GAIJIN YOKOZUNA: A BIOGRAPHY OF CHAD ROWAN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

ENGLISH

AUGUST 2004

By Mark Panek

Dissertation Committee:

Craig Howes, Chairperson
George Simson
Ian Macmillan
Cristina Bacchilega
Jonathan Okamura
Dedication

For Janice Rowan
Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Janice Rowan, Chad Rowan, George "Ola" Rowan, Randy "Nunu" Rowan, Larry Aweau, Dr. Bob Beveridge, and George Wolfe for hours of invaluable, candid interviews; George Kalima, Jesse Kuhaulua (Azumazeki Oyakata), Fiamalu Penitani (Musashimaru), and Percy Kipapa for insight into the sumo world; and the others I was able to speak with more briefly, most of whom appear in the text.

This all would have been impossible without the generosity of David Meisenzahl, who provided a place to stay while I did my research in Tokyo; of the Sekikawa family for the same reason; of Tamiko Tanigawa for the same reason, but in Honolulu (and for the money she lent along the way to allow me to focus on my writing); of Francis Ward, who introduced me to Japan; of the Rowan, Spencer, and Kalima families for their friendship and support; and of my patient wife, Noriko.

I chose the UH English Department for my Ph.D. because I wanted to work with Craig Howes at the UH’s Center for Biographical Research. For the past four years Craig has been confirming the wisdom of this choice, from grounding me in lifewriting theory, to looking over draft after draft, to helping copy-edit the final version. George Simson, the Center’s founder, started me off on this project years ago and remained a strong, enthusiastic source of support. I also wish to thank Stan Schab, Anna Makkonen, Robert Barclay, Masako Ikeda, Ian MacMillan, Cristina Bacchilega, Jonathan Okamura, and Frank Stewart for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts.

Finally, it goes without saying that I could not have done any of this without Chad Rowan, who, among other things, set a standard of greatness.
Abstract

When Japan had the chance in the 1998 Nagano Olympic Opening Ceremony to define “Japanese” for the rest of the world, sumo was a natural choice for a centerpiece. Rooted in Shinto creation myths, the sport is among the country’s best examples of traditional icons, a ritualistic reminder of the past like no other in the world. But the man they chose to embody their culture was an American, Akebono Taro, formerly Chad Rowan of Hawai‘i, a Japanese citizen for less than two years. In a country whose aversion for outsiders is well documented, and where foreign residents are fingerprinted annually, the Nagano organizers’ choice raises the question “How?” How could they choose a former American as their primary cultural emblem? I answer the question in this biography by exploring how Rowan was prepared for his experience in Japan, how the system was able to accommodate him, and how he was able to perform in the role of Akebono to the point where he could find himself on center stage at Nagano.

Telling the story of Rowan’s life is an act equally biographical, anthropological, autobiographical, and creative. While the overall sports celebrity story drives the main narrative, the cultural concerns regarding both a Hawaiian in Japan’s National sport, and those of a haole biographer researching and conveying that story, are more important and arguably more interesting arguments for the value of this project as a contribution to the field of English Studies.
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A Note on Terminology

Working with a subject like sumo involves addressing the proliferation of poorly-translatable Japanese words. I have used Japanese words in such cases of poor translatability, placing them where the reader can figure their meaning from their context, very much like Akebono himself learned Japanese. There are, however, more than forty of these words in the text, so I have also included a glossary for quick reference.
INTRODUCTION

*Now I know you not going put this in that book you’re writing, but...*—Chad Rowan, 10/21/98.

You are holding a book born years ago of an idea that only took off when I flew to Tokyo in June of 1998, as excited and uncertain as Chad Rowan must have been more than ten years earlier upon entering the National Sport of Japan. Through some perfect alignment of the stars, timely encouragement from a friend in Tokyo, and my own delusions of a writer’s ability to live out dreams, I’d managed to secure an interview with Jesse Kuhaulua—the first foreigner to have won a major sumo tournament, the first foreigner to have retired into sumo elderhood and open his own training facility, and the first foreigner to cultivate not only a *yokozuna*—sumo’s highest-ranked competitor—but the very first foreign *yokozuna*: Chad Rowan, or as he became known in Japan, *Akebono*.

“I’m calling from the University of Hawai‘i,” I’d told Kuhaulua over the phone after reaching his sumo stable and asking to speak with him. “I’m researching the cultural moves Hawai‘i’s *rikishi* [sumo competitors] had to make in order to succeed in sumo, and since you paved the way for everyone else, I think you’d be able to help me most with an interview.” Having lived a year in Japan back in 1992, I’d become fascinated at how Kuhaulua, Rowan, and several other men from Hawai‘i appeared to have assimilated into Japanese culture as a condition for making it in Japan’s National Sport.
“Come Wednesday,” Kuhaulua had told me. “You know where my stable is?” (Kuhaulua 1998)

The extent of the cultural-athletic success of Hawai‘i’s rikishi came down to the powerful and image that had appeared on my TV screen a few months before my luckily-timed phone call. The winter Olympics were held in Japan that year, and like all Olympic opening ceremonies, Nagano’s included strong visual definitions of the host country’s unique culture. In this case, each of the record 72 delegations of athletes was led by a kimono-clad sumo wrestler whose hair was styled in a traditional samurai chon-mage—a kind of sharp topknot stiffened with oil and folded point-forward on top of the head, just off-center. Sumo was a natural choice for the Nagano organizers as a cultural symbol, stretching back in its current form over a hundred years, and in one form or another all the way back to Japanese creation myths. Once the athletes were assembled, the Yokozuna entered to purify the grounds of this Olympiad by performing the steps of his sacred ring-entering ceremony—steps which defined in an instant “Japanese” to a world-wide television audience.

As I watched on my TV the Yokozuna lift his feet high and pound them into the ground, what amazed me was that this Yokozuna was not some descendent of ancient samurai who had spent his youth praying at Shinto shrines and being drilled in the ways of bushido. No, the man ordained to chase away the demons by performing this detailed ritual dating back more than 150 years, was American-born Chad Rowan from rural Oahu. In a country whose aversion to foreigners is well-documented—a place where many third- and fourth-generation non-ethnic Japanese are not even allowed to carry Japanese passports—the man picked to personify
“Japanese” to one of the largest television audiences in history was Chad Rowan, now Yokozuna Akebono Taro, a citizen of the Land of the Rising Sun for less than two years.

When my plane touched down at Narita in June of 1998 I flipped through my passport, drawn to the picture of my twenty-year-old self and trying to imagine 18-year-old Chad Rowan’s first steps on Japanese soil. My own had been marked by the five-year-old Tokyo/Narita stamp, which ran into a purple flood of memories from more adventurous times as I flipped through the well-stamped pages, and then back to the first page: the Australia student visa, and the picture of the excited twenty-year-old kid, two months shy of his first trip abroad. And two years older than Chad Rowan had been when he’d first boarded the plane to Japan with nothing, and no idea when he would ever return.

Less than two hours later I stood in front of the Kokugikan, in awe and full of energy despite the long trip. After all these years, there it was, right in front of me: The Hall of National Sport. *Kokugi*. Built exclusively for sumo. That must be why it’s square instead of ovular, I thought, like a hockey arena used for basketball and circuses and concerts and everything else. No, the *dohyo* is square, so every seat must face it head on. A grand entrance fronted by a perfectly landscaped courtyard and wide stairways on either side up to a second-level terrace. A tower in the front where the *taiko* drummer sits to announce the openings and closings of each tournament day. A soft green crown of a roof sloping on each of four sides meeting in perfect angles, evoking some kind of futuristic temple. This is where it all
happened. Where Jesse Kuhaulua had his retirement ceremony right after it opened. Where Konishiki, the second man from Hawai‘i to impact Japan’s National Sport, made waves as the first foreigner to approach sumo’s top rank. Where Akebono defeated his strongest rival to do what Konishiki could not. I could hear it all from inside the big empty building: Akebono no yusho! Akebono no yusho! Akebono no yusho!

My friend David Meizensahl was a Tokyo IT specialist, a Hawai‘i transplant, and a sumo fanatic who’d become close to most of the Hawai‘i rikishi over the course of his eight years in Japan. He met me later that evening in a Ueno bar and invited me to spend the week at his apartment, which turned out to be only a couple of blocks from Azumazeki Beya—Kuhaulua’s sumo stable—and filled me with stories of nights out drinking with the boys.

After a two-hour search the following morning, I found the Takasago Beya where I’d hoped to meet Konishiki empty, its occupants having packed up and headed for the upcoming July tournament in Nagoya. So by the time my taxi driver picked out a non-descript Magaiki Beya from a row of similar-looking buildings on a narrow side street (after asking directions three times), morning practice was already over.

“You’re late,” the foreign rikishi said to me as I walked in. He was wearing a faded white practice mawashi—the belt-like apparel that makes up the sumo uniform. I’d seen pictures of Yamato, and he’d figured prominently in David’s stories, but here in person he was big, and he was intimidating: more than three hundred pounds of him spread around in perfect proportion, hair styled in a top-knot combed to a point and just off-center. His dark eyes, set deeply beneath his prominent forehead, gave
me the feeling that George Kalima from Hawai‘i had little patience with anything that wasn’t done right.

I apologized as best I could, and then explained my project to him, how I had an appointment with Kuhaulua, how I hoped to interview the other local rikishi, how I was staying with David.

He toweled off and listened to me with a who-is-this-haole-and-what-does-he-want-from-me look on his face and then said, “We’re all pretty busy this week.”

“How about right now? Twenty minutes or so would be enough.”

“Okay.” He went on for closer to thirty while the tokoyama washed and oiled his hair and re-sculpted and tied his chon-mage. The gruff suspicion disappeared and he actually seemed pleased with the attention. I kept the focus on him as much as I could for two reasons: he had made great accomplishments in his own right and immediately saw the cultural context I wanted to put them in, so he gave a great interview. But more importantly, I could sense that despite the fact that Akebono was his best friend, he resented living in his fellow Hawaiian’s shadow. George Kalima should have been a star in Hawai‘i for what he had done. Instead, people who knew little about sumo were wondering why he wasn’t a yokozuna too—a ridiculous assumption when taken in its full context. In the end he was happy to have talked to me.

I left Magaki Beya feeling as if I’d won something, the interview having answered all kinds of questions related directly to my thesis while raising several more. “There’s two of me,” he had said. “There’s a Yamato, and there’s a George, and you have to separate the two. That’s the hardest part.” No one could better
confirm the point I wanted to make about public and private faces in the dramatic context of Japanese culture. (Kalima 6/98)

On the third day I stood on a quiet, narrow street before a brown three-story building, a wooden sign depicting the Chinese characters for “Azuma” and “Zeki” next to its double doors. I walked in, down a hallway past the floor-to-ceiling portrait of Takamiyama—Kuhaulua’s ring name before he retired into the elder name, Azumazeki Oyakata—that had hung from the Kokugikan rafters following the man’s 1972 Nagoya championship. On the left through sliding doors on the way to the public viewing area I saw a bronze bust of the man, a few plaques and trophies, and a glass display case. Inside the case, tied in a circle with an elaborate loop and adorned with five zig-zag strips of white paper, was the brilliant white rope worn during the sacred dohyo-iri ritual by Yokozuna Akebono.

I sat on a hardwood floor area raised about two feet above the training room floor, where some of the stable’s young boys were already working themselves up into a sweat, lifting their muscled legs high in the air and stomping their bare feet with full force into the hardened clay. From here I proceeded to watch the banzuke—the complete list of sumo’s 800-plus competitors written according to rank—come to life before my eyes. Until that moment, it had been nothing more than just that: a ranking sheet, just like they have in so many other sports. But that day I began to see the banzuke as the perfect poetic symbol of the sport and the life. Its printed version unfolds to about 18”x30” and reads from top to bottom like an eye chart, the names in the top makunouchi division painted in broad black headline strokes, the names in the
juryo division still readable from a good distance, and the names in the four lower divisions descending in size down to the width of a single hair of a brushstroke. I was now watching the boys whose names were depicted in such comparative insignificance to Akebono’s, and the banzuke suddenly made sense, like a deep and meaningful painting would: they were small, they were unknown, and they had to serve him.

Back then a copy of the most recent banzuke hung above my desk at the University of Hawai‘i—it is updated bi-monthly to determine match-ups before each of sumo’s six annual tournaments—and at the time I could only read four names: newly-promoted East #1 Yokozuna Wakanohana, his brother Takanohana, in the West #1 position, and Akebono, the senior of the three yokozuna, listed in the East #2 spot. Akebono was followed by East Ozeki Musashimaru, also from Hawai‘i, and then the list stretched down into smaller writing, and still smaller, and finally to microscopic brush strokes that until only moments before had been nothing more than squiggly lines to me.

Over the next few years my Japanese would improve to the point where I could read most of the names on the banzuke’s top two levels. Over the course of the rest of that summer as I traveled with the sumo show from rural Japanese town to town, the purpose of the whole thing—of every name—would become clear. Way down at the bottom of the golf rankings, for instance, you may have to give golf lessons on the side to make ends meet. But you’ll never have to carry Tiger Woods’ bags, or do his laundry, or attend to him in the bath, or stand on call to run errands for him, or iron his red shirt on Sundays.
The training area door opened and for a moment practice came to a stop as the boys all fell to bowing and shouting a military-style greeting to Azumazeki Oyakata, whose presence filled all corners of the room his massive body failed to cover. Although now well into his fifties, Oyakata did not look all that far removed from his days as an active rikishi. He even continued to adorn his full, round face with the seventies-style pork-chop side burns that had been his trademark back before his own chon-mage had been cut. He could certainly have thrown these boys around the ring at will had he so chosen, and though he took little notice of them as he sat down on a cushion at the center of the viewing platform, the mood in the room changed. Charges were more spirited. Bodies now crashed into one another with the sound of a loud handclap. Faces grimaced in effort to stave off defeat at ring’s edge. Challengers immediately rushed to surround the previous bout’s winner, shouting eagerly for the chance to take him on. Those not fighting busied themselves with foot-stomping shiko exercises or push-ups. No one merely stood around, as some of them had been before his entrance.

The Oyakata turned to me and I quietly thanked him and introduced myself.

“Two of my boys are sick today,” he said so softly. I had to concentrate just to get what he was saying, his voice having been altered to a raspy whisper by a blow to the throat years ago. “So today we only have six. We usually have eight.” He said nothing about the Yokozuna. I couldn’t see how Akebono could get any kind of workout throwing around the likes of what resembled a bunch of junior high and high school kids, and later learned that he did indeed usually visit other stables to practice.
against rikishi closer to his rank. “We can talk after practice is over, at about ten o’clock,” the Oyakata told me.

Some thirty minutes later I could hear movement from down the stairs that enter the training area from the left, just below the clock that marked the progress of practice, protected in front by a chest-high wall. A couple of the youngest boys had finished their training bouts and headed downstairs. I could only hope that it was to help the Yokozuna into his mawashi. The footsteps which then lumbered up the stairs were far heavier than those of the two boys’ combined. And finally Akebono’s head emerged from below, several steps before he reached the hard clay floor, his chon-mage combed into a point rather than the up-turned flower shape I’d seen on TV when he did battle.

He continued to rise, and rise, a full two steps after I was sure he’d already reached the top. He towered over everyone as they stopped to shout the same military greeting they had given their Oyakata. The Yokozuna paid them no attention. He bowed to his boss, and firmly, respectfully greeted him. He then walked around to the other side of the ring and began lifting his legs and pounding his bare feet into the hard clay of practice dohyo. His feet had to be twice the size of anyone’s in the room, and as they slapped against the clay floor, the muscles in his legs would ripple like those of a power lifter. In the many matches I’d seen on TV, he had looked tall, but not as big as this. His legs had even looked skinny on television, which they were when compared to his wide upper body and his big stomach. But up close they were rocks as wide as my own waist, bulging with muscle.
Most of all, he was real, and he was sitting right there in the same room, offering occasional bits of advice, encouragement, nodding approval, all like I’d tried to imagine it, but now in vivid, up-close, living, breathing detail. His Hawaiian face did not in any way match the Japanese words that spilled out. From time to time he would smile, which on his expressive face had the effect of nearly changing his identity—he could look frighteningly mean, and then he could look almost babyish, smiling warmly with his entire face rather than just his mouth and eyes. For years my impressions of him on television and in print had conveyed a kind of abstract notion of “foreign yokozuna,” but now as I sat here in the same room with him, Akebono looked more like some of the big local guys I’d seen back in Hawai‘i than anyone in Japan—a comparison that made his accomplishment all the more amazing to me.

And he was big. Nothing I’d read or even seen on television had adequately captured the man’s size. Six-eight, five hundred—those were big numbers. But numbers mean little when compared to a thigh, rippling with muscle, wider than my waist. I wondered what kind of workout could he possibly get against these small boys. As it turned out, not much at all. Today was a light day for him. After completing his shiko he offered his chest for a few of them to charge into in comical attempts that didn’t budge him, despite his powerful baritone shouts of encouragement. I was sure I’d get to talk to him now, but even if I didn’t, the simple hour of being in the same room as the man worked would deepen tenfold whatever I would end up writing.
“Okay, we can talk now,” Oyakata said, turning to me. As the boys, and the
Yokozuna, finished practice they bowed to him and filed downstairs for their baths.

I began by thanking Kuhaulua again, and congratulating him on his incredible
career as both a rikishi and an oyakata. I then explained my interest in sumo as a
cultural institution. “I basically want to find out how much you had to become
Japanese, or act Japanese, in order to succeed in sumo. I’d also like to talk to the
Yokozuna about it if I could and if he has time, since he’s now going through it along
with you.”

“Sure, you can talk to him,” he said, just like that.

I struggled in my rush of excitement for a second to concentrate on the task at
hand, but in light of Azumazeki Oyakata’s own significant career, this wasn’t
difficult. Azumazeki Oyakata was in the position to help me the most with my
cultural questions, since he had broken the ground that allowed the rest of the local
boys to make it. His poorly ghosted autobiography, which had come out following
his Nagoya championship and long gone out of print, had at least illustrated that
much, as in the section where it explains the shinai—the bamboo stick oyakata wield:
“I was only beaten, except in rare cases, when I did something wrong in the training
area. I was able to avoid more arbitrary treatment largely because I had gained the
respect of my superiors. This respect was earned perhaps because I was struggling
very hard to overcome the many handicaps I faced, but I think, too, that my general
attitude had a lot to do with it. I didn’t complain and when I was told to do something
I would quickly say hai and run.”(Kuhaulua/Wheeler 86) I’d brought the book along
and handed it to him as a way to get the conversation going.
“John Wheeler wrote this book,” he said, opening it at random to find a half-page photo of eighteen-year-old Jesse James Kuhaulua, tall and lean, his hair too short yet for a chon-mage, wearing a black practice mawashi and an uncertain expression. The photo was 34 years old. He stared at it in silence, and the room disappeared around him. If my ten-year-old passport photo had moved me as it had on the plane, I could only imagine all the places Jesse and Takamiyama and Azumazeki Oyakata had to visit before finding himself back in the keikoba, sitting on a big cushion and facing me. From rural Maui to Tokyo, in winter, 1964. If my 165 pounds could draw stares in Narita airport two days ago, what must this man have gone through? No Yamato or Konishiki or Musashimaru. Learn Japanese or die of loneliness. Just about having to make excuses for being the first foreigner to win a championship, back in 1972. 1,231 consecutive top-division bouts. Becoming the only foreign-born oyakata running his own stable that sumo will likely ever see. 34 years.

A full minute later the Oyakata was back and talking to me. He gave me a good half-an-hour of thoughtful answers—a mix of history, Nihon Sumo Kyokai party-line sound bytes, and keen cultural insight along the lines of, “You have to think Japanese, and that’s the difficult part.” He would certainly have gone on longer, but Akebono emerged from the stairway again so he stood to leave. “You can talk to him now.” (Kuhaulua 1998)

The Yokozuna shook my hand and sat down next to me. He listened with pride as I thanked him for his time and congratulated him on his career. His t-shirt
and shorts now covered most of the bulk that had impressed me earlier, and had the
effect of making the chon-mage on top of his head look out of place, as it would on
some big local Hawaiian guy on the beach in Waimanalo. And up close now, his size
impressed me even more: the biceps bulging from his sleeves could have been
another person’s thighs. Even in this sitting position he was more than a head taller
than me. The hand that had enveloped mine when he greeted me could easily have
palmed a basketball—I couldn’t imagine how it would feel to be slapped with one of
his tsupari hand thrusts, let alone have this giant charge at me in the ring. But then
his face and manner did nothing but welcome me, communicating that he was happy
to sit and talk story for as long as I liked.

I turned on my tape recorder and explained the cultural aim of the questions I
would be asking, with some examples of what I’d learned so far: from Yamato, on his
own private and public selves, from Kuhaulua, on thinking Japanese. Part of his own
success, I explained, was in the perfect way he had handled the press over the years. I
wanted to see how much he had performed his answers, and how sincere they were—a
difficult prospect considering the chance that he would be performing for me, too.
It must have helped that I avoided what I’d considered the kind of stupid questions
he’d been answering for a career now—stuff about how much he weighed and what
he ate, or whether sumo was anything like football. I also believe that grounding my
thesis made him more candid, and certainly more thoughtful. At no point in the
interview, for instance, did he answer a question without a distinct pause. And to be
sure, many of his perfect, humbly delivered lines to the press had been sincere. But
then I called him on an instance of having hidden his arrogance—arrogance natural to American sports that has absolutely no place in sumo:

“What was your goal when you got on the plane to come up here?” I asked him.

He thought for a moment, and then, “Just like you. I wanted to learn about the culture, about the people. I wanted to be one hotel manager back in Hawai‘i and I figured it would be better if I knew Japanese. It was one free trip.”

“What about in sumo? Did you ever think you’d make it this high?”

He thought again, and then, “No, I was never good in sports or anything like that. I just wanted to try my best.”

“A few years ago I took a Biography class at UH where I wrote a 25-page paper about you. I interviewed your mom and your brother for that paper and your brother told me that when you left, you said you wouldn’t come home till you were yokozuna.” Something happened in the course of these few lines. When I said the word, “biography,” the Yokozuna tilted his head just a fraction, as if instantly intrigued. And he became more intent with what I was saying as I went on from there to the end of the thought. Just in that look I could tell somehow that he was deciding that this wasn’t just another interview.

“Well, that’s not something you put on your forehead and walk around with,” he said of his bold statement, with a big smile. Now, both of the young Chad’s stated goals had to be true. Every eighteen-year-old has both practical goals and less practical dreams. But to this point in Akebono’s career, his practical, humble thoughts and opinions had been, as required by his position, at the center of all of his
interviews. From this point on in our first interview, I began to get a more complete picture of the range of his opinion than I had ever seen in print, and a much better idea of the complexity of his identity than what I had been imagining over the years. The Yokozuna opened up, sprinkling his normal praise for his adopted country and his sport with ways Japan could irritate him, and moving into cultural observations best left unsaid by a yokozuna.

When we finished I turned off my tape recorder and did what I only became sure I would do at the turning point of our interview, when he had tilted his head at the mention of the word, “biography.” I asked him if he would be interested in working on a book about his life with me.

He took a moment and then said, “Yeah, you know I’ve been looking for somebody to do that,” and held out his hand for me to shake, saying, “Let’s make some money.” We spoke excitedly for a few minutes more on the book’s possibilities: “Sumo’s real popular in Spain you know,” he said, evoking the 1995 Madrid exhibition tour. “I like get ’em translated into ten different languages, sell ’em all around the world.” I told him how I wanted to write a children’s book for use in Hawai‘i’s public schools, that he was a natural role model. “That’s my number one goal,” he said, moved by the idea, “to help the children of Hawai‘i.” He finally stood and said, “I’ll call you before you go, and we can keep in touch by email when you get back to Hawai‘i.” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98)

I walked back to David’s wondering if it had all really happened, just like that.
David had arranged to have Yamato and his girlfriend Naoko over for dinner that evening, in part to coincide with my research visit, and partly because he and the big Hawaiian had become good friends over the years. Even dressed in a t-shirt and baggy shorts that reached his knees, George Kalima cut as imposing a figure as he had the day before after practice, with the full bulk of his muscled arms on display. And though he moved with a smooth sense of grace, it was impossible to look at him without knowing he could throw you through the wall at any moment if the feeling moved him. Despite the fact that George was now clearly as much a foreigner as David or me, his chon-mage made him look Japanese in a deeper, more far-reaching way than the salarymen out on the street who’d been born there, just as the long, flowing hair on Naoko—a Japanese hula instructor of some renown—made her look more “local” than many women in Hawai‘i.

