

## INTERVIEW WITH A DEMIGOD

Sumo legend Chiyonofuji talks to a mere mortal

TERRA MATER: *Chiyonofuji-san, is it true that you became a Sumo wrestler because you were promised a plane ticket to Tokyo from your home in northern Japan?*

CHIYONOFUJI: Yes, that is correct. It all started when my Kokonoe's head, Chiyonoyama, promised me a spot in his Sumo stable. The ticket was a kind of gift to celebrate the beginning of my new career.

— *You weighed just over 70kg. What qualities did Chiyonoyama see in you? It was probably not your weight.*

I think he recognised my athleticism in

**"I relied on technique and speed. But more importantly, on the mind"**

particular. I could run quite fast.

— *Why did attract you to Sumo? Was it the victories, the social status, the money?* Sumo meant nothing to me then. I just thought if I accept the invitation to Tokyo, I can fly in a plane and have a good time there. I mean, Tokyo! That was excitingly far away from Hokkaido. I was just an honest teenager, very straight.

— *At the beginning of your career, you experienced many setbacks due to injuries as a result from your weight disadvantage. What motivated you to stick it out?* I was emotionally robust and had a positive attitude. I also got a lot of support.

— *Speaking of support: one of your mentors once advised you to quit smoking so that you would gain weight. Did that actually work?* [Laughs.] Besides the issue with smoking, that mentor, Takanohana Kenshi, was also one of my great idols. He was similar of weight to me, and I always wanted to be like him. That motivated me tremendously.

— *But when you defeated him in the '80s, he gave up the sport.* Right. Takanohana stopped after I defeated

him. The victory over my idol gave me great confidence to continue with Sumo.

— *Was your weight a severe disadvantage? You were 120kg in your active days ...* My best weight was 125kg. But as *ozeki* I weighed only 98kg.

— *Given you had such a weight disadvantage against really heavy opponents, what did you do to make up for that?* I relied on technique and speed. But more importantly, on the mind. You have to recognise the disadvantages of the opponent, find the weaknesses in his centre of equilibrium and know how to expose those weaknesses.

— *So, if for example, a hulk of over 200kg moves towards you, you step aside, for him to propel himself out of the ring?*

That's one example. But you cannot always do this. Sometimes you also have to push back. In any case, one needs a lot of intelligence to be a good Sumo wrestler.

— *How did you feel when you defeated a grand master for the first time?* A great feeling of happiness, because I defeated a *yokozuna*, the best there is. This is something special. It also means more money, it is immediately reflected in your salary. Suddenly you can afford a meal at an expensive restaurant. But as soon as you are *yokozuna*, you immediately swear that no one will ever beat you.

— *It must be hard being yokozuna, to always have to be at the top. Is it not much more difficult to remain a yokozuna than it is to become one?* Much more difficult. You can never slack off, you absolutely cannot allow any weaknesses and certainly no injuries. The tournament doesn't wait for you. And if you can't hack it anymore, then it's time to retire.

— *When Onokuni, the subsequent 62nd yokozuna, ended your series 53 victorious matches in 1988 – how frustrating was that for you?* I was deeply saddened. This duel showed exactly

my weakness: my thinking was not good enough. I then changed my whole predisposition regarding matches in order to find a new path to victory.

— *What do you think about Sumo today, compared with sumo during your active career? How do you feel about the fact your sport is now dominated by non-Japanese?*

I find it unfortunate that there are currently no top Japanese in Sumo. But I hope they get back on the road to victory. Personally, I think that Hakuho has earned his position. He has worked hard for it. I just hope that Japanese wrestlers view him as a role model and work to become better than him.

— *You have had a brilliant career. Which of your many records are you particularly proud of?*

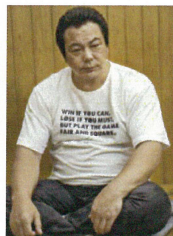
I see all these records as great achievements. But especially the 31 tournament victories give me a feeling of great satisfaction.

— *You won the tournament of Kyushu eight times in a row – nobody has managed that apart from you. How do you explain it?*

It probably has to do with the fact that my wife is from Kyushu. [Laughs.] I always came to Kyushu in a positive mood because I had already won there the year before. This makes you feel confident. I've always said to myself: this tournament is mine.



Chiyonofuji in his active days – and now as head of the Kokonoe stable: no living Sumo wrestler can measure up to his status. He is ranked second on the all-time list of top Sumo wrestlers



## CULTURE



**A noble gesture: yokozuna Hakuho signals to the Shinto gods that he will entertain them**

league – but in relation to a *yokozuna*, he is just cannon fodder.

*Tokozuna* Hakuho finally enters the ring, followed by dozens of flag bearers – a spectacle those unfamiliar to sumo will only understand through the translation of the characters. Each flag represents a sponsor. The standard-bearers are usually a rarity in the case of other wrestlers, but have a massive presence at Hakuho in accordance with an unwritten law: Above all, sponsors appreciate a reliable winner. And since Hakuho has married a Japanese model, even nationalists are prepared to forgive his Mongolian origins, especially since he has cultivated the Japanese way of life with great devotion and always behaves immaculately in public.

Hakuho brims with confidence, he practises every one of his pre-match movements with elegance and contemplation in equal measure, accompanied by waves of enthusiasm. The opponent – though far from a nobody – gets routinely smashed. This is not only best practise for a *yokozuna*, it is a commitment: once he starts to lose, he has to end his career himself.

But Hakuho doesn't have to grapple with that. Behind him lies a triumph in the spring tournament (15 wins, 0 losses), before him a *natsu basho*, which he will win again without any losses.

Hakuho is a grand master, a role model the Chiyonofuji entrusts his Kokonoe protégés to follow: "Because he does everything right that you can do right in Sumo."

In the end, that attitude will inevitably lead to a balance the gods are so much in love with.

