

master should operate his own sumo stable individually. The Kyokai has nothing to do with the management of the sumo stables. Each master gets a loan and sets up a sumo stable on his own. He has to pay for transport when going out to scout. It takes time to visit Hokkaido. However, if you hesitate in order to save time and money, the number of new apprentices will fall. It is a vicious cycle. As the Kyokai, we should support the young masters by arranging the environment so that they can have their sumo stables and go out scouting proactively.

Does this mean that you agree with a master allowing apprentices to have their own rooms?

Why not? It depends on the master of the sumo stable. Younger masters may have their own ideas that are different from ours. It is OK if each master of a sumo stable has his own policy. My sumo stable has about thirty wrestlers, so it is difficult to allow them to have their own rooms. However, if there are five or six wrestlers, it is possible, but the wrestlers must train harder if they are allowed to have their own rooms. To be honest, I think that the current wrestlers should train harder than in the past when I was an active wrestler. In fact, they are making efforts to do so. When I was young, older people tended to criticize us. You have to apply the appropriate method according to the times.

Let me say it again. First, increase the number of masters who want to have sumo stables. Second, arrange the environment in such a way that the apprentices want to wrestle. The situation was really difficult at the time of Chairmen Musashigawa and Hanaregoma, although Ryogoku Kokugikan is always fully occupied now. I therefore want to manage Kyokai in a way that means that the next generation can operate it comfortably in terms of management and talent fostering. We still have many more things to do.

Translated from "Tokushu — Nihonjin Yokozuna wa Tanjo suru ka: Imano Rikishi niwa Kiryoku ga kaketeiru (Special feature — Possibility of the advent of Japanese yokozuna: Today's sumo wrestlers lack spirit)," Chuokoron, August 2016, pp. 120-125. (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [August 2016]

HAKKAKU Nobuyoshi

Born in Hokkaido in 1963. Participated in his first match in the spring tournament in 1979. Promoted to yokozuna in 1987. Retired in 1992. Experienced 29 tournaments as yokozuna. Won eight times in the *makuuchi* division. Left Kokonoe Sumo Stable to set up Hakkaku Sumo Stable in 1993. Acted for Chairman Kitanoumi who died in November 2015. Took up his current position in December 2015.