"Haole boy here is now Chad’s biographer," David announced.

"Ho, I thought you were just writing one paper," Yamato said with a smile and a handshake, and without a trace of so that’s why you wanted to talk to me yesterday. “What happened?”

I told him the whole story. “He said he was going to call me tonight so we could talk about it before I go back to Hawai‘i. I’m ready to stay here, or go home and move out of my apartment and come back here for good.”

“Let’s try call him right now,” he said, taking out his cell phone. He let it ring a few times and then put it away. “See, that’s the thing about Hawaiian: he neva answers his phone. That’s one busy man. You lucky you got to talk to him at all.”

The suspicion with which Yamato had held me in our first meeting had not followed
him to David’s apartment. He had recently dropped from stardom to obscurity in a matter of months for missed time resulting from a bout with pneumonia that had almost killed him, and would find himself out of sumo’s paid ranks when the next banzuke came out. He talked excitedly about what appeared to be his latest in a continuous flow of money-making schemes that led us to believe he was thinking of getting out of sumo. His recent frustration on the dohyo also led to one Japan Sumo Association-related complaint after the next, further underscoring the difference between “George” and “Yamato” he had pointed out in our first meeting. He talked of the way sumo dealt with injuries, of course, and went on to discuss its politics, his opinions of some of the oyakata and other rikishi, people he had to deal with as his stable’s headliner, punctuating every story with a smile and the words, “but you neva heard that from me.” (Kalima 6/98)

By Friday morning most stables had packed up for Nagoya, including Azumazeki Beya, but Yamato still had one day of practice. This time I arrived at Magaki Beya on time. The man running practice was no longer the big Hawaiian, or Yamato, or simply a sumo wrestler. He was George. I’d eaten with him, drank with him, laughed with him. Watching him now wasn’t the same, and the place seemed stranger now because of the contrast: how could someone like George ever end up in a building like this, advising young rikishi on grips and throws in Japan’s National Sport?

“You heard from Hawaiian yet?” he asked me when practice ended.

“Not yet.”
“Wait here,” he said, and went off into the bath.

He soon came out. “We go,” he said. We got in a taxi and he asked me if I’d eaten yet. “You cooked for me last night,” he said, “so why not let me cook you some lunch?” He insisted on paying for the taxi, too, which stopped in front of a red brick building about twice the height of the surrounding buildings. A huge, maroon Humvee was parked outside, half on the sidewalk, with Yokozuna’s name airbrushed onto its tailgate. George welcomed me to his eighth-floor apartment and chatted about practice, the guys in his stable, his boss, as he cooked up some Portuguese sausage, eggs, and rice. Then the phone rang.

“Yeah, he’s here eating with me right now,” Yamato said. “Okay, we’ll come up when we’re done.”

Two floors up we walked into a large three-room apartment, in all ways like any other Western-style apartment except for the huge basketball shoes and snow-shoe-like zori slippers next to the door. The floors were of hard wood and not tatami. The doors swung on hinges instead of sliding. The only reminder of Japan was the apartment’s centerpiece: a three-by-five-foot enlargement of Akebono’s Day-Fifteen victory over fellow Yokozuna Takanohana that clinched the Hawaiian’s most recent tournament victory. Both men are airborne in the photo, but the outcome that will follow the frozen moment is clear: Takanohana’s face is pure panic; Akebono’s a kind of delighted menace.

In real time the Yokozuna sat on the living room couch in front of the TV with an expression that never shows up anywhere near the dohyo, whether before or after a
bout: he was totally relaxed, and smiling, lounging in a pair of boxer shorts. His wife Christine and their newborn daughter sat next to him on a kitchen chair.

"Eh, you big prick!" he said to George. "You always off this early? Ho, I lucky if I can get home by dinner. I usually not back until after eleven. This my first day off in I can’t remember how long." (Rowan, Chad, 6/98)

"Yeah, but that’s business," George told him, stopping to greet Christine and the baby. And then, "That’s why you live on the top floor and I stay downstairs.”

He sat down on the floor across from the Yokozuna.

"Eh, sorry I neva call you,” the Yokozuna said to me. "Ever since I talked to you I been running around like one chicken widdout one head. This my wife, Christine,” and then to her, "He writing one book about me.”

"Great! Come sit down. Chad’s been thinking about a book for a while now.” We began to introduce ourselves and George launched into a detailed plan he’d been considering about opening a restaurant.

After a while George got up to keep a doctor’s appointment, and Christine took the baby into the bedroom for a nap, leaving me alone with Yokozuna Akebono.

"Why did you choose me to do this?” This was obviously my question, but he was asking it.

"That’s exactly what I wanted to ask you since Wednesday,” I told him.

"There have to be hundreds of people who want to write your book. Why me?”

He thought for a moment and said, “When you do what I do for a living and get to where I am, you learn how to read people. Plenty people want this or that, they like you when you’re winning, ’cause you doing good, ’cause you ‘Akebono!’ When
I was talking to you I could tell right away that you were sincere.” He had nailed in one sentence my single greatest worry since I’d begun dreaming about the project years ago: overcoming the immediate assumption that “I’m writing a book about Chad Rowan” means “I’m out to make money off of Chad Rowan’s celebrity as Akebono.” A few people around the Yokozuna would wind up jumping to this conclusion and making things difficult for me in the ensuing months—the subject of another book entirely, as well as the subject of much of the biographical theory and criticism I’d studied at UH—but that wouldn’t matter: the most important person in the project knew my intentions were honorable.

“So what do you want me to do?” Again, it seemed like my question, but he was the one asking it. I told him I had to go back and move out of my apartment in Hawai‘i, quit my job.

“I’d like to go on the jungyo,” I said. Jungyo was what the Sumo Association called its exhibition tours, the longest of which snaked back and forth across Northern Japan through the month of August. “I think if I go on the jungyo, I should be able to talk with you enough to get most of the information I need. After that I’d just have to be able to reach you to clear up any questions that come up.”

“We’re going home to Hawai‘i after the Nagoya Basho,” he said. Rikishi were given five days off following each of sumo’s six annual major tournaments, or hon-basho. “You could come back up with us when we come back. You could travel with us on the jungyo, stay with the boys. Or you could just crash in my room if you don’t mind sleeping on the floor. Let me give you my email address so we can keep in touch that way. Eh Chris!” He waited. “She must be asleep already. Try wait—
I’ll go get ’em myself.” It’s no small feat for a man 6’8”, 510 pounds to lift his body out of a couch. He did so and walked across the kitchen into the bedroom.

One would think that as I got to know Chad Rowan, the question as to how a foreigner could wind up defining “Japanese” for a worldwide television audience would begin to answer itself. But instead, at least in these first couple of hours, the opposite seemed to be true. There seemed nothing miraculous about Chad from Hawai‘i, nothing that set him apart as some expert on how to read cultural situations and act accordingly. If anything, Chad reminded me of his cousin Nathan—a kind and articulate man who took care of his family, did his job well, and loved nothing more than to spend his weekends having a few beers with his friends. Yokozuna Akebono struck me, in this way, as more typical than remarkable, leading me to wonder over and over again, How did he do it?

The answer could only come from a research quest I began in earnest that afternoon. Hours of interviews with family members, former and current rikishi, Azumazeki Oyakata, former coaches and teachers, close friends, and Chad Rowan himself. Hours of direct observation and immersion in my subject’s life as Yokozuna Akebono. Volumes of secondary source material in both English and Japanese. The summer jungyo, parts of three succeeding tours, daily attendance at five hon-basho and parts of two others, hours back in Hawai‘i talking story with Chad’s mother, who had become a close friend over the years, or golfing with Nathan. It would all add up to a very personal story far more complex than the obvious sports narrative a cursory look at Rowan’s life suggests.
It would be three years and five attempts before I would admit that there was no such thing as a *definitive* biography, and that the only way to tell *this* version of the man’s life would be to weave each source directly into the narrative and then let the audience decide. Some stories, like this introduction, would come mainly from my own observations. Others would come from any number of other sources. But being direct about where each piece of information came from would be the only way to put the material in order, and the best way to be honest about what I felt it added up to as I worked to explain Chad Rowan’s cultural and athletic success.

That afternoon in his apartment, the Yokozuna held one of the more important sources for the first chapter when he returned from the bedroom with his email address and cell phone number and sat back down heavily on the couch.

“Maybe you can use this stuff,” he said, handing me a stack of papers. There was a sumo glossary downloaded from a sumo-ophile’s web site, and several generic pieces on sumo history downloaded from some other web site, much of it highlighted in yellow or pink marker.

And there were four other typed, single-spaced pages that began like this: “It’s a late night in Japan. It’s September 25, 1997 and we just got through with a basho. I had a rough time during this basho due to a leg injury. I just got a new computer so I decided to write down some of the things that happened in my life here in Japan (maybe someday I might get lucky and someone might want to write and actually read my story).” (Rowan, 1)
I remember getting on that plane very clearly up until today. I remember that I had one walkman, one tape, letters, pictures, and one set of clothes. I remember sitting in the back of the plane. Two of us were sitting in three seats. I was kind of surprised at that. I mean, I kind of felt good because it was going to be a long flight, and it was better to be comfortable. I remember sitting down and starting to feel really sad. I brought out a letter from my cousin that I really looked up to when I was growing up. He was about ten years older than I was. He gave me a letter, some pictures, and some other stuff. In his letter he gave me a dollar bill. He wrote that this dollar was supposed to be used only as my last dollar in this world. I still have that dollar up until today. I started crying. But I also remember the other sumo wrestler telling me to take a good look outside because it would be my last look for a long time.—Chad Rowan: 9/25/97 (Rowan, 1)

One morning after public practice, about mid-way through sumo’s 1998 Natsu Jungyo summer exhibition tour of northern Japan, I walked into the dressing room shared by the top-ranked rikishi and was greeted by a sight as routine as sumo’s sacred ring-entering ceremony. Ozeki Musashimaru slept peacefully on a futon spread out in one corner, lying on his back with a blanket pulled up over his big belly. Wakanohana, who had recently been promoted to the sport’s top rank of yokozuna, talked quietly with a few men in suits kneeling on the floor beside him. Ozeki
Takanonami laughed with some of his attendants. And Yokozuna Akebono, lying on his stomach and propped up on his elbows, sang and bobbed his shoulders as he flipped through a newspaper, big earphones on his head, “She likes it My Way. My Way. My Way,” all in a smooth and perfect tenor. Along with the daily hours on the bus and the sweat from public morning practices, there was a lot of down time for upper-ranked rikishi during all three jungyo I followed. From ten to one-thirty every day, their time was their own, and they invariably spent it as they were here.

Yokozuna Akebono looked up and motioned for me to sit. “You eva listen to Usha?” he asked loudly, still wearing the earphones. Then he sang out a few lines.

“Who’s Usher?” I asked him.

“Here. Try listen.” He handed me the earphones, a pounding beat: “Yo yo yo yo! I do what I do my way!”

“They can put that in your movie soundtrack,” I said. He had indeed done much of it his way, but his rise to sumo’s top rank had depended on no one being the wiser to his ambition. The cultural performance had demanded pure humility, a public stifling of the kind of confidence he was showing right now by singing aloud without concern.

“Eh, I heard your friend’s coming back,” I told him.

“Who.”

“Taka.”

He smirked. Yokozuna Takanohana, his main rival since the day he formally entered the Nihon Sumo Kyokai—the Japan Sumo Association—had missed the first half of the tour after breaking a toe. “Shit, I like get hurt too so I can go back to
Tokyo. This one circus: three o’clock comes around, pack up the elephants, pack up the tent, move on to the next town. Tired already. You not tired yet?”

“Man, I’m tired of trains, these arenas. It all starts to look the same, and I’m just watching.” I was following the tour mostly on local trains, spending from two to six hours a day getting from one town to the next. “I’ve been getting a lot of work done on the train, though.”

“You started the book?”

“Mostly notes, but I have a draft of the beginning. It starts when you get off the plane: all warm in Hawai‘i, and then freezing, gray, lonely here in Japan.”

“Ho, I told you I only brought one change of clothes when I came up here? Was washing my underwear in the sink every night. I thought they was going take care of me, but they neva give me not’ing. I can see what you wen write so far?”

“Shoots.” I plugged in my computer and opened the “book” file.

The Yokozuna read what has since been polished into this:

Most flights leave Honolulu for Japan in the morning, just after the trades have picked up and before waves of heat begin to shimmer from the tarmac. In winter the air is so clear you can see the points on the green mountains just inland, and sometimes make out neighbor islands more than a hundred miles away. The terminal is landscaped with hundreds of palm trees that sway as if on cue. And the water never fails to look like something out of a tourist brochure, a perfect emerald that deepens into the deepest blue. I have seen whales playing in the sea below after taking off on flights to Japan.
From the window of a plane Tokyo is nearly always drab and gray. Dirty waves lapping at industrial-looking stretches of sand explain the sea-side water parks and public pools that stand in the middle of vast parking lots, empty and abandoned in winter. Tokyo Bay darkens as you look from the bridge spanning its mouth towards the rivers that feed it. Miles of same-looking flat buildings cramped together stretch out from the city center. In winter the surrounding rice paddies, the golf courses, even Tokyo Disneyland look like color forgot them. And even on the best days, a haze shrouds the towers that reach up from the city’s center.

But Chad Rowan was coming to make it big. He had, he figured, already made it big. This wasn’t like getting recruited to UH; they’d paid for his plane ticket to Japan, just like a pro team recruiting a star free agent athlete. A professional athlete! He was a professional athlete. As his Uncle Larry had promised him, everything would be taken care of, and Larry was a good friend of his new boss—he’d been up to Japan plenty. Chad would be fighting just like the guys he saw on the Japanese T.V. station at home, fighting for big money. Fighting like Konishiki, who rode in limousines and stayed in hotel suites when he came back to Hawai‘i.

He and John Feleunga emerged from customs to find their boss, Azumazeki Oyakata, another huge Hawaiian. The man had recently retired from the sumo ring and now towered above the television crew there to record the arrival of the latest foreigner to take up Japan’s National Sport. The three of them—John, Boss, and himself—dwarfed everyone in the airport. But what these people lacked in size, they more than made up for in numbers. A wave of them engulfed him the moment he stepped into the public part of the terminal, and swarmed past with no regard for
anyone else’s space, a sea of black hair with unseen, punishing elbows, babbling at one another incomprehensibly, pointing, staring. And he’d thought they were supposed to be polite.

These fuckas keep bumping into me and not even saying sorry, he thought. Me, one professional athlete. I like crack one of ’em right now.

But he kept walking.

He followed his Boss outside to an equally shocking blast of cold air on the way to a waiting car. For the first time in his life the Hawaiian could see his breath. Nothing in his life experience even came close to the feeling of the wind biting at his face. The inside of his nose burned as he breathed through it—a sensation more strange than painful. If he had retreated to a car before, it had been for the comfort of air conditioning against the beating tropical sun. But now after less than five minutes outside in winter, his hands throbbed for some reason, his eyes watered, and so he slid into the car for a much different kind of relief.

As they drove to Azumazeki Beya—Azumazeki Oyakata’s sumo training facility—his head spun from the speed of the chatter inside the car, and the newness of what he saw outside. Cars coming at them on the wrong side of the freeway. Buildings everywhere and new ones going up on nearly every street. Steel orange television towers crowned with flashing red lights. Veins of rail snaking above and below the elevated road. Parking lots filled not with cars, but packed with bicycles, all black or silver. And people. Honolulu airport could get crowded too, but here the crowd hardly let up once they’d left the terminal. Tokyo sprawled out to an area roughly the size of his native Oahu, but housed some forty times as many people.

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Forty times! Everywhere, there were people, men with long, dark coats, women bundled against the cold, standing on street corners waiting to cross at intersections which all looked exactly alike.

About an hour later they exited the freeway and took a number of turns and crossed a big river and stopped on a quiet street not much wider than the car. To Chad, the buildings also all looked the same: three or four story boxes in shades of gray or brown. In fact, all the streets looked the same, as had all the intersections. The only landmark he could remember was the river. He followed John and Boss into one of the buildings and down a dimly-lit hallway, past a larger-than-life painting of Boss standing strong, dressed only in some kind of decorated apron.

A shout startled him from down the hall, five or six people at once barking out some kind of military greeting. A few other wrestlers busy preparing the evening meal had dropped what they were doing the moment Oyakata entered, bowed to him and shouted out. Oyakata ignored the greeting and introduced the young Hawaiian. Then he took Chad and the reporters upstairs, where they took off their shoes and stepped up into a large room with straw mat floors, empty except for a television in the far corner. Chad stood next to his boss and faced the television crew, still in a bit of a daze as they turned on the spotlight. The interviewer spoke quickly and referred to Boss as “Azumazeki Oyakata,” who answered deliberately in his raspy voice and sometimes translated questions for his new recruit. The boy could only remember what his father had told him the night before he left for Japan: be humble; never brag or speak big-headed. He answered every question the same way, stating that he had come to Japan to work hard, follow instructions, and try his best.
When the television crew left, Oyakata went upstairs to his third-floor apartment and left Chad in the big room with twelve other boys ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-one. They also ranged in size, from surprisingly scrawny younger kids, to the imposing Samoans from Hawai‘i, Feleunga and Taylor Wylie, each close to 400 pounds. Chad looked from one to the next as they stood staring at him and felt a feeling, a kind of energy confront him. The boys all stood as tall and wide as they could as they sized him up with the skepticism of a battle-seasoned army platoon eyeing an unlikely recruit. Each had his hair tied into a single knot and folded over in the way he had seen in television samurai movies back in Hawai‘i. Purple welts and bruises covered most of their faces. Many of them had their arms folded so that the fabric of their robes stretched tight enough to display bulging biceps underneath. And then Chad understood the energy he was feeling enough to name it. Testosterone. He was the new kid. They fought for a living, day after day. They fought. As of yet, he did not.

Some of the younger Japanese boys began barking at him in words he could not understand, as if to order him around. Their guttural commands were more reminders of one of those TV samurai movies he and Nunu and Ola used to mimic in exaggerated grunts and mumbles, but now he was actually living it—and without the benefit of subtitles. He turned to his senior—his sempai: “Excuse me, John-san, what they wen say to me?”

“What I look like?” the Samoan glared at him. “Your fuckin’ interpreter?”
The blast of cold wind back at the airport had shocked the young Hawaiian less. He stood motionless, trying to figure out the reaction somehow. It made no sense to him. While he might have expected trouble from the Japanese, John had been through exactly what he was now dealing with and should have empathized, could have made things smoother simply with a few words. "They wen tell you for lay out your futon," or, "They like know why you so tall." The support certainly did not have to go on forever, but Chad had only been in the country a matter of hours, after all. Instead it was, more or less, just cause I local no mean I going help you—you’re on your own, Hawaiian.

Confined now to silence, he continued to look around and take in the complex web of power surrounding him, one based on age, time served, and of course, strength. In the last and most important of these, it was immediately clear that Taylor was The Man. The big Samoan took charge and ordered two of the boys to set out a futon for Chad in the corner of the room. Only eighteen as well, Taylor had come to Japan the year before and now ran the heya, as Chad could already tell, through unspoken agreement which also clearly had to do with testosterone. He ran the heya because he could kick anybody’s ass in the room. And so the boys did as he said, showing Chad a personal storage area much too large for the possessions he had brought, which futon was his, and where he was to lay it out in the evenings and store it in the mornings.

All of the boys, as it turned out, shared the big room. As far as he could tell, they spoke more or less freely with each other, laughing occasionally across the room as much as the boundaries he had noticed permitted. And beyond Taylor’s initial
gesture, no one made any effort to include him, including his compatriots, who bantered fluently in Japanese. Chad realized as he lay on the cold, hard floor that his time in the spotlight was over. This was not the sumo he had seen on television back in Hawai‘i. Konishiki’s limo, stardom, big money—it all may as well have been another ten-day-long plane flight away from this hard, cold floor. They’ll take care of everything. Right. On his very first night in Japan, all he could think about as he drifted off to sleep was home, and what a huge mistake he had just made.

He awoke the next morning to the sound of movement in his room. It was still dark, much too early for Nunu to be awake. If it was Ola, he would have to kick his brother’s ass for waking him up. He was tired enough to sleep well into the day for some reason, and besides, it couldn’t possibly be time to get up anyway, not in the dark.

But when he opened his eyes he could not recognize the ceiling. He was colder than he had ever been on any other morning. A strange, sweet smell permeated the room. And then he slowly came to the conclusion that he would not kick Ola’s ass. He would not even see Ola. He was thousands of miles away from Ola. The big room, the straw mat floor, the television in the corner. A few of the other boys folding up their futons in the darkness was the activity that had awakened him; the smell, the oil in their hair that shaped the top-knot. Stumbling about in the same sleepy haze, they completed the chore automatically. They may very well have still been asleep.

As Chad picked himself up off the straw mat floor and followed suit he was surprised by the stern sound of a single word, spoken suddenly by all those awake:
“ZaiMASsss!” He recognized the first as the greeting the boys had shouted when Boss had entered the kitchen the day before, and turned to see a slight, pretty Japanese woman in the room. She looked to be around forty and was dressed smartly, in pants, her hair cut short below her ears.

The early hour didn’t seem to bother her at all. She was Boss’ wife, whom everyone referred to as Okamisan. She had come to invite him upstairs to a neat, well-appointed apartment on the next floor, where he found that she had prepared a welcome breakfast to ease his adjustment to the heya, to being away from home.

He already missed his own mother powerfully, less from the time away than the distance. Mom had been opposed to the Japan adventure from the moment he broke the news to her, and said little during their final family breakfast on the way to the airport. He could sort of understand why she was mad at him for going, and he felt bad about it. But on the other hand, he agreed with his father: he’d been taking care of his brothers for his whole life, and now it was time for him to set off on his own. They had all stopped to eat at Zippy’s, where Chad decided over what he thought would be his last helping of Portuguese sausage and eggs for a long time, that he would make it big in Japan, and he would do it for his parents and his brothers.

And now a day later and half a world away he sat down to the exact same breakfast. He was touched by Okamisan’s special treatment, happy to grasp something so familiar in the midst of the overwhelming change in his life. She made him understand that Oyakata had faced the same challenge, having also come from Hawai‘i to Japan during winter, and that the welcome breakfast from his own okamisan remained one of his most powerful memories. So she had done the same
for Taylor when he arrived, and then for John, and now for him. While her English was not very good, Chad gave her credit for trying. And the hospitality was a welcome contrast to the earlier treatment from the boys, who were all downstairs training.

Chad got his first taste of practice the following morning, when he awoke with the first group of boys as Taylor and John slept, and followed them downstairs, past the ground floor to the basement locker room. They all squinted against its bright fluorescent lights, under which he could again see his breath. They literally disrobed, for rikishi continued to dress in samurai-like robes called yukata, tied at the waist with a narrow cloth sash they wrap around themselves several times. Once naked, they helped one another unravel long, neatly-folded narrow lengths of black canvas, which they each first straddled like a thong and then wrapped around their waists up to five or six times to form a thick, strong belt tied at the back. Uncomfortable at first as they helped him with the course fabric, Chad was nonetheless eager to fit in, to put on his own mawashi.

They then walked up another flight of stairs and emerged in the keikoba, the dim, cold room situated beneath the one in which they slept and about the same size. Though the whole scene in the practice area was new, the keikoba's floor made an immediate, lasting impression. It looked like smooth brown dirt, with the outline of a circle about fifteen feet across cut into it and two parallel white lines about two feet apart at its center. It seemed a small area for so many big boys to be training together in—the entire floor was only slightly wider than the circle. But above all, the keikoba was hard. It was made of clay, and even after one of the boys swept it evenly with a
thin layer of sand, what Chad felt beneath his bare feet was frighteningly close to pavement. He was supposed to wrestle, as all of these other boys did, on ground as hard as the worn concrete in his Uncle Sam’s driveway.

Uncle Sam’s driveway. He’d laid on that concrete any number of times helping his cousin Bud change the oil in whatever heap he was trying to soup up at the time. “It’s not how it looks,” Bud would always tell him, “it’s how fast it goes.” Some of them looked like he’d just had them towed from the junkyard, but in no time Bud would have them running, and then have them running loud. He would take Chad and Ola cruising, whatevas—like that time they went out to the track in Makakilo and stuffed Ola into the trunk so they wouldn’t have to pay for him. Chad could see it vividly as he closed his eyes and walked across Uncle Sam’s driveway. Uncle Sam’s driveway. That’s how hard the clay was. As of yet he could not imagine getting thrown onto it at any time, let alone on such a biting winter morning, hitting it hard with his knees or hands or elbows or back.

As for the cold, there was nothing he could compare it to. The closest thing to cold he had experienced in Hawai‘i was waiting at the bus stop through a winter rainstorm, and then getting on the air-conditioned bus. Here he could see his breath, and he was wearing next to no clothes. He had wondered at the airport how people lived in such weather, and those people had been bundled up in winter coats. Hawai‘i had winter and summer, but nothing like this. The cold and hardness left him empty to think he was so far away now, from both warmth and family, and left him with a question that would hammer at him more and more. What am I doing here?
He fought off the doubt and tried to follow the routine of the other boys, standing as they did, moving as they did. They stood in a row and limbered up with shiko, lifting in unison first one leg and then the other, high in the air and off to the side, then stomping the hard ground with full force, and then squatting. He gamely shadowed them as much to learn the technique as to overcome the cold, lifting his tight, long legs perhaps a third as high as everyone else, but believing he would improve, given time.

The others looked his way occasionally but continued in silence. He began to take notice of his surroundings. A narrow stage-like platform surrounded the dim, wood-paneled room on two adjoining sides; a large pillow sat at the middle of the platform facing the street-side wall; a narrow row of opaque windows just above head-height ran the length of the street-side wall. Strips of white zig-zag paper hung from the miniature shrine above the other platform, which faced a full-length mirror and a list of words written in Japanese hanging from the wall. A smooth wooden pole the thickness of a telephone pole stood in one corner of the keikoba. A basin with a wooden ladle sat in the opposite corner. A bowl of caked salt, some iron dumbbells, a baseball bat, and a thick, four-foot bamboo stick sat next to the pole.

The boys continued shiko for what seemed like a long time. They may have stomped more than a hundred times, though Chad was absorbing too much to keep count, and were all soon steaming with sweat. When they finished, two of the boys faced each other in the ring as the others kept busy either with the weights, more shiko, push-ups, or rhythmically slapping the wooden pole with open hands. Those in the ring squatted for a moment, and then charged. Much smaller than the image of
sumo he'd absorbed from his television, they fought quickly and passionately, first with thrusts to the face, then for a grip on each others' mawashi, until one finally grabbed hold and twisted the other from the ring. Several of the other boys immediately jumped into the circle, shouting something unintelligible and reaching for the winner as if to ask for the next fight. The winner would choose one, and then they would line up and charge. The matches were short, the pace fast and furious, the time in between only a few seconds.

The challenge fights went on for some time, interrupted occasionally as other rikishi made their way up the stairs. Each time another entered the keikoba everyone except the two in the ring stopped what he was doing, bowed, and shouted, "ZaiMASsssl!" before going back to the practice at hand. And each time another entered, he looked at Chad, said something Chad did not understand, and laughed as everyone laughed along. At length Oyakata entered to even more spirited shouts and took his place on the cushion Chad had noticed earlier. Each movement became noticeably more serious as the man looked on, silently communicating either praise or disapproval, or offering advice or instruction in single-word commands. Taylor and then John entered last to shouts from the other rikishi and stopped and bowed stiffly to their Oyakata with the same greeting before beginning shiko.

The sight of Taylor dressed only in a mawashi was shocking. He was huge, the biggest man Chad had ever seen. He had to be more than four hundred pounds, a larger-than-life version of the Fat Guys in Japan image of sumo Chad had brought with him from Hawai‘i. He considered that image as he looked at Taylor, and then at the other boys around the room. Some of the kids were closer to scrawny than fat,
leading him to wonder how they would ever put on enough weight to compete. Others had big stomachs and plenty of flab from their chests down to what hung over their mawashi. Taylor and John had exaggerated versions of this roly-poly build. These guys all did look fat at a glance—there was no getting around it. But there was something different about them. Chad had seen enough fat people in Hawai‘i to notice the difference almost right away as he watched Taylor go through his shiko. The Man’s stomach shook with each foot-stomp into the hard clay. But the shaking ended there. His thick legs and arms, proportional in size to the rest of his massive body, were rocks. Not an ounce of fat on them.

Chad’s first opponent had this same build—although about a hundred and fifty pounds less of it—the fat stomach, the powerful arms and legs. He looked something like a football lineman would without pads or a shirt. Chad towered over the boy in an apparent mismatch. If he could handle Ola, he could take on anyone in the room, except maybe Taylor, in what to him had seemed nothing more than a pushing match: push the other guy out of the ring, and you win.

But sumo clearly involved more than just pushing. First of all, his feet slipped easily on the hard, sand-covered ground. Getting traction for the charge would be difficult. And secondly, he wasn’t sure exactly when he should charge. The rikishi he had watched seemed to charge intuitively at the same time, without any signal as to when they should start. At times they would abort the fight if one charged before the other was ready, and then the rikishi who charged early would bow and apologize to his opponent. If it happened again, Oyakata would glare at the
offender. Chad took care as he crouched down not to commit one of these false
starts.

But the very moment he touched his hands to the ground the Hawaiian was
blasted straight back into the wood-paneled wall behind him. Shouts from the rest of
the rikishi filled the room as they quickly gathered around the winner in hope of
taking him on next. The smaller boy had come in low, stuck a shoulder into Chad’s
cHEST, and bulled forward with his legs. The match was over before he even knew
what was happening.

Oyakata pointed to Chad’s long legs and laughed, saying some words in
Japanese. He then ordered the boy back into the ring despite the loss. “Tsupari,” he
said to Taylor. Taylor stopped what he was doing and walked out into the ring and
demonstrated a pushing motion called tsupari, a technique marked by repeated open­
handed forward thrusts. At this point Chad’s only hope seemed to be to keep the
other guy away from his body, where his height would be fully exploited. Chad tried
the pushing in a walk-through with Taylor, noticing again how solid the guy was
beneath the layer of fat, and then crouched down again to fight.

More determined after the loss and the ridicule, and armed with the new
technique, the Hawaiian lunged forward at the charge and got his hands up quickly,
aiming for his opponent’s chest. But his opponent spun out of the way and Chad’s
momentum carried him straight into the platform at the other side of the room, his
arms flailing. The other boys surrounded the winner as before and shouted to be
picked next, hands extended.
Chad took his place among the other boys to watch the rest of practice. They continued to take turns in the ring, taking on all comers until beaten in spirited, violent fights which could have gone either way, and then jumping in again later after losing. Between bouts they might towel off, but generally one bout quickly followed the next, until one of the bigger boys stood at the edge of the ring facing outward, and beckoned another to charge him from outside. The pusher locked up with a tight grip just below the shoulders, while the boy in the ring stood in such a way that he could keep his balance as he was pushed, his feet sliding below him across the sand until he reached the other side of the ring. The two then disengaged, turned, and repeated the action. It reminded Chad of the blocking sleds on the Kaiser High football field, except this was a human blocking sled, one which shouted encouragement as it was pushed back and forth. After several of these trips across the ring, the Blocking Sled stood aside at the charge, allowed the pusher to bounce off his chest, put a hand to the back of his neck, and threw him to the hard ground. The pusher rolled and stood immediately, slapped the front of his mawashi loudly with both hands, charged again, bounced again, rolled again, stood again, bowed, and huffed out, "maSHTA!" Now covered in sand, squinting as sweat poured into his eyes, he ran for the ladle and filled it with water. But instead of drinking, he carried it to his Blocking Sled, and bowed. The Blocking Sled drank, rinsed, spit, and nodded in acknowledgment. Two other boys had already begun the same exercise.

When Chad charged into Taylor’s massive chest, he got no results at all. He could not move Taylor. Oyakata smiled and said something in Japanese, and again everyone laughed. Chad absorbed the obvious teasing and then stood back to charge
again, but managed to push his sempai no further than about mid-way into the ring. The guy may have been soft on the outside, but underneath he was as hard as the keikoba's clay. He kept shouting some unintelligible mumble and smacking Chad in the head, and finally threw him to the ground as he had with the other boys. Three more tries ended with the same result: Chad failing to get his Blocking Sled past the center of the ring, getting thrown down hard, and, not knowing how to roll, hitting with full force.

"Mo ii," Oyakata said at last. Enough. Taylor indicated that Chad was to stand aside, and took his place near the center of the ring to begin his own fighting. Chad stood by covered in sand and a bit sore, but not unhappy with his performance. To him the relatively poor result was to be expected; before today he didn’t even know what a mawashi was, let alone how push someone across the ring. He would improve.

"Mizu!" One of the other rikishi shouted. He continued on in a barrage from which Chad could pick out a lot of mizus and more hayakas. The gestures led him to recall what the first pusher had done for his Blocking Sled, and he gathered that he was supposed to bring a ladle of water to Taylor in thanks for the use of his chest. He moved to do as he suspected he was being told, and the shouting stopped. Taylor took a sip of the water, spit it out onto the clay, and stepped into the ring to begin his own workout.

All other activity in the keikoba stopped. The big Samoan stared calmly ahead before each charge and methodically dispatched each of his opponents, sometimes with tsupari, but usually by simply wrapping his arms around them and
deliberately moving forward. Where the fights between the younger boys had been fast and furious, Taylor’s fights were based on power. The only motion was forward. When he and John charged at one another their chests met with the sound of a handclap. The two big local boys fought more than twenty times and were relatively evenly matched. By the end they were both breathing heavily and throwing off enough heat to warm the room all by themselves. Combined with the sweat, the keikoba was now almost humid. And yet it never got to the point of smelling like a gym. The sweet smell of the oil in the rikishi’s hair must have masked any odor.

And now another smell blanketed the room and took everyone’s mind far away from whether or not Taylor beat John or John beat Taylor, or how. Many of them had been awake for over four hours by now. Chad, having worked his body into exhaustion with the unfamiliar exercises, was nearly knocked over by the smell. It was familiar at first, but he could not pick it out exactly until he felt his stomach rumble. Someone was cooking food. He could not tell what it was beyond the fact that it was food, which was enough for a stomach that had been empty since just after six o’clock the night before. It was as though some tangible essence of food had escaped the pots and wafted through the keikoba and deep into him to remind him that he was ravenously hungry, like one of those animated, life-like odiferous clouds he’d seen in Saturday morning cartoons. Two of the other younger rikishi had left the keikoba earlier and were busy preparing the morning meal for everyone else—a task he would be expected to assist in once he learned the full routine of keiko. And as if the fourteen-hour gap of time between meals were not enough of a shock to his system, the cruel, teasing thought of food cooking pecked at him worse than Taylor’s
slaps to the head had. He did not yet know that, like everything else in the heya and everything else in sumo, the meal would be served according to rank, a fact of life which would force him to wait the longest. More than anything—more than going home even, or being able to speak Japanese—at that moment all he wanted to do was eat, and eat as soon as possible.

At last, Taylor turned away from the ring and mumbled the word, “mashta” through labored breath, indicating that he was through with practice bouts. Eating could not be far away. But instead of heading for the stairs to the locker room, Taylor and John each went through butskari-geiko—the same blocking sled exercise the younger boys had done. There was still much more to do before any of them would meet the source of that wonderful smell.

Oyakata left the keikoba as the boys assembled into rows and counted off more shiko in sets of ten, stomping in unison, and Chad began to pick up on the numbers, in part to distract himself from the thought of the food: “Ich! Nii! San! Shii! Go!” and so on. They did ten sets and then lined up around the circle one behind the other and squatted down with their hands in front of them and shuffled around the circle. The object was to work the thigh muscles as they moved forward around the circle as low to the ground as possible. A full head taller than the next tallest deshi, not to mention five hours into such unfamiliar exercises, simply keeping up was excruciating for Chad.

Then they all squatted, silently facing the miniature shrine. One of the boys led everyone in what sounded like a kind of prayer: he would recite a line, and everyone would repeat it—about four or five lines altogether. The boys all then
clapped their hands once in unison, and bowed their heads to the ground. They stood and filed downstairs, first John, then Taylor, and then the rest.

The changing room, draped in steam with the promise of a warm bath, was nothing but a cruel tease to Chad. Instead of a bar of soap, he was handed the sweaty lengths of canvas from the upper-ranked disrobing rikishi and ordered to follow one of the younger boys upstairs. They walked through the kitchen, where some of the other younger boys were chopping vegetables, and on up to the second floor. They walked through the big room and the boy opened a window and draped each mawashi along the rail like a long, black snake reaching almost to the ground. The boy then ordered the foreigner to follow him back downstairs.

But instead of heading for the baths, they stopped in the kitchen, where Chad was given a head of cabbage and shown how to rip it into small pieces. He wondered when he too would be allowed to shed the uncomfortable canvas, clean up, and now that he was in the kitchen, eat. It wasn’t Zippy’s plate lunch, but if the smell in the keikoba had been hard for his growling stomach to withstand, watching the other boys cooking rice, cutting fish, and putting all of the vegetables into a huge, steaming pot was pure torture. Only a day ago the stuff would have looked horrible, this *chanko nabe*. And as he would soon learn, only a day from now it would look horrible again. He hated vegetables. But at this point he was ready to eat the clay from the keikoba.

Taylor and those who had entered the baths with him soon walked through the kitchen and out to a kind of sitting room adjacent to the kitchen and behind the keikoba. Two of the younger boys carried the pot out to this room and placed it at the
head of a low table next to John. Each of the rest of the deshi sat in order, next to the one who preceded his entrance, one place further from the pot. Chad was made to stand by with one of the younger boys, attending in case anyone needed more water, more rice, and so forth, watching everyone inhale whatever they found before them. He refilled their bowls with more stew from the pot, or more rice from the kitchen, refilled their glasses with water. He listened to them banter back and forth and could only try to imagine what they were talking about.

Everyone finished eating. Chad and the other boy brought their dishes to the kitchen, washed them, put them away. Only after everything was clean were they finally allowed to go downstairs to bathe. They helped one another untie their mawashi and showered quickly, as though eating had become much more important than relaxing in the bath. They returned to the empty room to eat what was left over. Chad’s mother had been right about the food; his ravenous hunger was the only reason he could force the stuff down at all. Cabbage, dumplings made of some kind of fish, all in a salty broth. It made him wonder how these fuckas eva got so big, and how they expected him fo’ put on weight. At least there was rice. But cabbage? *Chad, you hate vegetables.* Sitting on a thin cushion on the hard wood floor. *Dey some big Japanee. Ho, I wonda what they eat fo’ get so big. Cannot be just fish and rice.* That was all anyone ever wanted to know back in Hawai‘i once he told them of his plans to join sumo. *What do they eat?* No one would ever believe it.

The other boy finished first and left his dishes behind for him to clean up alone. The boy indicated that Chad was to wash the dishes, and only then would be allowed to go upstairs, where everyone else was napping. Fatigue turned normally
simple tasks like clearing, washing, and putting away a few dishes into huge projects. He dropped things easily, could not figure out where the bowls were stored, worried about where to put the towel and rag when he was through. The place was already run like the military, which he knew all about from Uncle Sam’s endless army stories, and so he knew that everything must have a precise place, every surface must be clean enough to eat off of.

He was affected with that special brand of exhaustion found only in a sumo beya after noon, when a hush falls over the building that had shaken with the crash of bodies and the sound of challenges shouted out only a couple of hours before. Those who choose not to sleep whisper quietly to one another so as not to disturb anyone else. And the only sound to be heard is the occasional shuffle of zori or the weary clap of wooden geta slippers dragging across the stone floor as the lowest-ranked deshi completes his chores. In any one of over fifty sumo beya around Tokyo, this boy was the very picture of exhaustion: sore from practice, sleepy from the early morning, and stuffed with food, ready to pass out on his feet at any moment. Under these conditions, Chad Rowan struggled to wash a few dishes, thinking mostly of his pillow, his family, Hawai‘i, the cold, and what a mistake he’d made in coming to Japan.

At last he trudged upstairs on aching legs and stepped over the rest of the sleeping deshi and stretched out his futon in the corner of the big room. Sleep would be delicious relief. But no sooner had he drifted off than one of the deshi who had eaten with Taylor kicked him awake, barking something about “futon” and pointing to his own mat and blanket. The Hawaiian’s quizzical, dazed look earned him
another kick, which brought him straight out of his sleep and to his senses. This fucking punk like tell him what fo’ do, he thought. He like ac’. Chad took in what had just happened without reacting, before doing anything that might get him in trouble, and decided to do as he was told; he was being ordered around, however unfairly, because of his rank. Just like in practice, just like with cooking, just like with eating. Just like with everything.

Next, the young boy with whom he had eaten led him to help collect and fold the mawashi they had earlier hung out to dry, and to put them in their proper places in the changing room for the next day’s practice. Other deshi did different chores, while others sat in front of the television or played cards or flipped through magazines. Chad and his partner followed their task by doing laundry, and then helping some of the other boys prepare the evening meal. They served dinner as they had served the afternoon meal, though no one ate nearly as much this time. And again, when everyone else was through and everything was clean, Chad was allowed to eat.

There it was again: chanko nabe. A few pieces of colorless, wilting cabbage floating in a grayish broth, along with the same bits of fish they had eaten for lunch. He stared at the bowl in front of him. He had been so hungry in the afternoon that it didn’t matter what they put before him, but now it was an effort to even look at the stuff. It made no sense to him how Taylor could have ever gotten so huge, or for that matter, how everyone in the heya hadn’t turned into scrawny little punks. Sitting in that nasty broth, the fish looked like pieces of dead flesh, dead flesh with leaves in a puddle on the side of the road. At home they were eating something with gravy, he was sure. Or some spaghetti dripping with cheese, something his mother probably
made that very night for Nunu and Ola. Even when she made them force down a plate with vegetables, the second plate they could always eat whatever they wanted. But not here. Here it looked like this was all they were ever going to get, this Japanese stew shit.

He cleaned up without eating much and headed back upstairs, no more satisfied than before.

Though everyone turned as the tall foreigner entered the big room, the universal display of testosterone had subsided considerably since the first time they all confronted him. The boys were lounging around in different corners of the room and all turned indifferently back to whatever they were doing just as quickly as they had looked up.

All except for one. The same guy as before called him over and ordered him to lay out his futon almost immediately. Everyone looked up again to see the foreigner swallow hard and do as he was told, which was to lay out the futon and set the blanket for a perfectly capable sumo wrestler who was operating on at least two more hours sleep and a much fuller stomach than himself. As he finished, the guy whacked him in the head with an open hand. He barked something out and pointed, as if to say the futon was not straight, or was upside-down.

Already on the verge of snapping after the long day, it was all Chad could do not to turn around and throw the guy into the wall, which, even in his current state of exhaustion, he could have done with little trouble. Physically, the little Japanese was no match for him, but he had been there much longer—they all had—which must have carried some weight, or else the guy would not have confronted him in the first
place. He reigned in his anger and made an effort to fix whatever was wrong but was shocked by another blow to the head, harder than the last. The guy barked something else at him and then bent down to fix the futon himself, though Chad could detect no change in the way it ended up. It was not hard to figure out what was happening in the otherwise-peaceful room: Da fucka like ac’. Right in front of everybody. With all the eyes of the room upon him, the new kid swallowed hard, and then bowed, "Sumimasen." Excuse me.

"Brah," Taylor told him a while later, "you trust everybody too much. These guys, they your sempai, but they going walk all over you, you no stand up fo’ your rights." As Chad lay out his own futon, Taylor explained to him the realities of rank and seniority in the sumo world. Sempai meant senior. Kohai meant junior. Both categorized the sumo world along the lines of time served. And then there was the idea of rank, an earned position which granted its own privileges. "You have to move up the banzuke," Taylor said. It was the ranking list for everyone in sumo. When you got high enough on the banzuke, Taylor explained, you became a sekitori—one of the guys they showed wrestling on TV—and then everything was taken care of: big money, women any time you wanted, plenty people taking you out all the time, your own tsukebito—lower-ranked wrestlers who served you. He talked about it almost wistfully, as if becoming a sekitori were like entering some kind of Promised Land, and indeed the difference was abrupt: at one rank you’re a king, and the next below, you’re a slave.

Taylor considered what he had seen so far of the Hawaiian’s good nature and saw the bottom of the banzuke as a particularly dangerous place for him. "Especially
because you’re a foreigner, a gaijin. You gotta make ’em respec’ you.” He then further explained sumo’s sempai-kohai seniority system, which in this case meant that Chad would have to bow to kids sometimes three years younger than he was, and to take orders from them at least until he outranked them. His obligations as their kohai would not end there, but once he out-ranked them he would command enough respect not to be ordered around. The real power structure within the sumo beya seemed to be one based on the ability to cause pain, measured obviously by the steps on the banzuke, and by what went on in the keikoba. “You gotta stand up for your rights,” Taylor said again. Chad had not imagined the wave of testosterone the day before when he walked into the big room for the first time; it had been all too real. “And all the way at the top of the banzuke, that’s where the yokozuna stay,” Taylor went on. “Mean, da guys. Can kick everybody’s ass. They bigger than the bosses. You ever see one of them, like Chiyonofuji, you better bow low. And if he tells you for do something, you run, and you do ’um.” He went back to watching TV.

Chad was left alone to figure all this out, which seemed to be how everything worked. He was supposed to figure out how to act, what to do, what to say in a language he couldn’t speak, all on his own. At least Taylor had helped him with the sempai-kohai stuff, and the tsupari that morning at practice. But so much of it was just left for him to do alone. Most of the rest of the boys around the room talked quietly with one another, or passed thick comic books back and forth and laughed over their contents, or sat in front of the television. Until he learned Japanese—and who knew how long that would take—he could not participate in any of this. He would have liked to have gone on talking to Taylor, but his sempai had led him to
believe the conversation over. So he lay down and plugged into the refuge of his walkman, exhausted in every possible way.

_What am I doing here_ occurred to him more during this quiet moment before sleep. The rush of new experiences took the place of the day’s distractions in his head. Have to listen to the sempai. Stand up for your rights. Which was it? And when? Have to scrap for what you like, but have to be humble at the same time. The keikoba, hard as Uncle Sam’s driveway. Folding mawashi, cutting cabbage. _Tsupari._ _Shiko._ _Butsukari-geiko._ _ZaiMASss! Sempai, kohai. Sekitori, tsukebito._ And the cold. Even now he was cold, dressed only in the clothes he had worn to Japan and the one set he had brought.

The music underscored the cold and the loneliness by reminding him of cruising down Kalanianaole Highway in his cousin Bud’s car, the windows open as always. He had only brought one tape for his walkman: _Feelings in the Island_ by the group 3 Scoops of Aloha—a mix of backyard local music, some of it in Hawaiian, and all of it likely to come out sooner or later when someone passed the ukulele around at the parties in Uncle Sam’s carport. If he closed his eyes, the music could bring him right home. But the moment he opened them, he knew he was separated from home by more than an ocean. He wasn’t going to be away for a month or six months or even a year; he had no idea when he would ever cruise with Bud again, or with George Kalima. A year? Two years? It was a prison sentence with no end in sight.

“Mom, It’s Your Song” had the effect of reminding Chad beyond any doubt how far away he was from home. The words brought back a powerful flood of
images—the look on her face when he would bring her flowers from work, the cheers he could hear over everyone else at his basketball games, how hard she always worked to keep him and his brothers in line. And then the way she’d reacted to his decision to come to Japan, with anger and surprise. She wouldn’t talk to him all the way to the airport. But he knew she’d been upset by his decision for one reason: she didn’t want to see him leave because she loved him. He already missed her powerfully, even after just two days.

As the music played he looked around the room to see Taylor and John absorbed in a television program he had no hope of understanding, other deshi fast asleep. There was so much he wanted to ask Taylor, but he didn’t dare. He knew already that you didn’t just walk up to your sempai and start talking to him like he’s your friend, any more than you would pester his Uncle Sam with questions about how to play slack key guitar. Two of the younger boys were giggling with one another. Chad looked back at the wall, up at the ceiling, back at the wall again, Do you remember? and at last, he began to cry.

He awoke the next morning to the sounds of activity he had heard the day before, and to the same cold temperature. This time there were no illusions of his room back in Hawai‘i. His body ached as he lifted it from the floor and bent to put away his futon, and continued to ache as he followed the other boys downstairs. He could again see his breath in the changing room and was eager to begin practicing in spite of the soreness, if only to keep warm. The same boys dressed first, and the same boy led the way up to the keikoba as had the day before. They did the same number of shiko to warm up, but today Chad found it even harder to lift his legs. As practice
continued he noticed the same boy step into the ring first as the day before. Oyakata walked in after the same duration, and the deshi entitled to sleep a bit later entered in the same order: according to their rank, which he now knew to be their position on the banzuke.

Unfortunately for Chad, his performance in the ring looked equally routine. His smaller opponent came from underneath, put a shoulder into his chest, and slammed him into the wall, again. Oyakata said, "Tsupari," this time directly to Chad, and again his hand-thrusts missed the slippery target, and again his boss laughed at him. Again he took the laughter good-naturedly, as though Oyakata was trying to put him at ease. And since this was all so new to his body he had even more trouble during the blocking-sled exercise, barely managing to move Taylor and getting thrown to the rock-hard ground several more times for the poor showing.

Oyakata seemed to let it go on forever: Chad charging, Taylor yelling, resisting, smacking him in the head from time to time, throwing him to the ground. Chad getting up, facing his target, slapping the front of his mawashi with both hands, and charging, Taylor throwing him down. After a few more charges he could barely lift his heaving body off the ground. Taylor shouted and kicked him gently in the ribs until he was up on all fours, and then pulled him by the hair the rest of the way to his feet and called on him to charge again. His body had that helpless feeling he used to get during basketball practice when Coach Wolfe made them do push-ups after running them hard. Anybody could only do so many push-ups, and once you reached your limit it wasn't like you could squeeze one or two more out of arms that had nothing left, no matter how much you tried to will it. Sit-ups, you could always get a
couple more in, but not push-ups. He could barely lift his arm to try to wipe the sweat from his eyes, and even then his sand-covered hand made them tear even more. He gulped at the air and felt nauseated. Taylor was yelling at him, “Saigo! Saigo! Hayaku!” Breathing burned his throat and the insides of his nose. But once more he slapped the front of his mawashi with both hands, put his head down, and moved forward. When he hit the ground he was grateful to hear the raspy sound of his Boss’s voice: “Mo ii.”

Strange that the hard keikoba could feel so comfortable. It was plain for all to see that the Hawaiian would love to have just laid there, as if he was cruising on the beach in the shade of a palm tree. But of course his day was far from over. There was preparing the chanko, tending to the dirty mawashi, and cleaning up still to be done. But above all, he had to give Taylor a ladle full of water as a sign of thanks, of all reasons, for having condescended to “offer his chest” for Chad to charge into, and for his encouragement. Getting that ladle full of water meant that, somehow, he had to pick himself up off the keikoba, walk over to the basin in the corner, dip the ladle in, scoop out some water, walk over to where Taylor was standing, offer it with two hands, and bow slightly. He may as well have been expected to run a marathon. But before his Boss could light into him for being so slow about something so simple, he managed to get up, first to his hands and knees, and finally to his feet. He squinted through tears and burning salt and sand to pick out the basin on the other side of the room. He walked as quickly as he could and lifted the ladle, made of bamboo but somehow heavy now all the same, and dipped it into the water. However inviting it may have been to his own parched throat, he didn’t dare drink any of it himself. He
delivered the first scoop of water to Taylor with two hands. And while two hands was the accepted form of serving, in this case, his arms were so tired he could not have done it with one. Taylor took a sip, rinsed, and spit the water out onto the ground.

The rest of practice went as it had the day before, from the fights, to the shiko and the turns around the circle, except this time Chad had nothing but his will left to endure the rest of the day. Taylor and John still needed to jump on his back for him to complete the splits, which they called matawari, but he was too tired for it to hurt this time. All he wanted was to lie down and sleep. Instead, he followed everyone down to the changing room. This time the boy who had helped him the day before ordered him to hang out the mawashi by himself. Then he had to go to the kitchen and help prepare the meal. Then he attended to everyone's needs as they ate. He noticed that they were seated just as they had been the day before, with John right next to the pot and the youngest deshi farthest away. He gathered that they were seated according to rank. As it had in the early hours of the morning's practice, Taylor's explanation of the importance of the banzuke applied here, too: he and Chad were the same age and dealing with the same obstacles, but within the walls of Azumazeki Beya they were miles apart in status.

After the meal Chad completed his chores in a daze, shuffling across the floor, laboring up the stairs. He could have dispensed with his futon altogether and crashed right on the floor, but made the huge effort to lay out the mat and the blanket as he was supposed to. He hit the pillow as heavily as he had the hard clay in the keikoba,
but just as quickly heard a familiar voice shout the same words from the day before: “Gaijin yaro!” And then a sentence which included the word, “futon.” Chad didn’t know what all the words meant, but knew from the tone and context that he was expected to put away the same guy’s futon, again. He didn’t like being called a gaijin, either—by now it carried the weight of the word nigger.

As the gaijin slowly got up, the guy smacked him in the head and shouted, “Hayaku! Hayaku!” motioning with his hands for Chad to move more quickly. Chad responded and went to work folding the futon, when he was smacked to the floor, again to the shout, “Gaijin yaro!” He could again pick out the word futon as the deshi bantered on in guttural mumbles, finishing with the words, “Hayaku! Hayaku!” and motioning for him to hurry.

One or two of these “tsupari” he had been learning, he thought, or even a couple of cracks to the face, would have sent this fucka across the room and into the wall, this gaijin yaro fucka. It would have been so easy. He’d been trying fo’ ac’ in front of everybody from the start, no matter what Chad did—bow, treat him as Taylor explained about that sempai-kohai shit, stay out of his way. And still this. You gotta stand up for your rights, Hawaiian was still stuck in his head and he was ready to act on it now after everything that had piled up over the last two days and take it out on this fucka’s head. The moment could easily have gone either way, but this time instead of pounding his sempai through the tatami mat floor, he put his head down, moved forward, and put the futon away with a single word: “Hai!”

That evening as he cleaned up after dinner Taylor came into the kitchen. “Hurry up, Hawaiian. We go.” Chad finished putting the dishes away and followed
his sempai out into the cold. They found warmth in a tiny bar across the river by mixing beer with talking story, reminiscing about home. They began with sports, going back and forth about which high school had the better football team, which had the better basketball team. The talk soon turned to food, as it often does when locals get together to talk story, and the two of them debated for nearly an hour on where to find the best chili rice, the best shave ice, the best chicken katsu plate lunch. Then the talk turned to violence, as the best talk-story sessions always do, with inflated recollections of this "beef" or that, who wen false-crack whom, who wen give stink-eye fo' start which beef, who neva like back down. "Backing down" was the worst form of defeat in a "beef," since it implied a lack of courage. It was worse than losing altogether, which in fact was often seen as equally admirable to winning, as in, "Ho, was t'ree of dem, and two of da buggas was bigga den me! But I neva like back down. I knew I was going get dirty lickings from them, but I knew I was going hurt them too, so..." It occurred to Chad that he had been forced to do exactly that—back down—and Taylor’s suggestion to stand up for your rights came back to him again in the thickening fog of his beer buzz.

Under normal circumstances, someone at Taylor’s rank—just below the makushita division, or some six hundred places up the banzuke—would never socialize with someone as insignificantly ranked as Chad. But theirs was a natural association brought on by common struggles and a common language. Foreigners across Tokyo gather in groups, living in affluent “gaijin ghettos” among foreign neighbors for years, sometimes learning a few Japanese words at best. While Taylor and Chad had no choice but to learn the language of the National Sport, away from
the confines of life at Azumazeki Beya, they took comfort in the refuge of being local boys who may just as well have been back home sucking up beers on the beach. The mix of English—in this case Hawai‘i’s local pidgin English—and talking story about home was an escape all foreign rikishi needed in order to survive the pressure of their new roles. Getting good and drunk was another great escape.

Along the way back to the beya Chad saw a length of two-by-four lumber in a pile of rubbish beside the road, and like many a drunk and frustrated eighteen-year-old before him, he got an idea. Perhaps it was all the recent talk about home, or the beer, or a combination of the two that caused him to pull the wood from the pile. Back home, somebody looks at you the wrong way and it’s time fo’ fight. If they start throwing attitude, you don’t forget that. But above all, if they kick you, or hit you in the face, you give them lickings. You give them dirty lickings. He had been more patient than most local boys at back at school, avoiding fights over stink-eye and the like not by backing down, but by waiting out the tense moment for the other guy to throw the first punch, which never happened. But the other guy had thrown the first punch three times already. Three times! Sure, this was Japan, and they had different ways of doing things here, but he had waited long enough. His patience was at an end, and in truth, he really did not care if they sent him home. It was time to stand up for his rights.

They entered the big room just before curfew to find everyone asleep. Chad walked straight to his enemy’s futon and kicked him awake with a shout: “Eh, you like me put away your fuckin’ futon now, you fucka?” He raised the two-by-four and
held it like a baseball bat, or a samurai sword. His head was bowed slightly so the whites of his eyes could be seen beneath the upturned pupils.

The Japanese stood and faced him, startled and breathing heavily, quickly wide awake and ready to pounce. But this time there was no bowing, no *Sumimasen*, and no *Hai!* The gaijin stood firm.

“Go, Hawaiian!” Taylor told him again, “Stand up for your rights!”

“We go!” Chad challenged. He held the two-by-four steady, the veins on his hands popping with the force of his grip, and glared down at his opponent, at his *sempai*. The *Gaijin yaro!* came back to him. The laughter in the keikoba came back to him. The *Hayaku!* came back. And he focused all of the building anger onto a single spot on the side of this fucka’s face, right next to his nose—that’s where the first shot would land. And if some how this fucka was tough enough fo’ come back from a shot to the head with one two-by-four, and even wind up taking Chad, it didn’t matter. What mattered was that he got dirty lickings. *Dirty* lickings. “Come on, we go!” Chad said again. “*Hayaku!*”

Perhaps sensing the gaijin’s resolve, the Japanese backed down. He *backed down*. He bowed, seething with his own anger. He straightened his own futon, and lay down.

The new deshi had less success convincing his Boss that he belonged. Oyakata was visibly losing patience with the boy’s lack of progress in the ring. A calm, kind, fatherly figure outside of practice, the man could steam with anger at unmet expectations displayed on the clay before him. He would openly scold Chad for failing to lift his legs high enough during shiko. He would shout at the boy for
what he saw as a lack of spirit in his uncertain charges forward. And his bamboo stick would connect with Chad more and more for the same reason. Standard equipment in every sumo beya, the shinai—the bamboo stick—had been part of sumo for years, used to discipline wayward or lazy rikishi, but more often to light the fire of anger, to incite a fighting spirit. Oyakata used the shinai on Chad not for disciplinary reasons, but because the boy obviously lacked the killer instinct. Extreme beatings along the lines of what can be called nothing other than corporal punishment are not unheard of in sumo, and Chad withstood his share those first few months. He would sometimes hit the ground after his tsupari blow glanced off a slippery opponent, only to feel the combination of outward sting and penetrating throb that only bamboo can produce. He found it difficult to breathe the first time Oyakata connected with several full swings to his ribs, shouting, “What kine sumo is that!”

The evening after that severe beating, Chad’s head spun as much as his body ached. Three days in Japan seemed more like three years. Sempai, Kohai. Mawashi, tsupari. Keikoba, shikona. Matawari, kokugi. Shinai. What kine sumo is that?!

Standing alone in front of the large mirror in the darkened keikoba, he thought seriously for the first time about giving up and going home. The thought had had crossed his mind since the very first night, but now it was less a wish than a conviction. Japanese stew shit, getting beaten, so much further to go. When Uncle Larry had talked him into going to Japan he had mentioned hard work, but had never made it out to be like this, cleaning toilets, scrapping with these Japanee fuckas over one futon, getting humiliated by Boss for stuff he wasn’t supposed to know how fo’ do anyway. Everything will be taken care of for you. Right. Hard work in sports, that
was running stairs after basketball practice, listening to Coach. He would do stairs until he couldn't move. But this wasn't one sport; it was like one prison movie, with prison movie food.

His mother had been so right about the food. He missed her terribly and would have loved nothing more than to hear her scold him for not completely finishing his first plate of food before moving on to the second. He almost laughed at the thought that the food—the worst part—was exactly like his mother had said it would be—*Chad, you hate vegetables! What are you gonna eat?*—while the rest of it was nothing like they’d promised. Fighting on T.V., one professional athlete. More like he was one professional *slave*. But the food—the wilted leaves of cabbage, the gray bits of fish—mom had been dead-on about that. And Oyakata, he had never wanted Chad anyway. The laughter the first few days had not been to put him at ease, as he had thought at the time; Boss had been making fun of him. Oyakata had wanted his younger brother Ola, a natural athlete built perfectly for sumo. Boss had taken him, Chad figured, because he’d felt sorry for him. Several minutes passed as he looked into the mirror. And then he turned and walked out into the cold.

He made his way through biting wind in search of a pay phone, taking care to count the number of streets he had passed, since everything still looked exactly the same despite the fact that he’d called home daily since his arrival. The first time it was to say he’d made it safely. All the other times he’d just been so lonely he wanted to hear familiar voices, and each time he’d taken care not to get lost. Most of Tokyo’s narrow streets are set out in a grid, and numbered as coordinates on a graph rather than named, so to the newcomer every corner looks so much the same that
missing one's street can lead to becoming hopelessly lost. He made the minimum number of turns and found a phone about two blocks away.

“Chad!” His mother answered. She asked him how everything was going. He spent the next hour telling her all about what he had been through, crying sometimes and venting frustration, how it was nothing like Uncle Larry had promised. People were rude, bumping into him in crowds without apologizing. Everything looked the same: gray. He was cold. His body was sore. He missed everybody. He had made a big mistake. “Every day we gotta eat this same Japanese stew shit.”

“Chad, we love you,” she told him. “Come home. You don’t have to prove anything to us. It’s all right. Tell Boss to give you your passport, pack your bags, and we can pick you up at the airport tomorrow. Just come home.”

He thought for a moment, looking out at the gray streets, the lighted storefront signs screaming in letters he had no hope of understanding, and then said, “I can’t do that, Mom.”

“Yes you can. Just get on the plane and come home.”

“I cannot.”

“Why not?”

“Mom, I just cannot come home.”

“You know what Chad. Anytime you like come home, you can come home. You just call.”

Chad talked to his brothers and then his father, who all tried to encourage him to “show those Japanee!” They were so proud of him, like he had already made it.
Then he talked to his mother again, who told him to call again if he got lonely. “We love you, Chad.”

He hung up the phone feeling a little better for having vented, but for a moment he felt even further away from his family than he had before, and as he walked back to the heya, the tears were already beginning to fall. In some ways the call had been a tease, like they were in the next room, or he was calling to get picked up from practice at Kaiser High. Hanging up the phone renewed the distance, and made it more final, instant, shocking, nothing at all like the long goodbye at the airport. It just confirmed for him that they were home, and he was in Japan, of all places. *What am I doing here?* But he also knew there was no way he could go home now. People would laugh at his parents and say, “Their kids, they’re just big for nothing. They get big bodies, but they cannot do nothing with them.” His brothers and his father, they had talked to him as if he had already made it, as if he was some kind of hero, when really he spent much of his time scrubbing toilets and tending to other people’s dirty mawashi. He would not go home until he measured up to what they thought of him.

A few mornings later everyone woke together and drifted down to the changing room. They helped one another with their mawashi as usual, but today they also put on yukata robes and wooden geta slippers.

“*De-geiko,*” Taylor explained. “We’re going to another stable to practice today.” Everyone walked out into the quiet of the still-darkened streets. They crossed the big river and turned right and continued up the river’s edge for about half
a mile. They turned left down a narrow street past a number of nondescript buildings before stopping in front of one with wooden, sliding doors and a sign similar to that in front of Azumazeki Beya. All of it still looked so much the same. "Takasago Beya," Taylor said. "Boss trained in this stable before he retired. Konishiki practices here, Asashio, Mitoizumi, Nankairu. They're sekitori," meaning, as he'd told Chad in his explanation of the banzuke, they were ranked at the top in one of sumo's two salaried divisions. "You'll see real keiko today." As Chad would learn, De-geiko is a common method of training, particularly among smaller heya, and usually between heya in the same ichimon, or family of sumo beya. When Azumazeki Oyakata opened his own heya in 1986, he branched out from Takasago Beya but remained a part of the Takasago ichimon.

The Takasago Beya keikoba was a bit larger than Azumazeki's, but not by much, and already crowded with their entrance. Chad again drew stares when he walked in. He had no idea who Asashio or Mitoizumi or Nankairu were. Neither did he see Konishiki, or either of the two bosses. He put his clothes and his towel on the side like everyone else and fell into line doing shiko.

Shouts of "ZaiMASss!" startled him, and indicated Takasago Oyakata's entrance. The boss took his seat on the viewing platform without acknowledging anyone and lit a cigarette. The shouts rained out again when Azumazeki Oyakata entered and sat beside his former boss. The men chatted for a bit, and then focused on the training as the boys turned to practice bouts.

"ZaiMASss!" A rikishi nearly as tall as Chad entered, greeted the two oyakata, drank ladles of water offered him by three of the highest-ranked Takasago boys.
Remarkable in height, he also wore a faded white mawashi instead of the black worn by everyone else. His entrance had been something of a distraction, and now two of the boys attended to him as he began to limber up, standing beside him holding towels. Mitoizumi. A sekitori. And while nothing was said to upset the quiet of keiko, the aura surrounding the man spoke as loudly as his white mawashi in declaring the respect and special treatment he warranted. Some of the younger boys even fell into a nervous kind of awe. As he warmed up he would whisper occasional advice to the boys in the ring. Even if it came only in the form of grunts, they would accept the advice with a solemn Hai, and hang onto it like holy writ. If a combatant was thrown in his general direction, the offender would bow and apologize profusely despite the fact that the throw had been way beyond his control. Mitoizumi would nod and continue limbering up, untouchable. John Feleunga, the ranking rikishi at Azumazeki Beya, was not worthy of offering Mitoizumi water.

A darker rikishi near Mitoizumi’s height and dressed in the white mawashi entered and was treated with the same deference by everyone except Mitoizumi. Nankairu, the sekitori from Samoa, quietly took his place warming up. Two other boys stood near him at attention with towels. Chad now counted six foreign rikishi in the keikoba, including himself.

A few minutes later the place erupted into a barrage of “ZaiMASSs!” If Mitoizumi and Nankairu had caused distractions, then the Ozeki stopped the clock. He was the biggest man, by far, that Chad had ever seen—another full person bigger than Taylor, who only days earlier had seemed humungous. He was a mountain, nearly as wide as he was tall, which was about six feet. So broad were his shoulders

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that his head at first appeared almost too small for the space it occupied. Chad
figured the man must have weighed more than six hundred pounds—most of it
concentrated in his tree-trunk legs, and around the mighty stomach wrapped by his
faded white mawashi. One single step away from the very top of the banzuke, as
Ozeki he was among the three or four most respected of all rikishi, not just in the
room, but in all of sumo. His own greeting to the two oyakata was barely audible
above the clamor. Nankairu first offered him water and greeted him, “Zaimasss!”
Mitoizumi and then four others then did the same. Three more then attended to the
man with towels as he slowly began his shiko. Konishiki. He was the Samoan from
Hawai‘i who had come to Japan six years earlier and charged up the banzuke in
record time. He could take anyone in the room and he knew it, carrying an unspoken
confidence as big as himself.

And finally, Asashio, the senior Ozeki, entered to the same spirited greeting,
and water from all the sekitori, including Konishiki.

Keiko progressed as usual, although a bit more spirited with the novelty of
new opponents, and the relative crowd—more than thirty rikishi crowded the
keikoba. Chad had improved to the point where he won his first challenge bout, using
tsupari hand-thrusts. He was overpowered in the ensuing fight right at the charge and
did not get another chance. Eventually the same two or three boys came to control
the challenge matches, all of them from Takasago beya. John put up strong fights but
could not finish any of them off. Taylor managed a win but was then defeated
immediately. Then Mitoizumi stepped in.
To be fair, the boys he decided to take on had fought more than twenty times each by now, and Mitoizumi was just warming up. But from the start he was simply toying with each of the three, allowing them to push him to the ring’s edge, freezing them, and then turning to throw them down easily. He continued this play until they were breathing heavily, and then shifted the bouts into the butskari-geiko blocking-sled exercise. Mitoizumi’s control over them was that of a matador choreographing his kill. To them, it was a simple, desperate charge forward. But the confidence stemming from his knowledge, experience, and strength allowed him to consider the seconds as much longer lengths of time—intervals of play and creativity. And while the difference resulted partly from their exhaustion, the man in white would have been in charge anyway in a contest of equally fresh bodies. It was clear even to Chad that they did not belong in the same ring with Mitoizumi.

All of the milling around, the indiscriminate push-ups or shiko or work with dumbbells that acts as background noise to what goes on in the practice ring on a normal day came to an absolute halt when Konishiki threw a handful of salt across the ring and stepped in. The keikoba is never noisy, but sometimes it not only sounds quiet; it feels quiet. The frightening sense of anticipation focuses even the silence. Konishiki squatted and faced Mitoizumi. They both stood, and their attendants towed them off. Another attendant offered first Konishiki, then Mitoizumi, the basket of caked salt. Each took a handful and spread it across the ring. They squatted again, touched their fists to the ground, and charged.

Konishiki came up quickly under the chest of his taller opponent and took two steps forward as he thrust his hands out. Mitoizumi was actually airborne for a
moment before settling outside the ring, steadied by those around him. Then the
Ozeki took care of Nankairu with similar dispatch. He had a harder time once his
more compact fellow-Ozeki gained a strong, two-handed inside grip on the front of
his mawashi, but he still forced Asashio from the ring. Konishiki alternated between
these three victims for fifteen more bouts. They squatted, stood, and were toweled
off again before each bout. Konishiki was calmer and more methodical with each
charge, working with the control of a matador choreographing his kill. And these
men were separated not by divisions, but by a mere three steps on the Banzuke,
meaning that they all made their livings fighting against men of similar caliber. He
and Asashio even shared the same rank. Theirs was not a difference of ability or
experience or knowledge. It was one of power. No one in sumo could match the big
Ozeki’s power. Even to Chad, it was clear that the other three sekitori did not even
belong in the same ring with Konishiki.

Chad now understood what Taylor had meant by “real keiko.” If the gap
between himself and Taylor had been huge, he hated to consider that between himself
and these men from the top ranks, these sekitori, the ones he had seen on television.
He had, to say the least, a long way to go.

It was typical of him to look forward in this way, but had he looked back for a
moment as he stood in Takasago Beya he would have seen that he was now a part of
something reaching beyond relationships of skill and rank, or of seniority. While
Azumazeki Beya had been open for only two years, Takasago Beya was steeped in
sumo history. Of the fifty-odd sumo beya currently housing rikishi in various parts of
the surrounding neighborhood, Takasago ranked fifth in years of operation, dating

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back to 1878—by no means the beginning of sumo, but an age when the sport began to flourish in Tokyo and take on its present structure. If American Major League Baseball were a hundred years older (and if baseball players shared this unforgiving, monastic lifestyle), Takasago Beya might be comparable to Yankee Stadium.

To stick with the admittedly unrealistic baseball comparison for a moment, Takasago beya was perhaps more notable in a Brooklyn Dodger way than in a way befitting Yankee pinstripes. In addition to Taylor and John and Konishiki and Nankairyu (the sekitori from Samoa), Chad saw two other foreigners in the room, members of Takasago beya. While other sumo beya had recruited rikishi from Brazil and Argentina, and would later look to Mongolia, the only foreigners yet to have really impacted the National Sport were limited to this room. Twenty-four years earlier on a demonstration tour to Hawai‘i, the fourth Takasago Oyakata had taken a chance on Jesse Kuhaulua, the beginning of Hawai‘i’s connection with Japan’s National Sport. Kuhaulua had trained and competed for more than twenty years at Takasago Beya as Takamiyama. He now presided over asa-geiko next to the present Takasago Oyakata, on nearly equal terms, as Azumazeki Oyakata.

* * *

Yokozuna Akebono took his time scrolling through the file I’d given him that August afternoon in 1998, oblivious to the room. I had left to get lunch and to watch the children’s sumo exhibition out in the arena and come back an hour later to find him still lost in the computer screen.

He finally looked up and said, “Ho, I read that, I like go home already.”
The Yokozuna’s tsukebito began stretching out the massive, brilliant white rope he would wear around his waist for his dohyo-iri. Every day at exactly 1:30 they would prepare to ready the Yokozuna for his performance as Symbol of Japanese Culture.

“I’ll probably re-write it a few times,” I said, “but that’s the idea: I want the reader to learn about sumo in the order you learned, and to be as cold and lonely as you were.”

“If I knew it was going be like that,” he said, “I neva would’ve come up here.”

He labored to stand up and the boys dressed him: a kind of under-mawashi, then his elaborate apron-like kesho-mawashi, and finally the rope. The rope weighed more than forty pounds, and it took six of them to put it on him properly. He leaned forward on one, who faced him and held the heaviest part of the rope in the front, while one set the knot in the back and two others on each side pulled it tight, rhythmically shouting as they did, “Uh-who! Uh-who! Uh-who!” They all wore white silk gloves, both to keep the rope clean, and because once the Yokozuna was wearing it, they forbidden to touch him with their bare hands.

He strode out of the room and down a tunnel toward the arena’s entrance. The narrow tunnel was a flurry of activity, with other sekitori milling about dressed in their kesho-mawashi, older Sumo Kyokai officials telling them how to line up for their dohyo-iri, tsukebito standing by with towels. The men—his peers in the sumo world—parted and bowed and greeted the Yokozuna, each with a respectful, “Zaimass!” He took his place just inside the arena and the cameras began flashing.
Six thousand pairs of eyes were focused on Yokozuna Akebono. At the time it hardly seemed to matter that he was a foreigner.
You know when you’re real close to everything, you take everything for granted? Like when I used to hear people say, ‘Oh, Hawai‘i’s such a beautiful place!’ I was born in that beautiful place, though. I didn’t realize how beautiful the place was until I was up here. Every day we used to catch the bus from Kaiser High School to come home to Waimanalo, and you know when you come up to Makapu‘u? Riding over there every day, it was just, “Oh, shit, here we go. We almost home, almost home.” But I sat there for hours the first time I went back home.—Akebono: 6/17/98 (Rowan, Chad, 6/98)

When young Chad Rowan plugged into his 3 Scoops of Aloha tape and cried himself to sleep in the big room at Azumazeki Beya, it was with images not simply of paradise, but of home. Part of it was place, part of it people, but the memories were nearly strong enough for him to close his eyes and walk into them. One spot in particular just outside of his hometown always called to him. There is a bend in the road at the top of a hill near Makapu‘u point which reveals one of the more breathtaking vistas on the island. Tour busses and limousines and rental cars routinely fill the roadside turnout. Even local people stop to take in the view. Stand at the cliff’s edge and look north, and you can see forever up the coast of the Oahu. The steep, green Ko‘olau ridge frames the left side, while the right goes on to where sea meets sky. Waves, tiny in the distance, break along the outside reef to the horizon and bathe nearby Rabbit Island and the tiny coastal islands beyond. A ribbon of
white sand runs for miles like a border between the soft pines and the water. And the water. In deepening shades of blue, it almost isn’t real. Looking straight down to its surface more than a hundred feet below, it looks like a pool and you can see all the way to the bottom, another ten, twenty, thirty feet below the surface. Farther on, it fades from aqua into deep, deep blue. To visitors it is an idyllic postcard of Paradise. To many who live there, it is simply the most beautiful spot on Oahu, the first place you show people who visit from the mainland. To Chad, it was more or less the extent of his world before going to Japan, for within this postcard lies the town of Waimanalo.

Kalanianaole Highway leads to this popular turnout and continues north all the way to Haleiwa on Oahu’s north shore, connecting a number of small towns like Waimanalo. Several small streets branch off the highway towards the Koʻolau ridge, creating a number of quiet neighborhoods. The Rowans lived since 1971 on Humuniki Street. Like most of Waimanalo’s residents, they lived in a government-issued three-bedroom single-story house on Hawaiian Homestead land—land provided by the U.S. government as compensation for past wrongs. Homestead houses of the 1970’s were something between GI Bill housing and military shelters—squat, square, flat-roofed boxes of concrete hollow-tile in drab shades of olive or off-yellow, all looking very much alike. Fronted by car-ports, extra cars or boat trailers parked on the grass, their functional appearance was underscored by natural contrast: the splendor of the steep Koʻolau ridge on one side and the promise of the ocean on the other.
I had a hard time finding the Rowan's house the first time I went out for my
initial interview ten years ago—Janice Rowan had agreed to talk to me for the
seminar paper that would later come up in my first conversation with Akebono. The
houses all looked the same, and so I had to check with one of the many neighborhood
kids zooming up and down the street on bikes.

"Eh, you know Jan Rowan?"

"Oh, dass my auntie," the kid told me. "She stay in the house wit da red van
out front."

Janice Rowan greeted me at the door with a warm smile and invited me to sit
on the couch in the house's main front room. A doorway to the right of the entrance
opened into a hallway that led to three small bedrooms. When I sat on the couch I
faced the TV, and the entrance to the kitchen, I was struck that first time, and then
again every time I've visited the house since, by how small the place was. It seemed
cramped now with just Janice, her youngest son Nunu, and her foster daughter
Windy. I couldn't imagine mom and dad and the three big Rowan boys all seated
around that tiny kitchen table. Three 250-plus-pound brothers could irritate each
other in any space, but this confined area had to be volatile.

"Didn't they fight?" I asked her.

"Fight?" She said it in a let me tell you about fighting tone. Nunu started
laughing. "But if they ever hit each other they'd have to answer to me." (Rowan,
Janice, 1993)

"An' you gotta watch out for my maddah," Nunu said. (Rowan, Randy
"Nunu," 1993)
"They’d each end up getting lickings about every six months," she said, "like tuning up one car." It doesn’t take more than a few minutes with Jan Rowan to see how three big boys could grow up in such a small house without killing each other. For one thing, she’s big and strong enough to have been able to handle whatever they could have dished out, and to have intimidated them into line with little more than the right look on her expressive face. For another, she is uncompromising in her sense of right and wrong, regardless of popular opinion among her boys, the rest of her family, the people in her neighborhood, or anyone else.

"Ho, Ma," Nunu joked, "If you was raising us today, they’d t’row you in jail for child abuse!"

"Yeah, but you see how you boys turned out," she told him. And then to me:

"I let them tell me now how they feel about me. One time Chad was telling me, ‘Oh you were so strict,’ and ‘Oh, you would be in jail right now.’ But I told him, ‘You know what. You didn’t come with papers. Especially you; you were my first child, and I thank God I had a child like you that was very obedient. But yeah, sometimes now I look back, now that I’m a foster parent, and I see that I wouldn’t have done certain things to you folks, but I don’t regret it now because I was only learning. And all I can say is, if you felt I did something that you didn’t agree with as far as discipline, then I’m sorry. But there are a lot of things that I did—I told you guys the rules—there are a lot of things I did, I’m not sorry for.’"

"Chad needed discipline too?"

"Even Chad. But not as much as the other two," she recalled. "And definitely not as much as my middle boy, Ola. We were harder on Chad from the beginning
because we knew we’d be out working and we’d have to leave him alone or with a sitter a lot of the time. We wanted one boy who was disciplined, that we wouldn’t have to worry about, and Chad was exactly that. At three years old, I would pin a note to his shirt, give him money, and send him up the street to the store. Can you imagine doing that nowadays? That’s what Waimanalo used to be like. And Chad was always responsible."

The stories poured forth over the course of this first visit and have continued to this day—stories from Nunu and Ola and Chad, his cousins Frank Hewett, Nathan and Bud Spencer, Aunty Tita and Uncle Sam, best friend George Kalima and the whole Kalima family, Auntie Gerry, Uncle Freddy, Uncle Nolan. But I heard most of them right there in the small house’s front room, or sitting in the retail gift shop Mrs. Rowan opened not long after I first met her.

Most of the stories painted Chad as a happy little kid, bouncing around the house and talking non-stop. Early on, as he told me himself in our first meeting, his favorite subject had been the TV at the center of the small house’s parlor. “When I was three or four years old I used to tell my mom I was going be famous,” Chad told me. “All the time, she’d keep telling me shut up: ‘Shaddap! Shaddap!’” He laughed at the memory. “I used to tell her, ‘One day I going be one supa star! I going be on TV, an’ everybody going be looking up at me!’ Ever since I was small. She used to say, ‘Ah, you just talking bubbles.’” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98)

The sitter with whom Chad and his brothers were left most often, Randy Rowan’s cousin Frank Hewett, told me more of the same. Only sixteen at the time Chad was born, Frank has since become one of Hawai‘i’s most respected kumu hula.
Some kumu hula merely teach hula dancing to their stables of followers, while others are the most ardent protectors and perpetuators of traditional Hawaiian culture, language, religion, and performance. Frank, whom I first met just after his unforgettable Hawaiian chant highlighted Chad and Christine’s 1998 Tokyo wedding, falls into the latter category. Something of a local celebrity long into a career that saw him as one of Hawai‘i’s top entertainers in the ’70s and early ’80s, he is active in community affairs for native Hawaiians and is often moved to tears in public political discussions of current issues facing his people, such as education and health care.

Frank and I met again a few weeks after the wedding to talk story in a building behind Waimanalo Elementary School, where he had started a program for older kids in the community to mentor elementary kids. The stories that flowed over the afternoon he spent reminiscing with me, and the calls he made to follow up on our discussion, are as much measures of his own generosity as of his continued devotion to the boy he helped raise.

“I think as far back as I can remember when he was a baby,” he began, “when he was born, that’s when I knew Chad.” He thought for a moment and then went on: “When we were young, we were not rich in material things, our families, but what we had was a lot of love and care for one another. From baby time they would bring him to me—his mother will tell you this—when he was an infant, and his brothers too, and they used to jump around the house, crazy, calling me, calling me, calling me! But the one thing I remember about him was that he always had a kind heart” (Hewett, 1998)

“I know when we came back from the wedding in Japan, Nunu and Janice and I were at the shop having a conversation, and Nunu was saying how it’s really important to him that he gotta rough his son up because he wants him to grow up tough and he wants him to be somebody.” Nunu’s son, who was a few weeks from being born the night I first met Nunu and Jan Rowan, was already about to turn five at the time, a lanky, happy, gentle kid. “And he was just ragging on his son, yeah? And his son’s named, yeah? After Akebono.” Anthony’s middle name is Akebono. “So I said to him, ‘You know what, Nunu. What’s the problem?’ And he said, ‘Well, you know him. He’s too soft, you know, he needs to be more aggressive and stuff like that,’ and I said, ‘But you know what. Your brother was the same way. And look where he is today.’ And Nunu had to stop and think for a while. ‘You know what,’ I said to Nunu, ‘I was there with him, and I had to take care of him, and he always had a kind heart.’”

“So you’re saying he was a lot like Nunu’s son is now?”

“Yeah. He was always a happy guy. He was always jumping around, playing. He always had a good outlook on things.”

One effect of watching Nunu’s kid jump around and play, as he was often doing for hours on end when I visited with Mrs. Rowan in her shop, was that I’d have to remind myself the truth of what had always deceived my eyes: the boy’s age. I’d be surprised to find him rolling around on the floor like a three-year-old until I counted back the months and reminded myself that he was three years old—not six, or even the small seven he could have passed for physically. The kid wasn’t overly clumsy or immature; he just hadn’t grown into his body yet. And he spoke like a
toddler because, despite his size, he was one. But unfortunately for him, only those who knew him knew that as far as maturity and ability were concerned, he was right on schedule.

“One thing I remember,” Frank went on about another young big kid from another time, “was he was always falling down a lot, always bumping into walls. But never really—and that’s why I think this is something he was born with, it’s his gift, yeah?—I remember he used to like, bump into the wall, or fall offa the bed, or whatever it was, and he always used to laugh. Most kids would cry or something, but once he got over the initial shock, he would always end up laughing. I think that kind of positive-ness, whether it is achieved or learned, or you’re just born with it, it helps you to see that there’s a vision for tomorrow, because you have such a positive outlook from such a young age. I think that’s part of what helps him to achieve today.”

Over the course of the afternoon our talk evolved naturally into a meal the rest of the small school’s staff had laid out and insisted that I share. The conversation continued to move back and forth between Chad’s childhood and the pressures he was currently facing on Japan’s front pages—which Frank, as a celebrity both in Hawai’i and Japan, could sympathize with better than most—and finally ended up back home in Waimanalo. “I think he will always look at this as home,” he said, “as a place where he can just be himself, where he can find people who love him.”

When we finally finished, Frank escorted me out into twilight, which comes early in the town nestled in the shadow of the steep Ko’olaus. “This all used to be farm land.” He indicated the area stretching back behind the school, now built up with
groups of small, one-story houses. "Horses, goats, chickens. The kids all used to play in the back of Waimanalo after school."

"Yeah, I heard about that from Chad. I have an appointment next week to hear about it from Ola."

He rolled his eyes, although not without affection, and simply said, "Ola," as if that were a story that could fill some other afternoon.

To this day Chad Rowan believes he was initially recruited by Azumazeki Beya because Boss wanted his younger brother Ola to join him later. Unlike Chad, Ola was a compact six feet, two inches tall, two hundred and fifty pounds, with stocky legs and beefy arms—the perfect build for sumo. His athleticism had been proven since childhood on baseball and football fields across the state, and his fighting spirit was unmatched. And since he grew up with the same humble beginnings and the same powerful mother, eating the same food in the same small kitchen in the same house on Humuniki Street, one might easily expect that he and I also talked story at some point along the Nihon Sumo Kyokai’s jungyo exhibition tour. Instead, we met during visiting hours at the State of Hawai‘i Halawa Medium/High Security Facility. George "Ola" Rowan was serving out the latest in a string of drug-related sentences.

After surrendering everything except the tape recorder I’d arranged to bring, including the earring I wore at the time, I was escorted through two double-door security check-points and into the visiting area—a big room with long benches along the walls, a couple of tables and metal chairs, and a long list of rules meant to ensure
that nothing could be passed between visitors and inmates. I had a few minutes to
wait in this area, which was looked down upon by a row of tinted windows. I thought
about Ola’s offenses, his temper, his own brief stint in sumo, his size. I imagined
him, as an inmate, sullen and full of anger at the very least. I would not have been
surprised if he’d aimed his contempt at me, who, under better circumstances, could
just as well have been writing a book about his own storied athletic career. So by the
time Ola entered the room I’d had him built up into a Hannibal Lechter who would
bite my face off for asking the wrong questions.

Instead I was charmed by a big smile and a warm handshake, an invitation to
sit, and the question, “So, whatchu like know about my braddah?” (Rowan, George
“Ola,” 1998) The hand that shook mine was as big as Chad’s, and despite his warm
smile, Ola remained, due to his size, an imposing figure—even to me, just returned
from three months of almost daily existence among big men inside the sumo world.
Approaching three hundred pounds, even now Ola looked like he could have taken
most of the rikishi I’d seen in Japan—if not in a sumo match, at least in a street fight.
Even hidden in the brown prison jumpsuit, his build resembled that of Musashimaru,
whose low center of gravity and tree-trunk legs are naturally perfect for the sport.

Ola went on candidly and generously for the next four hours, the nicest guy
you’ll ever meet, sincere and passionate, although obviously, like any good
storyteller, prone to exaggeration and embellishment. For the first hour I let him go,
and wondered what someone like him was doing in prison at all. For the next three I
fought with follow-up questions against his tendency to switch from subject to subject
like a car radio in seek mode, and realized, sadly, that he didn’t stand a chance upon
his impending release and would soon find his way back to Halawa. (He was released, and is again back in prison.) He was undergoing no kind of therapy. He was not enrolled in a drug treatment program. And his social rehab program, he said, consisted of the two months that were added to his sentence for the unspeakable crime he committed as part of the prison’s kitchen crew: “I was still hungry during clean-up and they caught me eating two vienna sausages,” he said. “I got one extra month for each sausage.” Don’t ever let anyone tell you the State of Hawai‘i doesn’t know about behavior.

Whether prison had taught Ola a measure of self-evaluation, or whether he naturally had an even grasp of the kind of kid he had been, his picture in the many stories he told was consistent. In every case, he presented a kid full of curiosity, energy, and a need to be included. “When I was small they had a team called Giants that my brother played for,” he said. “Baseball. And I was the batboy, ah? So I was maybe like about five at the time, cause it was T-ball at that time, so I was five years old. And I would watch them, and every time, I get my glove. I get my glove, I get my hat. I’d run out in the middle of the field, I ready for play, ah? My father would yell, ‘Get over here!’ I’d tell ‘im, ‘No! I like play!’ They always had to stop the game, ah? ‘Get over here!’ ‘No!’ So eventually, when was their turn for bat I would stand in line wait my turn for bat, wait for my turn, swing the bat, ah? So I’d go up, hit the ball, five years old, they used to let me go. I was pretty good.”

On he went, and with every word he further underscored the difference between himself and his more reserved, stoic, thoughtful, and reflective older brother. Chad had described the farm behind Waimanalo Elementary school, for instance,
slowly and thoughtfully as a place where “we used to have to come over and help them take care of the animals. They had all kine animals: horses, billygoats, rams. Nate and them would come pick us up from school and we’d walk through the field. I guess that’s how they learned how for build cars, cause they had motorcycles; they had place for ride ah, in the field. It’s a bitch, we had to go in the field, look for the horses. Because they had the house, the driveway, they had ’em all fenced off, one big-ass area and was like forest, you gotta go in there and look through the forest. And you know when you small that damn thing so big, scary, ah? The horses wasn’t scary, just being in the field looking for the horses was scary.” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

Ola had little interest in horses. And I doubt whether he’s ever been afraid of anything in his life. “They had all kine go-carts li’dat,” he said of the farm, “motorcycles li’dat, ah? So I was more into that kine stuff and not da kine, horses. So Chad and them would like ride, ah? So I said, no way, brah. I jump on those buggas, those go-carts, I start chasing those guys around, all kine. All kine stuffs.” He laughed, as he did through many of his stories. “Ho, they used to trip on me. One time, we jump on the back of the go-cart—we was young, too, ah?—jump on the back of the go-cart, going, brah, we blazing, go through all kine bushes like that, ah? Pile up, boom! Pile up.” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998)

Boom. Pile up. If anything that follows helps explain the strength of character Chad Rowan showed in his march to the top of the sumo world, it must all be qualified, because Ola, by all accounts a much, much better athlete than Chad, is not just Hawaiian like Akebono and not just from Waimanalo like Akebono. He and Akebono grew up in the same house.
Time can forget Sundays in Waimanalo. The day drifts by with the ease of the languid tropical breeze, flavored by the scent of barbecue, the sound of local music. Neighbors drop by and talk story, a totally informal local-style visit that can last hours, the conversation bouncing from one topic to the next, from one person to another. When the right subject comes up, the storyteller spins it into nostalgia, recalling so-and-so as a child, or what the food tasted like. It’s never long before the topic turns to food, which Waimanalo people can capture in words as well as any five star chef—everything from the best potato chips to the best shave ice, and what it tasted like: “Ho! Da rice was so ono!” It can be a choice filet, but it doesn’t have to be as long as it’s anything edible, and to most people in Hawai‘i and certainly Japan, rice is definitely not just rice.

The best stories are partly acted out, enlivened with sound effects, and punctuated by repeating the last line several times as it gets a laugh: “So my Uncle finally wen tell me, ‘Ho, I know you not going stand up to me—I’ll crack you right now!’ All drunk. But I neva like back down in front of everybody, was one hard-head teenager, so I jus’ wen stand there, acting all bad. All of a sudden, he wen turn around, POOM! He crack me right in the head!” A dramatic pause while every one laughs, “So then I like ac’ like I can handle, all tough. So I stay standing there, he turn around again, POOM! Crack me in the head!” Everyone laughs, “POOM! He crack me in the head again! POOM! Right in the head! He wen turn around, POOM! He crack me right in the head!” If the reaction is good enough, the teller will sometimes even go right back to the beginning and tell the whole thing over again.
Many of the stories are well-rehearsed, well-known even to those listening, but appreciated none-the-less as performances. The best ones include violence that we can all laugh about now. In quoted speech you always hear the teller prefacing a big point with "You know what," which is never expressed in the tone of a question. The words, "All drunk" always help the flow of a story, as does the phrase, "turn around." Everyone brings something to the table, and even the news is passed on in similar fashion, as something we can't quite believe happened because someone should have known better—sometimes, as above, even the storyteller.

While the Rowans can talk story with the best of them, their Sundays were usually filled differently, with time neither for go-cart pile-ups, riding, sports, or letting the day pass as it may. Chad’s father Randy Rowan sat in front of the television, but his devout Jehovah’s Witness mother would pile Ola, Chad, and her youngest boy Nunu into the car for the all-day affair of church. To the boys, nothing on earth could have been more of a drag. To sit in church for an hour-long mass on a beautiful day is one thing. To spend the good part of the day there while your friends are all outside playing and your father is at home watching football is, for six and eight and ten-year-old boys, pure torture. Nunu and Ola would always complain loudly. Chad would always go along without complaining. (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

One Sunday Ola decided to take matters into his own hands. Janice got the boys up to prepare themselves as usual. She washed and dressed Nunu, while Chad got himself ready. He stood waiting by the door as his father screamed at the television: "Go Franco! Go! God damn Steelers. Block like a buncha old ladies."
“Look your faddah,” Janice said to Chad as she walked up, holding Nunu’s hand. “Yelling at his idiot box. Eh, Randy! You like join your family for church?”

“You go on ahead, Janice. Say one prayer for Bradshaw.”

“Right. Where’s Ola?” she asked Chad.

“I don’t know, Mommy. I just wen get myself ready.”

“Randy, where your son stay?”

“Who, Ola? I thought he was getting ready for church.”

“Chad, take Nunu into the car. We don’t have time for these games.” She took a quick look around, and then around the back of the house, calling, “Ola!” But there was no response. She got into the car and drove off without him.

Ola emerged from his room a few minutes later.

“Where you been, boy?” his father asked. “Didn’t you hear your maddah... I know you heard her calling for you.”

“I neva hear, Daddy,” Ola said. “I neva hear nothing. I was right in my room. I neva know they wen leave already.”

“You neva know,” his father laughed. “You just neva like go to church, Ola. That’s about it. You probably stay hiding in your room the whole time she stay looking for you.”

Ola looked to the ground. “I neva.”

“Ah... Come sit and watch the game with your faddah.”

Ola brightened up and jumped into the seat next to his father.

“The Steelers are playing against the Oilers. The Steelers have the ball, and they gotta score before half-time because if they get a big lead, the Oilers cannot give
the ball to Campbell in the second half. They going have to t’row the ball, and they’re one indoor team—they cannot handle the cold. Go, Franco! Whoo, boy, we going win some money today, Ola!” Ola drank in the attention.

Several hours later his father was asleep on the couch, and the car pulled into the driveway.

“Daddy, Daddy! Wake up! Mommy’s home, and she going be mad at me!”

Janice just walked in and looked at her son for what seemed like a long time.

“So you smart enough for miss church,” Janice said, simply. “Now you can get in your room. You’re grounded, Ola. And you’re lucky I don’t come in there and lick you.”

The room froze.

“But Ma! I neva know you was leaving for church! Chad neva wen tell me fo’ get ready.”

“I don’t wanna hear it, Ola. You folks know that every Sunday, you folks supposed to get yourselves ready for church. This is nothing new. Nunu is five years old, so I have to help him get ready. Do I have to help you put your clothes on, too, like one baby?”

“Janice, come on. Give the kid one break, ah?” Randy told her.

“And you! You probably let him watch football all day. Shouldda been in church with your family, instead you watching that idiot box all day.”

“So what’s wrong with spending some time with my son?”
"You like spend time with your son? Try come home at a reasonable hour
during the week. Or try come to church with the rest of us next Sunday." (Rowan,
Janice, 1998)

"But Janice..." And back and forth it would go, often to the point of shouting,
sometimes to the point where Nunu would begin to cry, and Chad would take both of
his brothers outside to wait in the car for things to die down. (Rowan, Chad, 8/98)

Church was Janice Rowan's attempt to impose some kind of structure at a
time when she and her husband struggled to keep their three growing boys clothed,
fed, and in line. She was equally passionate about things like what her boys should
be eating, when they should be home, when they should be in bed, and so forth. But
above all of these, she stuck strongest to her notion of how her boys were to behave,
whether at school, at practice, or just around the neighborhood, and this notion
translated into the Three Hit Rule, which aimed at preventing all fights, both in the
house and outside, while it allowed her boys room to stand up for themselves. The
Three Hit Rule dictated that when the boys were challenged, they were to take the
first two punches and then walk away. If they were hit a third time, only then would
they be allowed to fight back. In theory, people would cool off, or someone would
break things up before the boys could get into trouble. To break the rule, of course,
would mean lickings from Mom, a fate worse than any punishment that could result
from any street fight, right up through high school. (Rowan, Janice, 1993)

The rule in practice worked to varying degrees of success, depending on
which of the boys it applied to. For Chad, it seemed to mean that he should avoid
fighting at all costs. Even at ten years old, his size and good nature made him an easy
target for neighborhood kids who liked to tease. They would call him things like
“Big Dummy,” or they would call him soft, or clumsy. “You get one big body,
but’chu neva going be able for do not’ing!” A family of five girls lived next door to
the Rowans and used to break Janice’s heart with their relentless teasing of her son,
which would often culminate in their hitting him. Janice would stand at her window
thinking, Oh, dang, Chad, just lick ’em! But her son would simply take the abuse, try
to laugh it off. Her son needed help, and after a while she finally relented, knowing
exactly where to turn.

“Ola! Go out there and help your brother.”

Without a moment’s hesitation Ola was outside making quick work of his
brother’s tormentors while Chad stood aside and watched. (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

So Chad interpreted the Rule as, “Do not fight.” Nunu came to interpret it as,
“Call Ola.” And Ola was convinced it meant, “T’ree whacks. You tell ’em three
times to stop it and they don’t stop, turn around and punch.” To Ola, it was more
like a formality, a prelude to any real fight: “My Maddah wen tell me I gotta take
t’ree whacks. So if you like go, we go, but you gotta hit me t’ree times. I can take
care of you, brah, but I no like get lickings from my Maddah.” (Rowan, George
“Ola,” 1998) So while the rule did much to help cultivate Chad’s self-discipline, it
did very little to contain Ola, who would fight on his own, fight to defend his
brothers, whatevas.

“Ola was in one fight again, Mom,” Nunu and Chad would say.

“So did you folks do anything to help your brother?”
“Don’t worry, Mom, Ola can handle. Gave the guy dirty lickings for picking on Chad.”

“For picking on Chad? And you didn’t help him, Chad?”

“Like he told you, Mom, Ola can handle.” (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

Ola’s best hope at a life with any kind of structure goes right back to his early forays onto his brother’s T-ball field. Indeed all the boys were constantly going to one form of practice or another, or going to one game or another—a system that not only taught them all the lessons sport teaches, but also kept them out of trouble, allowed mom to work after school, and came, as many such events in Waimanalo did, with a strong sense of community. Games on the field next to Waimanalo Beach Park were often followed by pot-luck parties. The importance of certain days’ wins lent a celebratory atmosphere. Cousins Nate and Bud, Uncle Sam and Aunty Teta, Uncle Rock and Uncle Brudda. Aunty Jan and Uncle Randy. Kids running around everywhere. And food: huge foil pans set out on long tables, piled high with kalua pig, teriyaki beef, rice, macaroni salad, chicken long rice, lomi-salmon, grilled ‘ahi. Boxes of chocolate cake, haupia cake. Coolers filled with beer or juice. Some sat on the coolers, others on blankets beneath the trees and talked story as the sun sank behind the mountain range separating the small town from the rest of the island, the rest of the world.

“My faddah, he was my da kine,” Chad told me during one of his reflective moods, “my little league, basketball, baseball—he come to everything. Ever since we were little kids, he was always the one pushing us into sports.” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)
George Kalima, or any number of other Waimanalo boys may have said the same about their own fathers. Whether it’s just one of the perks of living in a state with perfect weather year-round or whether there’s some deeper cultural explanation for it, I’m not sure, but Hawai‘i seems generally obsessed with youth sports. Nightly news sportscasts routinely lead with high school stories and scores. Soccer is everywhere and never seems to end. Scores down to Pop Warner little league football make the papers. Sports even measure time, as one sports season blends into the next with little change in the temperature: the only way to know it’s fall is that the days are getting a bit shorter, and it’s time for football, when whole families and even interested alumni fly from island to island for important high school games.

I’d first introduced myself to Haywood Kalima in the Kokugikan, where he’d looked up on the dohyo with pride and said, “That’s my son.” A few days later George cooked fresh crab and a seafood stew for us all up in Chad’s apartment and the talk turned to the first big athletic accomplishment of these two professional athletes: the 1979 Hawai‘i State Pop Warner Championship. You would have thought they were describing the just-finished Aki Basho, so specific were they all in their detailed accounts: how they’d won by accumulating more yards than the other team since no one could score, how Chad’s father had arranged for a luxury coach bus from the company he drove for to take the team to the stadium. “Ho, we wen drive up next to the other team’s yellow school bus and get out like we was the Raiders!” And then the championship jackets they’d gotten: “I used to wear that jacket every day,” Chad had said—this after having taken the Emperor’s Cup nine times. “I still have that jacket today.” (Rowan, Chad, 9/98)
Mr. Kalima pointed out that they’d made the Pop Warner weight limit because he’d kept them in the car all day with the windows rolled up on weigh-in day.

In his mid fifties, Haywood Kalima looks like he could still play linebacker for anyone. The man swims almost four hours a day diving for octopus, and has emerged as something of a community leader in the past few years. He recently organized a group of concerned Waimanalo neighbors, cleaned up a section of beach that was filled with discarded concrete rubble and just about every other kind of rubbish, poured a concrete stairway down to the beach, put in a boat launching ramp, landscaped the area with grass, small trees, and a rock wall, and successfully petitioned the Honolulu mayor to have the pitted parking lot resurfaced.

The sense of conviction and confidence I first saw in George the very first time I met him at Magaki Beya—I came to see it often in his father over the years, whether I was just listening to him talk story, or watching him gently but very firmly expel someone who’d gotten out of hand at his son’s wedding. The man never came to Japan empty handed, and never let me leave his house without a good-sized fish he’d just caught and the instructions for cooking it. Mr. Kalima was solid, is solid, a strong man and a strong leader. That he’s always been like that didn’t surprise me, and the longer I knew him, the more those same traits as they showed up in George made sense. And the more I knew him, the more those traits as they showed up in a certain long-inseparable friend of George’s made sense.

There are countless differences between Chad and Ola, many of which must go into psychological realms of unalterable distinct traits they were each born with. But the most visible difference in whatever was available to each of them to structure
their lives—from church to school to sports to Mom’s House Rules to the way each responded to Mom—is that thanks to the friendship he developed with one of his classmates, one had the almost-daily influence of Haywood Kalima, and one did not.

Which brought me back to what had become one of the more troubling aspects of this project: what to do with Randy Rowan. He was certainly one of the story’s more important figures, a good man with a big heart and good intentions, but not without flaws that bear on how his sons turned out. More to the point with regard to the project, I would never be able to interview him, since he died a few months before I’d first met his wife. From Janice Rowan, I heard stories filled with anger—anger directed, for the most part, at the fact that he was no longer with her, and he could very well have been had he listened to his doctors and taken care of himself. From Ola, I heard nothing but stories of loyalty and support—“Dad came here for visit me every day.” From Chad I heard, even among the details of his troubled family life, respect and gratitude, and a sincere forgiveness for his fathers flaws summed up best when he told me one evening after over an hour of reflection, “He had big dreams, my faddah.” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

He also had deep humility and generosity, or what a cultural theorist might call “The Aloha Spirit.” Acquiring the bus for his son’s Pop Warner Championship game, becoming the neighborhood kids’ adoptive grandpa in his later years—no one would argue that “Uncle Randy” was not full of aloha, as one of the first stories Janice Rowan ever told me shows. One evening while driving the run between the airport and Waikiki, he noticed a light off to the right side of the road, in the river which feeds out into Ke‘ehi Lagoon. He pulled the bus over immediately to
investigate further, and found that a car had driven off the road and sunk into the dark water. While two of the passengers went to free the driver of the car, he ran to call for help. The woman was saved, the police came, and the next evening the story was all over the news, except with no mention of Randy Rowan. That evening the woman stopped by the Rowan’s house to thank him for having noticed her, and having stopped the bus, and he was satisfied. Janice Rowan sat disgusted through the newscast, which highlighted the heroics of the two passengers without giving her husband the credit she knew he deserved.

“'I didn’t do it to get on TV, you know what I mean?’ he told her. ‘It’s enough for me that the woman took the time to come over here and thank me.’

‘But you know what, Randy. If you neva stop, then tell me how they can save that woman?’ (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

At the risk of getting too simplistic in my effort to explain what made Chad Rowan Chad Rowan, I have to say that something important shows up in this story. First, I’ve got to believe that his dad had something to do with the kind of generous nature Chad displayed in things like his willingness to work with me on this book after a single conversation.

And I also have to believe that his mom had very much to do with his lack of patience for people who just don’t get it. Indeed, Janice Rowan is as sure of her own sense of the way things ought to be as anyone I’ve ever met, and the fact shows up as much in these kinds of how-can-they-save-that-woman pronouncements as it does in the way she conducts her life, both then and now.
These days Mrs. Rowan's decisions usually amount to politely dismissing people who are out to make a buck off of her considerable local celebrity, but back then living what she believed often meant going against the grain of the whole community.

"My parents used to get looked down upon back then for things they used to do," Chad told me later. "Like being Jehovah's Witnesses, my braddah and them would get teased: 'You're poor! That's why you no can get presents, that's why you no celebrate Christmas,' stuff like that, you know? Like sending us out of Kailua High to go to Kaiser High, people in Waimanalo wouldn't look upon them too good, ah?" (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

The unique choice of religion stood out most, of course, around Christmas. In spite of the weather, the Christmas spirit takes over Waimanalo much as it does anywhere else across America. Kids run barefoot through the corner of shopping center parking lots where trees brought in from the mainland wait to be taken to homes and decorated with blinking lights. Huge construction-paper snowflakes adorn the open windows of Waimanalo Elementary School. Neighbors try to outdo each other with lights and plastic reindeer on the roofs of their small houses. A nighttime drive through the valley's loops is a sparkling land of wonder for children, punctuated by the intermittent pop of fireworks—anticipatory blasts for the New Year, when the whole island is lit up brighter than the Fourth of July. And every kid waits for Santa. Every kid, except Chad, Ola, and Nunu, whose house remained dark.

"We was raise up as Jehovah's Witnesses," Ola told me. "Me, I neva did have one Christmas in my life. Neva did. Neva did have one Christmas tree. Neva did
have presents under the Christmas tree. I thought Santa Claus was da kine, one fat
guy with one beard.” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998)

The closest Christmas came to their home was when Nunu, all of five years
old, noticed a Christmas tree at a friend’s house, and all of the presents underneath.
Once he found out what the story was all about, he began to complain about not
having a tree in his own house. The friends had picked up an extra, smaller tree and,
feeling sorry for the boy, gave it to Nunu. But when he brought it into the house, he
was not greeted with Christmas cheer, but with the words, “That has nothing to do
with Christmas!” Chad, Ola, and Nunu took the tree outside to plant it in the yard.
They didn’t know if it would live or not, since it had already been cut, but they did all
they could for it. They dug a hole and, knowing that such trees came from the north
pole, filled the bottom of the hole with ice cubes before stuffing in the base of the
tree.

“My mother was, she still is one Jehovah’s witness,” Chad told me one night
on the jungyo. “Was hard for us to understand. Every Sunday we like stay home
watch football with Dad, ah? cause we hardly get to see him, he only home on the
weekends. You like stay home, all your friends outside playing, but you gotta go to
church. And was one all-day thing, when you go to church. And like I told you
before, they don’t believe in holidays, so it’s kind of hard for understand. My
youngest brother, I think he had the hardest time. He couldn’t understand how come
everybody else had Christmas trees and stuff like that, and not us. I told you about
the Christmas tree my friends gave us, ah? Dumb Hawaiians!” He laughed at the
memory, and then went on with some telling biographical analysis of his own: “Being
the oldest one, you kind of see shit, and you start learning that... How you put 'um? This is what you can do, and cannot do. I don’t know if I’m putting 'um right but, like for me was, I knew we was Jehovah’s Witness. I knew that we don’t celebrate holidays. I like ask why but, being the oldest, that would be a disgrace for my maddah, ah? You know, they always expect you for set one example.” He paused to reflect, and then said, “That’s the biggest thing: I respect her. She was strict, you know. She was real strict. Back then I used to think, ‘Why is she so strict?’ But now I realize why. She neva be strict on us I probably wouldn’t have been where I’m at today.” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

What Janice Rowan strove for in the chaos of working while raising three boys was order. Putting the boys in sports helped in this regard. Church also helped. And she also insisted her family meet weekly after church, a routine which helped iron out one grumble after another over the years as much as it reminded everyone they were part of a group. It was one time the Rowans could count on being together as a family.

In what could be a brutally honest atmosphere, such meetings could become uncomfortable, either for one member, or for everyone. Like many families who gather together and bear their true feelings for one another, the Rowans found that harmony was not always what they ended up with. Chad and Nunu, who shared one of the bedrooms, usually sat on the opposite side of the cramped parlor from Ola. But the real confrontations were between Janice and her husband, about Randy’s drinking, Randy’s staying out late, Randy’s not having gone to church.
Years later in plush Northern Japan hotel suites Akebono told me sad stories of his tough childhood, promising he could make me cry over all the young Chad Rowan had had to see, the worst of which always came at these Sunday meetings. At the time it was easy for me to distill his difficult experiences into a kind of hardship-builds-character-and-strength explanation of his success, especially with anecdotes that ended like this: “Nunu would start crying, and then later my mother would come out and drive us to go sleep on the beach.” (Rowan, Chad, 8/98)

But later I learned that while the hardship had indeed strengthened the young Chad and given him leadership skills beyond his years, the picture was far more complex than several dramatic fights between his parents, and not suggestive of a family falling apart at the seems in which the kids slept on the beach on a regular basis. Chad’s father certainly messed up from time to time. His mother admittedly erred on the side of strictness, and certainly overacted on occasion. But despite the relatively wild home life, Chad could never say he felt unloved.

Not to diminish the generally harmful effects of parental confrontations on their kids, but some of the fights actually became the stuff of the violence-we-can-laugh-about-later talk-story legend. Janice Rowan’s self-assurance, you see, comes in part from her size: she is not someone to be messed with, as her husband learned one bloody Sunday. Having had enough of her criticism, he stood up to defend himself in a deafening tirade, which his wife tried to quell with her own shouts of, “Randy, just calm down so we can talk about it. Calm down!” His own father, who was staying with them that weekend, joined in the vain effort to calm his son: “Randy! Leave her alone already! You always picking on her!” But the attention seemed to fuel rather
than douse the fire. And then Janice again: “Shut up, Randy! This is really getting nowhere and it’s really starting to irritate me. Randy! Shut up!” But he took this as encouragement to walk forward, getting in her face and drowning out his boys’ shouts of, “Daddy! Daddy! Leave her alone!”

In an instant the tone and direction of the boys’ shouts shifted: “Mommy! Mommy! Leave him alone!” sending both Randy and Janice out of the heat of confrontation into a moment of uncontrollable laughter. Janice had taken her husband in a hold beneath his shoulders and slammed him against the wall—no small feat against the 280-pound opponent—and begun swinging at him. The boys had shouted out at the immediate momentum shift, unknowingly underscoring the irony and the silliness of it all.

“I told you, you were irritating me,” Janice Rowan said after collecting herself.

She walked down the hall to avoid her husband until things cooled, but now it was a game, and Randy would not back down. He opened the hall closet, took out the ironing board, held it in front of him, and resumed his tirade as he followed her into the bedroom, now well-protected.

Janice burst out laughing again at the sight of him, walking towards her behind the ironing board, peeking out from the side. He started to laugh, too, and then continued to vent as she warned him again, “I told you Randy, this is getting you nowhere. You need to shut up, or watch what’s gonna happen.”

Of course he continued moving towards her, so she leaned into the ironing board with two powerful open-handed thrusts and sent him sprawling across the
room. When he got up, blood was pouring from his right hand, which had gotten caught on the board’s leg latch.

“Look what you did now!” he said. “Here! You like my blood? That’s my blood!” He started to wave his hand in her direction, splattering blood as he did.

“Yep, that’s your blood. You did that to yourself, Randy. You know that.”

“Just take me to the hospital.”

“No, you was the one acting stupid. Now you drive yourself.”

He thought for a moment. He looked around. “Chad!” All of eleven years old, Chad got behind the wheel and drove his father down to Castle Hospital, about two miles away.

When they returned, his father’s hand was heavily bandaged, and he sported a black eye, which had been overlooked in the confusion about the blood. A defeated man.

Mrs. Rowan told me the story with a lot more sympathy for her husband, and with much laughter as she remembered the images. “He goes up the street,” she reflected, “goes to tell my cousin, ‘Look what your cousin did to me.’ I told him, ‘You know what Randy. You tell him what you did to make me do that to you.’ My father-in-law told him, ‘You know what Randy, you should be shame.’ And I remember looking at him and I felt, ‘Oh, how shame!’” (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

The story of one particular family meeting did in fact make me cry as Akebono had promised. Where Janice Rowan liked to get things out in the open and then move on, her husband found this kind of open discussion difficult, and kept his
problems bottled up. When he finally let them out, he would get so emotionally involved that discussions would turn immediately into fights, a frequent occurrence when Chad was eleven. And so Janice and Randy Rowan began drifting apart, with Randy staying out later, and more often, and sometimes not coming home at all. In the most dramatic of all the Rowan family meetings, everyone crowded in the parlor as usual, but with mother and father on opposite sides of the room. The discussion was quiet and measured that day; there would be no shouting, no venting of frustrations. Mom simply explained that Daddy had to move out, and the boys were to choose whom they wanted to live with. Chad was eleven, Ola was nine, and Nunu was five years old. Nunu immediately ran to his mother, followed by Ola.

"I looked over at my father, sitting on the couch,” Chad said when he told me the story. “He was crying.” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

He looked to his mother, with his brothers in her arms, and then back to his father, crying, and made his decision: “Mommy, you can take care of yourself,” he explained, “and Daddy cannot. I have to go with him.” So Randy Rowan and his son moved into an apartment in Waikiki. (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

Waikiki is not Waimanalo. It is a strange mix of haves and have-nots, snow-birds in polished condos beside hotel workers, cab drivers, drug dealers, and prostitutes in tenements. All that most tourists ever see of Hawai‘i, Waikiki is less Hawaiian than it is a bad mix of Las Vegas and Cancun. The canal dug to help drain the reclaimed land on which its high-rises stand may as well be an ocean for the distance it creates between the resort and real-world Oahu. Local kids cruise down Kalakaua Avenue in low-rider Honda Civics on the weekends, checking out the place
as a kind of teenage adventure. It is not home—not even for most of the transients who live there, and certainly not for local people. And so after only a few days in this place Chad returned to the comforts of Humuniki Street, both to escape the noise and to attend school. But his father never forgot the gesture his son had made in choosing him.

Chad had been wrong about his mother’s power to deal with the separation on her own. He found her in bed, where she stayed, more or less, for the next three months. Chad did not know the details of his parents’ split beyond the fact that they argued a lot, but knew there had to be more involved for his mother to be so depressed. He took it upon himself to run the household, cooking for his mother and brothers, paying bills with his mother’s checkbook, getting his brothers to school on time and keeping them, as best he could, out of trouble. “There he was again,” Mrs. Rowan told me, “being the adult in our lives.” (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

Randy Rowan did his best to return home during this time, but his knocks on the front door were met with only silent bitterness.

“Please, Mommy, let him in,” her boys would say.

“You folks stay away from the window,” she would tell them. “Don’t you folks stare. He’s not coming in my house.” Late one night Ola, whose room faced the front of the house, was awakened to the sound of someone trying to open the front door. He knew it was his father, but was afraid to move. It was best to pretend to be sleeping. Having no luck with the door, Randy came over to his son’s window and called in a too-loud whisper, “Ola!” All drunk. Still Ola pretended to sleep. His father reached in through the window and began shaking his son’s bed, calling, “Ola!
Ola! Wake up. Come around and open the door for me.” Ola finally sat up in bed. He turned to get up and found his mother standing right in his bedroom doorway.

“You get up and let him in, Ola, and you can pack your bags, cause you’re going right out there with him.” And then to her husband: “And you can get away from my house.”

“But Janice!”

“Go!” And she turned to leave.

“Come on, Ola. She’s not going kick you out. You can let me in. I can convince her, Ola. I love your maddah, Ola. And I love you boys. I miss you. You’re my son, Ola.”

So Ola got up, walked through the parlor to the front door, and unlocked it. He turned around and saw his mother standing in the hallway.

“That’s it. Go and pack your bags, Ola.” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998)

Janice Rowan eventually began to emerge from her depression, realizing that she couldn’t continue to expect Chad to do everything. She knew it was wrong to keep the boys away from their father, and so in spite of her anger, as she recalled, “After a while I said, ‘Okay, you folks need to see your dad, that’s fine,’ so I allowed him to take them.” This was the first step towards letting the penitent man back into her house, which she eventually did. (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

“See, that was the problem,” Chad told me of his confusion as an eleven-year-old. “He was gone, but he would come back, and he would go, come back.” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)
He would not come back for good until his oldest son reached high school and his own disease—diabetes—caught up with his self-neglect. He knew it had been eating at him for more than ten years, and yet he had done nothing to care for it. After it led to an extended absence from MTL Bus Lines, he was discharged on medical retirement.

He was able to continue making decent money driving for Charlie’s Taxi company, and his wife put the rest of her anger behind her and insisted he move back so she could keep an eye on his health—a move more truly reflective of how she felt about her husband. The anger, after all, had come because she cared about him, and he’d let her down. He was a good man with a huge heart who made a lot of bad decisions, just like her Ola did, and she loved him all the way through it, even the times when she couldn’t stand to see his face. He would go and come back, go and come back. But this time he was home to stay.

Back towards the mountains in Waimanalo valley among the lettuce and corn was a chicken farm, owned by Glenn Miyashita. The fenced-in property looked much like the grounds where Chad took his brothers after school—a wide-open area shaded from the late afternoon sun by the wall of the steep Ko‘olau range where, in this case, chickens were allowed to run free. As in many places in rural Oahu, the calls of roosters started the day in Waimanalo, either from the farm up in the valley, or from the various neighborhood homes of men who trained the birds to fight. Many local kids learned quickly to care for chickens, sometimes to the point of being able to gauge their potential in a fight.
And so when the seasons came to collect young chickens from the reaches of his vast farm, Mr. Miyashita had a huge labor pool within walking distance. Word would get out that he had work, and the boys would show up in the evenings after dinner. He would divide them into teams, and appoint a foreman to lead each team to sweep a different part of the farm. The team members would then spread out into a long line and walk through the brush to flush hiding chickens, taking care to avoid the rats infesting the farm, some of which out-weighed the chickens. Once they found a chicken, the closest boy would catch it and carry it back to a pen near the farm’s entrance and return to his team. It was a skill requiring speed, coordination, and focus. The boys would often end up rolling on the manure-covered ground after executing dives worthy of any highlight film to get their hands on the birds. Most of the time it was more like a game than work. And perhaps best of all, it allowed the boys to stay out late into the evening, and it allowed them to get covered in mud.

When he was twelve Chad went along with the neighborhood kids for one of Miyashita’s seasonal offers for work, both as an adventure, and to help his family, which was now struggling with his father’s uncertain presence. He was competitive about the work, flying at each chicken like a linebacker to see how many he could catch in one night. Miyashita was impressed enough after the first day to have him join Brian “Moku” Apokeau as one of his two foremen, even though there were older kids on his team. Chad led aggressively, immediately putting into practice all he had picked up in caring for his younger brothers. He also led by example. By far the hardest worker, he would be covered in more mud and manure than anyone else by the end of the shift. When he returned home, often after eight at night, his mother
would spray him down with the garden hose before letting him enter the house.

(Rowan, Janice, 1998)

When the seasonal work was over, Miyashita kept Chad and Moku in mind and hired them permanently when he opened his nursery the following year, nearly around the corner from Humuniki Street. Chad’s back-breaking accomplishments around this time are the stuff of legends. Part of his boss’s business, for example, involved renting small trees to Waikiki hotels, which meant that the plants would have to be periodically rotated for maintenance. Miyashita would drive Chad and Moku to places like the Sheraton Waikiki, where they would lug trees up and down the stairs to the second floor ballroom lobby.

“Oh, braddah, you talk about getting in condition,” Chad told me long after having been exposed to the rigors of sumo training. “You run steps with those palm trees. And not one tree, one time. They teach you how for carry five, six trees one time.” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

Either in the hotels or at the nursery, six to seven days a week, he would be at work, from age twelve through high school. George Kalima would always tell him, “Fucka, you going die, you go work over there.” But even then it was Chad’s nature to push himself. He continued working for years after his family no longer needed his immediate support, and continued to proudly hand his paychecks over to his mother.

“When I was fourteen I started dealing Ice,” Ola freely admitted to me at Halawa Prison. He meant the drug crystal methamphetamine, the drug of choice not
only among derelicts at the bottom of the barrel on Oahu—even anyone from your waiter to your attorney may be a user. Ola’s appearance as an athlete, ironically, is what led to his full-scale involvement with drugs. “Because of my size, and because of the fighting and being aggressive and stuff like that, people would take me on runs for collect money,” he told me. At first he was simply paid to go along for the ride, something he would have jumped into out of sheer curiosity anyway as he had as a child, to be a part of the game. “That’s the difference between me, and Nunu and Chad, ah?” Ola explained. “You know them, they going step back, but me, I like go check out what’s going on. Tell me somebody going to offer you, ‘You come wi’ddus, we’ll give you five grand,’ and you’re going to say, ‘no.’ Especially when all you get in your mind is dollar signs.” Ola was soon promoted to sales, a natural step for a boy who could do a lot more than charm his father into watching football when he belonged in church, or talk his mother into blaming his behavioral problems on the wrong teacher. (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998)

“I think I enabled him,” Janice Rowan admitted in a look back. Chad had been drilled with discipline by the time Ola was born, and three years later Nunu came along and took up most of the Rowans’ parental time. What attention Ola could get, he had to scrap for. Where Chad was quiet and responsible as a child, Ola had always demanded attention, and always gotten it. “Whenever he got into trouble,” his mother said, “I always blamed it on the school. I always blamed it on the situation. ‘You don’t get along with this teacher? Okay, fine, we’re taking you someplace else.’” In the meantime, Chad had to take care of everything else: ‘I gotta go pick up Ola. Make sure you get Nunu home. Make sure you start the rice. When I come
home, make sure you guys are ready so I can just pick you up, take you to practice.' With Ola, if you did good in school, if you had a happy face on Friday, there would be a time with just me and you. You know I felt Ola needed a little bit more. It seemed like, when I threw my husband out Ola was in like fourth or fifth grade, it seemed like the insecurities came from that.” (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

“We didn’t know the smell of pakalolo,” his mother told me on another occasion, using the local term for marijuana. “My husband and I had never been around drugs. We didn’t know what it smelled like.” Around this time Janice Rowan was straightening up Ola’s room and vacuumed up a pile of baby powder she found on his dresser. Her livid son shouted when he found out what had happened, “You wen vacuum up the cocaine! Mommy, it was a little over a thousand dollars’ worth!”

“I don’t care, Ola. I told you, don’t bring ’em in the house. I thought it was powder at the time, but now I’m glad I wen vacuum it up.” When she caught Ola stealing from her to replace the drugs, she called the police. She figured the drastic move would put a scare into her son and straighten him out. “But it didn’t,” she said, “it just made him more brave, and more brave, and more brave. It made him harder and harder and harder, like, ‘I can handle.’” (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

By the time he entered Kaiser High, Chad could hardly be recognized as Ola’s brother. Aside from their attitudes regarding responsibility and the gulf between their athletic achievements, they moved in different circles of friends, and were thought of differently by teachers. Chad dealt with his own insecurities by trying to blend into the background. Where Ola was a smooth talker, Chad was quiet and reserved. Even
at the height of 6' 5" as a freshman Chad never stood out, while Ola could never help but be noticed, if usually for the wrong reasons. By freshman year Chad was painfully self-conscious about his size, and about the condition of his hands, always scratched and dirty from constant work at the nursery. He did his best not to bother anybody, not to attract attention.

"The thing people remember most about him was that he was never a trouble maker in school," Nanette Umeda, a counselor at Kaiser, told me. "He was always willing to help somebody else." (Umeda, 1998)

After he failed to make the Kaiser basketball team, his already poor self-image took another hit when he convinced his mother to allow him to attend the Freshman Banquet, a dinner cruise off of Waikiki. When he had first met the girl he planned to take, he somehow managed to summon the courage to ask for her phone number. He didn’t know her well, but he had called her a few times before the banquet. And after she agreed to accompany him, he could think of little else.

"And who are you going with?" his mother had asked him.

He told her the girl’s name. "She goes to Kamehameha."

This was enough for his mother, who normally would not let her sons go out on dates and enforced their curfew with military precision.

"Can I have some money?" he asked her.

"Chad, you don’t need to ask me. It’s your money." As he walked to the bank, he calculated how much he would need. She needed a new dress. He needed something other than his Sunday clothes to wear. He would buy a pikake lei for her. Then there was the taxi. He figured he would need about four hundred dollars. He
could envision the whole evening as he picked out his clothes at the mall. He could imagine what she would look like in the dress he chose. The next day at school he gave the dress to her cousin to give to her.

The following Friday Nunu, all of nine years old, walked into their bedroom to find his brother dressed to the nines in his new outfit. “Ho, handsome, you!” Nunu said with a smile. “Going out wid one girl! Ola! Ola! Come look your braddah.”

“Ho, styling, Chad!”

“Shut up, both you fuckas,” Chad said.

His father had arranged for one of his friends at Charlie’s Taxi to pick him up and take him off to meet his first date, the girl from Kamehameha.

An hour later the taxi pulled back into the driveway. Chad got out and slammed the door. He marched straight into his room and slammed that door as well, angry enough to walk through walls. It turned out that when he arrived at the girl’s house with the fresh, fragrant pikake lei, she met him at the door with the story that she couldn’t attend the banquet because she had to go to a family funeral. (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

Chad went right back to staying to himself and remained there for the next couple of years, taking refuge in roles that gave him a sense of importance: Big Brother, Nursery Foreman, Student Helper. He found the last of these in Ms. Umeda’s office, where he assisted with clerical work. His interest in school varied from class to class. But overall, school was never a place he enjoyed going to,
certainly not for academic reasons, not for social reasons, and not even for athletic reasons.

But over the course of his senior year, all of that would change.

While people like his own parents, his uncle Sam, Mr. Kalima, and Glenn Miyashita had impacted Chad through childhood, the most important figure in his late teens was a man named George Wolfe, who was named Kaiser's head basketball coach following the 1986 season. Coach Wolfe had assisted at Hawai‘i Pacific University and coached junior varsity at Kaiser several years before and was now facing his very first varsity head coaching assignment. When I met Wolfe late in 1998 he was preparing to open the season as the Assistant Coach of the Rainbow Wahine, the University of Hawai‘i’s women’s basketball team. We talked for over an hour and I found him as much an educator as a coach—one ready to use his bag full of coach’s clichés, but able to go beyond it to help players reach their full potentials as men, and now women, as much as basketball players. He was named Kaiser’s Head Coach following the 1986 season, and first met Chad Rowan at summer league tryouts in June of that year.

“All of the sudden we see this really big kid walk in,” Wolfe recalled. Chad had come out with a few friends. He stood uneasily in a gym full of would-be park legends and Michael Jordan wannabes. He collected the odd rebound and had a few put-back points but was by no means spectacular, or even very competent. All he had going for him was his size. (Wolfe, 1998)
With his previous experience at Kaiser and HPU, not to mention his own playing career, the young coach had enough basketball knowledge and simple insight into human nature to begin sizing up the talent scattered from hoop to hoop in his gym that first day. Many he recognized as returnees from when he had assisted with the summer program the previous year. He began to formulate opinions on the new ones almost right away. This one could handle the ball. That one had a consistent shot. This one had speed, but was selfish. The other one slacked on defense. What he saw in Chad that first day, and what another coach might have missed, went beyond height. While the boy was big enough to turn heads when he walked in, he had obviously never played organized ball, or even much playground ball. But he was trying. He was looking intently at everything happening around him, and he was trying.

"I don't think you're going to get a college prospect out of Hawai'i very often," Wolfe told me, explaining his purpose as a high school coach. "But you want them to enjoy the game, and if they do happen to go somewhere and have a shot to play at like a junior college, or if they're playing on their club team, you want them to feel comfortable with all their skills. And if for some reason this kid goes on to the next level, I want him to feel that there's nothing that coach can tell him that he hasn't heard from me."

Wolfe's strategy of making his kids feel comfortable began with simple, no-nonsense communication. From what he saw of Chad's desire on the first day, and the boy's willingness to learn and absorb what was around him, Wolfe knew he wanted to see more of the kid. "The thing about Chad was, he was just all eyes and
ears right from the start. Guys always have their own idea of how they’re going to
play, but somebody like Chad, it’s refreshing when you get somebody like that. He
just comes out. He’s trying to get it down. He’s all ears. So first I wanted to
encourage him to continue coming down—that was from day one: ‘I want you to
come back. Make sure you come back. Just keep coming and work and listen, and
you can do a lot. The sky’s the limit.’ And some kids,” he paused here for emphasis,
“they never hear that in their life.”

Chad certainly had never heard such words. Nor could he ever have expected
to hear them with regard to sports. He was not Ola, after all. “He said that was the
first time anybody asked him to be involved,” Nanette Umeda recalled the moment.
“He was so happy.”

Wolfe opened the gym every Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday that summer
for practice, and Chad was usually waiting: “Coach, what I gotta do? What I gotta
do?” He frequently called the coach at home to ask if he could open the gym at other
times. If Wolfe told the guards to show up at eight on a Saturday and the post players
to arrive at ten, Chad would be there at eight.

Wolfe’s interest came not from any particular talent or promise Chad showed
on the court, but rather the opposite. A coach could easily have looked at the boy as a
6’5” 270-pound rebounding machine from day one, and been obviously disappointed
enough in the boy’s lack of skill, knowledge, and coordination to discourage him
from continuing. Had the coach assumed Chad’s skill level matched, or should have
matched, his height, and made those expectations known, Chad may not have
returned to the gym.
But Wolfe empathized well with coaches’ sudden assumptions, having been a victim of them himself growing up as an athletic-looking African American in Hawai‘i. “When I was in high school,” he told me, “there’s a lot of stuff in high school they just assumed, either because I was big or strong, or that I was black, that I would just automatically be able to do things. When I was in elementary school and we’d go out and play PE, we played softball. So every time I’d come up to bat, all the guys would start backing up, cause, well, you know, Willie Mays. It was the 60’s, and Willie Mays was playing. Hank Aaron was playing. Black athletes, you know. So here’s the only black guy in the school, he’s gotta be a great athlete. He’s gonna smack this ball. Well, I’d never hit a baseball. Somebody has to teach you how to hit a baseball properly. I never figured out that you look the ball all the way to the bat; I never knew that. I used to whiff all the time. I don’t think I ever hit a home run in my life. Nobody ever told me or showed me how. In high school it was the same thing. They’re just kind of waiting for you to do some osmosis or something to achieve all these things. And the bad thing is, these are coaches. I’m supposed to be running the ball like Jim Brown. Well, what do I do? How do I carry it? Just give me some basics.”

So Wolfe began with the basics with all of his players, the perfect introduction to organized ball for a neophyte like Chad Rowan. In his effort to make his kids feel comfortable between the lines, Coach drilled them progressively. He began with drills for ball-handling, passing and catching, proper shooting and so forth, and led up to team drills, from two-man breaks to three-on-threes. “You build it up, teach them about space, everything. Because a lot of times you get kids who play park ball, but
they don’t really have the court sense: you get the ball, we all come running for the ball. We’re standing together, and one guy can guard us.”

Wolfe got mixed responses from the drills. The wannabes among his charges would whine that the drills were beneath them. “Okay, we’re gonna do wind-sprints,” he would say. “Oh, Coach! Why are we doing this?” someone would respond. “Okay, now we’re going to practice lay-ups.” “Lay-ups? Why we gotta do this, Coach?” “Because I want you to make lay-ups. I want you to come in, go off the left foot, and put it in off the backboard. I don’t want you to try any finger rolls, and nobody here can dunk, so we’re not gonna practice that.” Chad would simply do what the coach said, and give it his best shot, whether it was a simple passing drill, or an involved dribbling drill.

Cross-training was a big part of Wolfe’s plan to build his players’ skills. For Chad, this meant working with the guards, an invitation to immediate failure for the lanky big man. “Between the sideline and the edge of the lane extended straight down,” his coach explained, “you zig-zag back and forth. But as you do that, you’re looking at me” at the other end of the court. “You’re not looking at the ball. And I’m gonna be holding a ball, and I’m holding it high or low, and you gotta call that out as you’re coming, so you’ve gotta be looking the whole time. Go to the sideline, reverse spin, switch to the other hand and go to the lane and reverse spin, and I want you to do that all the way down the floor.”

Chad was a bit unsure, but ready to give it a try.

“You don’t know how to do this,” Wolfe told him before they began. “I know you don’t know. So don’t make like you know. I know that you don’t know. So
let's take another route. I'm here to help you learn. So of course you're going to go over here, and the first time I show you, you're gonna mess up. I guarantee you. But the more we do it, you'll get better at it. That's just the way it works in life.”

Chad looked his coach in the eye throughout the explanation, taking the words to heart.

Standing at one end of the court, Wolfe had Chad zig-zag towards him as he had explained, switching hands as he dribbled up the court, eyes straight ahead, with predictably disastrous results. At first the ball hit his feet as often as the floor, “But never, ever did I see him get pissed off,” Wolfe told me. “He’d just stay with it.” Wolfe’s faith combined with Chad’s own desire to erode all fear of failure, and to build what had been lacking in his life to this point: confidence. If Wolfe had to cancel practice for any reason, Chad would ask that it be rescheduled. When he was not working at the nursery, he was working on his game. By the eighth day of practice—a bit more than a week later—Chad could compete with some of the true guards. “By about the sixth or seventh time we were doing this drill,” Wolfe said, “I mean, Chad’s got it down. Between the legs, you know, he’s doing it. That’s how Chad was with everything.” Less through talent than desire, Chad Rowan was becoming an athlete.

“It’s almost like he was hoping,” Wolfe said, “hoping, hoping that somebody, somewhere, would tell him he was good at something, and he could go take off with it.” (Wolfe, 1998)

Chad improved almost daily throughout the summer league, and when school began he set to work at making himself academically eligible to play. School had
always bored him, and while he stayed out of the kind of trouble that plagued his
brother, as a student he usually just did enough to get by, always on the edge of a
2.0—the minimum grade point average required by the State of Hawai‘i for student-
athletes. “He was not an honor roll-type student,” Umeda told me. “He was okay,
but academics was never a priority.” Wolfe helped to monitor the boy’s progress, and
put him on a diet to slim him down for the season. On the first day of try-outs in
November, Chad, now thirty pounds lighter at 245 pounds, was among the sixty
candidates for one of the twelve spots on the team. Wolfe had drawn nearly every
park player at the school, all of whom figured they had a shot with the new coach.

The desire and ambition that so impressed George Wolfe was nowhere to be
found in Ola, now a football stand-out at Kailua High School. Between the lines the
boy was unstoppable: “I used to get one mean high playing football,” he told me. At
6’2”, 245 pounds, he was naturally built for the line. His toughness, of course, could
not be questioned. But between the ears was another story. For starters, he was at
Kailua in the first place thanks to his part in one of Kaiser’s more memorable brawls.
But at Kailua, at least he still had football. Maybe it would keep him out of trouble.
Maybe it would translate into some semblance of success in the classroom. Maybe it
would lead to college or even the NFL someday. At least it was an acceptable release
of his huge stores of aggressive energy.

But even with his great talent and strength, it was almost as if Ola didn’t want
to succeed, and by that I don’t mean he didn’t try hard to succeed, but rather, he did
his very best to fail. “I asked my Mom to come to one game,” he told me. “I gave her
free tickets. It was the Blue and White game. And all her friends that she used to hang around with, their kids was going to school with me. So I started hanging around with them, playing football, all that kine stuff. So I gave her tickets and she neva like come. So the day of the game, I looked for my Mom in, you know the bleachers and stuff, she wasn’t there. So I played, so all her friends told her, ‘Hey, you know what. Should’ve went to the game. Your son played a hell of a game. Sacked the quarterback three times, recovered four fumbles, saved one touchdown on the five yard line, all kine stuff.’ But was too late, you know what I mean. After she did that I told myself no sense. I no like play cause I lost interest, ah? That’s all I wanted, you know, for my Maddah for come watch me play football, but she neva did come. My sophomore year. I never played after that. I never played. I never played after that.” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998)

As Ola’s organized athletic career ended, his brother’s was about to take off. Chad was suffering the kind of stress Ola never had to face: whether or not he would survive tryouts.

“It’s going to be real hard the first couple of days,” Wolfe told Chad, “cause we gotta weed some guys out. Yeah, you’re trying out for the team, but in my mind, you’re already on the team. So you’re going to be tired and you’re going to be burning, but just keep it up.” The ideal, perfectly coachable attitude Chad displayed over the summer had earned him this encouragement.
Most everyone else in the gym still had to prove himself to Wolfe, beginning not with the range of a turn-around jump shot, but with the two qualities that attracted Wolfe to players like Chad: heart, and the ability to listen.

"We’ve obviously got a lot of guys who want to be on this team," Wolfe addressed them all on the first day. The boys sat on the gym floor, looking around at one another. "In fact, I’ve never seen so many guys come out, when I was an assistant here, or when I was at HPU, wherever. But all those times, the guys that made it through tryouts remembered two things: a winner never quits, and a quitter never wins. If you can show me you have some heart, you’re going to be sitting here again tomorrow." The first two days, the boys did not even see a basketball. Wolfe and his assistant, Ia Sapaia, just ran them. Sprints, suicides, stairs, whatever, as long as it involved running, and as long as it was painful. Within the first hour guys were already filing out of the gym. At the end of the day those remaining again sat on the gym floor, listless and exhausted, maybe even nauseated, sleepy.

"Congratulations," Wolfe told them. "You made it through day one. Now I know some of you are wondering whether or not you can handle any more of this. That leaves you with a decision: are you gonna come back tomorrow. Are you gonna keep trying to make this team, or are you going to give up? The choice is yours, and either choice is fine. Maybe you’ve found that this really isn’t what you had in mind. That’s fine. But before you make that decision, I want you to go home and look yourself in the mirror. Cause you’re gonna have to face yourself if you quit. You’re gonna have to face yourself every day. You’re gonna have to look at yourself every day in the mirror. Can you face that person if you quit? Or any big decision, you
know? You always want to feel comfortable if you make a decision, where you can look yourself in the eye and say, "I made the right choice."

Whether or not they looked themselves in the mirror, only they can tell, but more than ten players made the decision not to return the second day. Once Wolfe and Sapaia had whittled the group down to a manageable number, they broke the survivors into teams and conducted scrimmage games, making sure to give clear direction on how plays were to be run. Players who followed these directions earned points towards making the team. Those who drained three-pointers or drove to the basket rather than stick to the game plan—that is, players who did what Ola would have done had he been there—had little chance, regardless of the skills they were showing off. "I want somebody who's gonna listen to me," Wolfe said to me.

When the time came, Sapaia suggested they invite the final group of boys into the coach's office one at a time to either welcome them to the team, or thank them for their effort at trying out and making it to the final stage. Still nervous in spite of Wolfe's initial assurances, Chad entered the office to find the two men hanging their heads. No one spoke for what seemed like a long time, and the boy's worry increased with each passing second. He shifted back and forth on his heels.

Sapaia finally broke the silence. "We had a lot of talented guys come out this year, Chad." He paused. "More than we expected." He paused again for a long time—perhaps five seconds. And then: "We're sorry."

Chad's eyes widened in amazement. After all the practice, all the effort, and all the improvement, it came to this. He could not believe this was actually happening. He didn't make it.
The two men continued to stare at the floor, when Wolfe suddenly broke out into laughter, “He’s kidding, Chad. Of course you made it.”

“Ho, you guys make me all sick,” Chad said. “For a minute I thought I neva make ’um!” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

He not only made the team; he ended up starting at center. “He didn’t have enough experience in the game to make a real big impact,” Wolfe told me, “but we went to him a lot down low. You knew he was gonna get the boards. He was a battler. He was not intimidated by anyone whatsoever.” While Chad was no star, he played an important role on the team and was both a solid contributor and a strong leader, something unthinkable only a few months before.

Kaiser finished in the middle of the pack that year, but two of their games are worth mentioning. Both were against McKinley High School, coached at the time by Louie Palophini, who was also an assistant coach at Hawai‘i Pacific University. Wolfe had worked with Palophini several years before at HPU. While Chad’s size was enough to attract any coach’s attention, he did nothing spectacular in the first game against McKinley. What Palophini did not know was that the big kid was still at the stage in his game where he improved nearly every time he stepped out onto the court. When Kaiser played McKinley again six weeks later, Palophini could not believe what he was seeing. Chad was still no all-star, but his poise between the lines made Palophini wonder if he was watching the same six-eight center. Palophini called Coach Smith at HPU, who had been the head coach there since Wolfe’s days as an assistant. He then called Wolfe, and the three coaches discussed the idea of getting Chad into HPU. Smith liked what he saw, and based on Palophini’s
recommendation regarding Chad's desire and potential more than his present ability, he offered Chad a full scholarship, with the intention of red-shirting the big kid as a freshman to give him the chance to excel on the Division I-A level.

No one was happier with the news than Janice Rowan. She cried when she learned that her son would be going to college, the first in the family to do so. "I always thought my Chad would be the one to go to college. Nunu and Ola were my athletes, but Chad was my responsible boy. I always thought he could become a lawyer." (Rowan, Janice, 1998) In fact, her son had begun to consider a future as a hotel manager. From his first day delivering trees for Mr. Miyashita, the bustle of Waikiki had impressed him. The size of the Sheraton Waikiki, a monstrosity of a shadow-casting skyscraper crowding the beach, always impressed him. The managers in their suits or designer aloha shirts always impressed him. If he were to wear one of those suits some day, people would look to him with the same respect. He would, in his own words, "be somebody."

In May of 1987, not long after Chad's eighteenth birthday and just after he was set up to go to college, his grandfather died. The funeral was held in Nu'uanu, the section of Honolulu just over the mountains from Waimanalo. Chad and Ola, pallbearers at the funeral, were surprised when one of the guests—an old, grandfatherly Hawaiian man himself, slight but robust, with white hair and glasses—approached them with a request that was unusual, to say the least.

After the man spoke, Ola and Chad could do nothing but look at one another, completely puzzled. The man introduced himself as Larry Aweau, a distant cousin of
Randy Rowan. He had asked them this: “Would you boys be interested in going up to Japan to try sumo?” (Aweau, 1998)
CHAPTER 3

You have to be more. You have to think Japanese, and that’s the difficulty of being a foreigner.—Azumazeki Oyakata, June 21, 1998. (Kuhaulua, 1998)

I came over here for a purpose. It’s not for the money; it’s for the recognition. When I die, somebody’s gonna remember me. All these guys before us, nobody’s ever gonna forget them. They made a big impression in Japan and a big impression in Hawai‘i, too. Look at Jesse [Azumazeki Oyakata]. Nobody’s ever gonna forget him. He’s down in the history books already.—Maegashira 12 Yamato, June 20, 1998. (Kalima, 6/98)

Larry Aweau, also a distant cousin of Azumazeki Oyakata, is largely credited as the man behind the brief sumo Hawai‘i invasion stretching from Konishiki’s 1984 to the Sumo Kyokai’s mid-1994 informal ban on foreign recruiting—a ban that would later be relaxed as long as, it seemed, the foreigners in question did not come from Hawai‘i. The big Samoan’s success helped Aweau recruit Taylor Wylie, John Feleunga, and Chad Rowan. He would later send George and Glenn Kalima up to Magaki Beya, Eric Gaspar and Tyler Hopkins to Takasago Beya, and Troy Talaimatai, George “Ola” Rowan, Wayne Vierra, and finally Percy Kipapa to Azumazeki Beya. The gentle, grandfatherly, long-since retired fireman and former judo instructor has tracked all of their careers closely ever since and keeps an impressive scrap book of newspaper clippings highlighting all of their accomplishments.
One afternoon Aweau was kind enough to share with me the scrap book and all the stories springing from it—from his many trips to Japan, to his friendships with various oyakata, his recruiting efforts, and his discovery of Chad Rowan. "What caught my attention was the way he walked," he said of the boy he saw at the Nu'uanu funeral. "Beautiful synchronization for such a tall guy—everything perfectly timed. I could tell he had a clear mind, and he was sure of himself."

(Aweau, 1998)

Aside from the part about height, the same might be said for Aweau himself. Already far into his seventies when I met him, I envied the man’s spirit, his mental quickness, and his energy despite the forty-odd years that separated us. Robust, slight but strong, still with a full head of silver hair and peering intently through steel-rimmed glasses, he looked better than men twenty years his junior. "The doctors don’t like me," he told me as we sat down in the living room of his ocean-front cottage, apparently because he gave them no business.

The path of my investigation in researching this biography always came down to two basic questions: what did Chad bring with him to Japan that allowed him to make it in sumo? And, in what particular ways was the sumo system set up to accommodate someone who didn’t know a mawashi from a matawari? The answer to the first deals with the kinds of things Aweau began to see in Chad’s “beautiful synchronization” that went beyond the heart and drive and strength required of any professional athlete: character, the ability to adapt, and a certain astuteness at recognizing what particular social situations required—the “eyes and ears” that had so impressed George Wolfe.
The answer to the second question is more complex, dealing not only with sumo’s Shinto roots, its hierarchical nature, and the way it’s passed down in the apprentice/master-24-hours-a-day world of the sumo beya, but also with the way Jesse Kuhaulua/Takamiyama/Azumazeki Oyakata set the stage for Chad’s later and greater success by breaking the Japanese in to the idea of powerful foreigners in their National Sport. Chad has insisted to me that Boss never helped him much either as former rikishi, or as former rikishi who came from Hawai'i knowing no Japanese and nothing about Japan. Boss, to Chad, was just like any other Boss. But the immeasurable help to Chad’s own career came simply in the man’s presence. He had been the first foreigner to really succeed in the sport, but he had also taken care to fit in culturally, and, as he put it to me, to think Japanese. Boss, then, is a huge part of the answer to the second question, if only for what he did—on both cultural and athletic levels—before Chad was even born.

In vivid detail Larry Aweau took me back as far as Jesse’s 1967 trip home as the first Hawaiian sekitori—one of those focal points in history that changed forever the way things would turn out for Chad Rowan. “He asked me if I can go over to Japan and spend some time with him,” Aweau said of the visit, “because I was a judo sensei, and because he was worried about forgetting his English.” Kuhaulua had also been impressed with his cousin’s knowledge of his sumo career, which Aweau had been following with great interest since retiring from the fire department. Just as he does today, at the time Aweau probably knew more about sumo than anyone else never to have actually put on a mawashi.
While the John Wheeler book I shared with the Oyakata when we met in 1998 provides a good account of Jesse’s early relationship with sumo on up to his 1972 Nagoya Championship, there is no better source for the rest of the story than Larry Aweau. Wheeler—his unconvincing as-told-to first-person voice notwithstanding—gives a decent account of events: Jesse joins the Maui Sumo Club to re-hab his legs for football following a car accident. He is noticed by the visiting Meji University Athletic Director for his hard work and determination as much as for his size. He is later recruited by Takasago Oyakata during a Hawai‘i jungyo, and spends the next several years toiling in the lower ranks and regretting his decision. He shows amazing strength, character, and will in his fights against homesickness, culture shock, and his opponents on the dohyo, and finally reaches the sekitori Promised Land some three years after joining, the first in a long line of major accomplishments he would pile up under the category of “First Foreign . . .” Wheeler’s book has its climax when the First Foreign Champion is handed the Emperor’s Cup, which is where Larry Aweau more or less picks up the story.

“I used to go up there three, four times a year starting in 1971,” he told me. “I used to go everywhere with Jesse. I became friends with a lot of the other rikishi, the oyakata, some of the newspaper reporters. And I learned so much about sumo, so much about Japan.” Among the things he learned was the complexity of what had looked like a simple sport’s rules: two men charge at one another in a ring roughly fifteen feet in diameter. In seconds each chooses from several throws or types of pushes to force the other either down, or out of the ring. When one either steps beyond the straw ring’s edge, or touches the ground with anything other than the
soles of his feet, he has lost. The winning technique is announced—there are over seventy of these, and a special prize is awarded at tournament’s end to the rikishi with the highest technical skill. The numbers go up. The rikishi face different opponents the following day—every day for fifteen days in the top two divisions, and a total of seven days across the fifteen-day tournament in the lower divisions. The man with the most wins is declared the winner of his division.

Larry Aweau spoke with a judo instructor’s passion about sumo’s technical aspects, its resemblance to other martial arts. To him, sumo as an athletic contest involved far more than just pushing. It involved intricate throws, mind games between two men struggling for position, for the right grip to execute those throws. It was in fact more judo than wrestling—the sport’s unfortunate English translation. He delighted in discussing sumo’s wealth of winning techniques, its cultural nuances, and how Takamiyama had been able to master both on the way to gaining almost-universal appeal to the Japanese as he made his way up the banzuke to sekiwake, the third-highest rank.

From the picture Aweau paints of Takamiyama, and from the sincerity with which Kuhaulua delivered Kyokai doctrine to me in our own 1998 discussion and the way I’ve seen him deliver it to his deshi ever since, it’s not hard to see how the gaijin managed the most formidable opponent a foreigner in Japan’s National Sport must face: the task of constructing a culturally appropriate identity. “One thing in sumo,” he explained to me, “you cannot posture. It’s like in baseball when you say, ‘I just want to help the team’” (Kuhaulua, 1998). Kuhaulua explained this to me as we sat beside the ring in Azumazeki Beya’s keikoba, a place where two men face off in a
sport more individual than even boxing. During tournaments a rikishi walks out into the arena alone, and waits alone with no one in his corner. He fights alone, of course, and yet he must act as part of the team—in this case, not the sumo beya or the Sumo Kyokai, but Japan itself.

The same questions we ask of Chad Rowan also apply to Jesse Kuhaulua here: what did he bring that helped him to this kind of cultural success, and how did the system accommodate him? Wheeler answers the first question for us: growing up in poverty, raised by a strong single mother, a sense of place and responsibility, and, I might add based on my own observations, a generally self-effacing personality that happened to perfectly suit his role as Invited Guest in Japan. The answer to the second question is less complex for Jesse than it is when we apply it to Chad, for it basically comes down to a set of behavioral blueprints all set up for the gaijin to step into and follow: Shinto form, with its emphasis on performing a kind of role in relation to everyone else, and sumo’s more specific codes of performance according to one’s status as sempai or kohai, and one’s place on the banzuke. In short, since Jesse was the only foreigner of any significance the Japanese had ever seen in their National Sport, it came down to this: could the gaijin follow the rules?

It also couldn’t have hurt that the gaijin would not be the only one performing a role. All around him the Japanese were constructing identities of their own, or, as anthropologist Dorrine Kondo puts it, *Crafting Selves*, situation by situation, according to sempai-kohai relationships, other hierarchical relationships, and ingroup-out-of-group relationships. Everything to do with the Japanese social encounter determines identity in these relational ways—everything from behavior to
speech, right down to the verb constructions and subject designations like “I,” “you,” “him,” and “her,” which can all be expressed in several different ways appropriate for different situations. (Kondo, 26)

Jesse Kuhaulua “became Japanese” to the extent that he was able to understand the Japanese social performance Kondo explains—an interesting take on “assimilation,” since at least one of the “selves” he crafted was the one he had taken with him to Japan in the first place, and not at all Japanese. His cultural accomplishment lies in how quickly he recognized roles defined by the form provided by sumo’s Shinto roots, and how he understood the importance of performing such roles. A central myth in the *Kojiki*—Shinto’s authoritative text—relates how the Sun Goddess Amaterasu withdraws into a cave and is coerced out days later by the dance and monologue—the *performance*—of a lesser god. (Yasumaro, 70) While performance exists in other cultures, in these roots of one of the world’s more dramatic cultures, it literally saves the day. With language initially unavailable to him, at first Kuhaulua had to figure out how to move and behave, where to stand, and when to come and go. The only cultural education available to the foreigner—from language to behavior and everything else associated with the term—was immersion in the daily grind of heya life. Kuhaulua followed Shinto form naturally in finding his place in Japan the same way any other shin-deshi finds his place in the sumo world, not by studying Shinto and sumo history, but by sensitively assessing each situation and figuring out how to act.

I can’t pretend to imagine exactly how Kuhaulua went about making what amounted to instant assessments as to how he should conduct himself in one situation.
or another, but I suspect it had something to do with the palpable reverence with which people associated with sumo treat just about everything to do with their sport. It’s hard to capture it in words, but just walking into the Kokugikan mid-morning makes you want to lower your voice like you’re in something more like a church or a temple than a sports arena. Later in the day a festive party begins, with fans getting drunk, visiting with one another, cheering loudly for their favorite rikishi. But in the mornings when the lower-division bouts are fought and the ring announcer’s sing-song calls echo off of empty seats, the place has a kind of aura, and you know somehow that what’s going on is meant to be something more than an athletic competition. Kuhaulua, and later Chad Rowan, excelled at recognizing this aura, and then acting accordingly.

The more one knows about sumo, the more real its intangibles become, turning the behavioral guessing game into a set of common-sense understandings. Part of the reason the Kokugikan feels like a kind of temple, for example, goes beyond the Shinto shrine-like tsuriyane roof hanging from its rafters. A new dohyo is built for each major tournament, requiring not only several tons of clay and three days of manual labor, but a Shinto blessing called the dohyo matsuri, performed in front of the gods and a houseful of empty seats. The two chief gyoji (referees) dress as Shinto priests on the day before the tournament and bless the dohyo. The chief gyoji chants for blessings from heaven, spreads the Shinto purification symbols, sake and salt, and waves a Shinto wand over each of the four corners of the dohyo. A ceramic jar containing other Shinto purification symbols, including seaweed, chestnuts, and sake, is buried at the dohyo’s center. The yobidashi (ring announcers) circle the dohyo
three times, beating the announcement drum and closing the ceremony. The dohyo is now much more than a wrestling ring; it is an altar. (Buckingham, 61)

Once the altar/stage/ring is prepared, the rikishi are left to perform on it, but in a way perfectly set up for a neophyte to both sumo and to Japan like Jesse Kuhaulua: aside from the actual fury of the matches, every single step, from the tunnel under the seats, out to the dohyo, to the rikishi’s place as a member of the audience beside the dohyo, and onto the dohyo right up to the final charge, including the exit after the match, is measured and performed as ritualistically as the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. The top-division bouts are preceded each day of a major tournament with similar pomp, and a ceremony which includes the sekitori and focuses on the yokozuna. The dohyo-iri—the sacred ring-entering ceremony—is one of the most colorful moments in all of sport, as all top-division rikishi except yokozuna, dressed in beautifully-woven kesho mawashi, mount the dohyo in ascending order of rank and are introduced to the crowd. They all stand in a circle, turn towards the center of the dohyo, and clap their hands once to call on the gods to bless the area for competition. Then they raise their right hands, lift their kesho mawashi slightly to prove they are unarmed, lift both hands momentarily for the same reason, and file out. The yokozuna, if there are more than one, then take turns performing their individual dohyo-iri. The meaning of all this differs from observer to observer and from participant to participant: to some it is a ritual which reminds the audience that the gods are among them; to some it is a pageant to put the heroes on display; to others it is part of the job. To some, it is all three. And to all, it is
something to be watched—a performance, with measured, rehearsed, prescribed steps.

The less-straightforward cultural role was one that circumstance and personality allowed Kuhaulua to fill naturally. His likable nature combined with his early struggles at the bottom of the banzuke to cast Takamiyama as an underdog rather than an invader, one who obviously worked as hard at learning the language and sumo life as he did at his sumo. The most admirable sumo performances are carried out by those who endure in the face of injury, age, apparent size disadvantage, or some combination of these—a cultural value summed up by the word *gaman* that allowed Kuhaulua to be accepted by the Japanese in a more personal way.

To fully understand the appeal of a rikishi pulling himself up onto the dohyo day after day, sometimes limping, sometimes heavily wrapped in white athletic tape, one must first understand the Japanese concept of *gaman*. It is a culturally specific kind of virtue where one pushes forward in the grind of daily life through sickness, injury, depression, or any other kind of hardship. Where an American might skip a day at the office to get over the flu and avoid infecting his co-workers, for example, the sniffing, coughing salaryman is looked up to as someone who will not let the discomfort keep him from his responsibilities. I know a nurse who pushed her own IV bag through the hospital just so she could complete her scheduled shift without passing out from dehydration and exhaustion.

George Kalima and I discussed the idea of *gaman* extensively just before his 1998 retirement, usually shaking our heads in skeptical disbelief. “Everybody’s competing for the same spot,” he said. “Everybody will not really ignore their
injuries, but, you know, tape it up, suck it up, and go, cause they wanna train more. Let’s put it this way: in the Japanese culture, the way they think is, the harder you work, the better your chances of going up. So, say if I trained ten hours a day, they’d say, ‘He’s gonna make it.’ But someone trains three hours a day: ‘Oh, he’s never gonna make it.’ So everybody thinks they have to do a lot; everybody thinks they have to do more. But if really seriously ask me, that’s wrong. You’re not giving your body a chance to rest. You’re not giving the injuries a chance to heal. It’s typical of us in sumo.” (Kalima, 9/98) Before each practice, or during each tournament day, the changing room echoes with the ripping sound of athletic tape being unrolled.

In sumo, *gaman* extends to the rules: absences from matches are treated as losses, which lead to demotion.¹ In May of 1999 I watched Ganyu limp up onto the dohyo in search of his eighth win, wincing with pain just to complete his pre-bout ritual, his legs heavily taped. A pre-tournament injury to ligaments in his ankle had worsened over the course of the tournament to the point where the man should have been in a hospital bed. It seemed stupid for him to be walking, much less preparing to compete in a sumo bout where he would likely do further damage. But since a losing record would have sent him out of the top division, he was doing all he could to *gaman* through the pain. Ranked as he was at the bottom of sumo’s top division, Ganyu was not that well-known even among those who frequented the Kokugikan, and his match was otherwise insignificant, having no bearing on who would win the

¹ When rikishi are injured during competition in a major tournament, the absences are not counted as losses. Depending on how late in the tournament they withdraw, the absences may not affect their rank.
tournament. And yet no one drew a louder ovation that day than he did, both after he stepped up, and after he lost. The people loved it.

Jesse Kuhaulua was equated with *gaman* long before he became well-known as Takamiyama. He polished the image further by showing up for work every single day of his career, which went far beyond the normal retirement age of his colleagues. “Thirty five years old, he wanted to quit already,” Larry Aweau told me. “I said, ‘No, Jesse. You gotta remember: you’re not Japanese. You’re Hawaiian. The Hawaiians have always been strong, even when they got older.’” (Aweau, 1998) Indeed, Aweau could have used himself as an example. Takamiyama managed to make it past his fortieth birthday, eking out his eight wins at the bottom of the makunouchi division and enjoying more popularity among the Japanese in his role of an old warrior battling on against time than at any other point in his career. He never missed a match until towards the end of a career that would even cause Cal Ripken to stand aside in awe. Jesse Kuhaulua succeeded culturally in Japan because of his humble, likable nature, and because he fought from the position of the underdog. But above all, he was loved because he had become a walking example of *gaman*.

As a judo sensei, it did not take long for Larry Aweau to look at Kuhaulua’s mix of strength and persistence and begin to think of who among his former judo students might also be able to make a career of sumo. There was certainly no shortage of big, strong guys in Hawai‘i. Finding a few with the pride to stick out sumo’s tough early years could not be much of a problem either. Aweau knew that the young Japanese recruits spent most of their early years putting on weight and
increasing strength. But right off the top of his head he could think of at least three high school kids who already had the weight and strength. “When I got back here,” he told me of the return from his first trip to Japan in 1971, “I went around hunting.”

But it took him six years to convince even one local boy to take him up on his offer—Brian George, who wrestled on Oahu’s North Shore for Kahuku High School, and who managed to stay in Takasago Beya until 1979 when a knee injury forced him home. “Everyone thought I was crazy,” Aweau told me, looking back with surprise at the lack of interest. “I couldn’t get anyone else. Nobody cared for it. I talked to a lot of kids from Kamehameha School, and they said ‘Oh no, I’m going to college.’ I couldn’t get any.”

Kuhaulua’s unusually long career on the dohyo gave Aweau’s luck a long time to change, which it finally did in the summer of 1982 when one of his former judo students ran into a mountain of an 18-year-old local Samoan kid one day on the Diamond Head end of Waikiki beach. “Kurtis ‘The Bull’ Iaukea was in Japan for pro wrestling,” Aweau explained, “and he was so surprised to see me: ‘Oh, sensei, whatchu doing up here?’ So I told him I was planning on recruiting for sumo. Then he came home—he was on the beach, because he had a concession there.” The moment Iaukea spotted the kid, “he asked him if he was interested in sumo. He said he knows somebody who can get him in.” For once, the question was met with more interest than scorn, and Aweau called the kid, Salevaa Atisanoe, at his home in Nanakuli on Oahu’s west side.

“I got a hold of him,” Aweau remembers, “and I did some research on his background: his performance in football, is he an easy student to work with on the
field. The coach said ‘Yes, he’s a very good boy.’ Then the counselor. His record was beautiful.” An honors student at the University of Hawai‘i Lab School, Atisanoe was well liked by teachers and coaches, popular among fellow students, and an excellent singer who played the trumpet as well as he played the line in football. The big kid had already won a music scholarship to Syracuse University, but was nevertheless interested in Aweau’s offer. “So I called Jesse and told him, ‘We got a good prospect over here. Come over.’ So he came over, and we signed him up.” By cutting class that day to relax on the beach, “Sale” Atisanoe (sah-lay) ended up competing as a member of Japan’s National Sport under the name Konishiki.

Aweau’s ability to recruit more foreigners like Atisanoe depended entirely on Takamiyama’s performances, both cultural and athletic. The gaijin sekitori had to be enough of a success to entice more local boys to try sumo, and he had to appear Japanese enough for his hosts to be willing to accept more gaijin into their National Sport. On the dohyo, he had to win. His cultural off-dohyo role was something he had to recognize and perform, though not entirely invent, mostly thanks to the form provided by sumo’s Shinto roots and the reality of the banzuke. The way Kuhaulua handled the highlight of his career on the dohyo, roughly ten years before Atisanoe was discovered, shows how he fulfilled these contradictory roles.

Nine days into the 1972 July Nagoya Basho the gaijin found himself in sole possession of the lead. While Takamiyama had put together enough winning records to move steadily up to komusubi—sumo’s fourth rank—he had never threatened to win a tournament outright. The winner of the yusho—championship—in the
makunouchi division walks away with a number of prizes, the most coveted being a huge silver trophy called the Emperor’s Cup. Like his promotion to juryo, and all his other “firsts,” Takamiyama’s run at the yusho was the first by any gaijin. And despite his widespread popularity to that point, the moment was not without controversy. While something around only twenty percent of Japan’s population can claim to be sumo aficionados, the media event became the topic of conversation throughout the country. Many lamented at the condition of the National Sport, and likened the prospect of the gaijin taking the Emperor’s Cup to Japan’s failure to take gold in judo at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics: cause for national shame. The noise increased with each win, but when the gaijin clinched the championship on the final day and humbly—almost disbelievingly—received the country’s most purely Japanese symbol of greatness, shouts of praise from Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka down to average, adoring fans far outweighed any dissent.

“I was in a daze,” Takamiyama later told the English publication, Sumo World magazine. “I wanted to shout: ‘I did it!'” (aa 2-7, 13-17 “Jesse Retires” 7/84). But after eight years he knew there was no place for shouting in sumo, even after the culmination of a dream. Instead, he offered a dignified bow as he accepted the cup from the Kyokai Chairman. Takamiyama had not invaded Japan’s National Sport; he had become a part of it. The yusho in Nagoya was his shining moment, and he came through with a performance cultural as worthy of an Oscar as an Emperor’s Cup.

Kuhaulua’s humble acceptance of the Emperor’s Cup, and the obvious diligence which had earned him the respect of the sumo community, combined over the rest of his career with his expanding role as a real underdog to further endear the
gaijin to his new country. He parlayed his popularity into a brief-but-successful
career as a television pitch-man until the "undignified" practice was banned by the
Kyokai in the early 1980's. (The ban was relaxed in 1998 in an effort to boost sumo's
waning popularity.) But more important was the money he was able to raise over his
career through the support of the wealthy patrons in his koen kai—his personal fan
club—money which allowed him to retire into a position in the Nihon Sumo Kyokai
as an oyakata.

The Kyokai is administered by a group of 105 oyakata in various positions on
various committees. They are all former rikishi who have competed for at least either
one tournament in makunouchi, twenty-five in juryo, or twenty consecutively in
juryo. The number of positions is fixed, and positions are either handed down by
retiring oyakata, or, more commonly, purchased as stocks. When Takamiyama
retired in 1984, stocks were worth more than a million dollars apiece. Further, upon
obtaining stock new oyakata commonly work as coaches in existing heya, or end up
taking over existing heya, only rarely taking the much more expensive path of buying
the land, building, and recruiting enough rikishi to open their own heya.

Takamiyama could be praised enough for his incredible accomplishments on
the dohyo. He could also be praised for his ability recognize and enact the proper
cultural role—a process culminating in his adoption of Japanese citizenship (an
oyakata requirement), which entails erasing one's former identity to the point of a
name change, in this case to Daigoro Watanabe. But the fact that he was able to
attract the support and the money not only to buy oyakata stock, but to open his own
sumo beya, is the most tangible measure of the extent to which he became loved and respected in Japan, above and beyond just being accepted.

The extent to which Kuhaulua was able to fit in in his adopted country is best summed up by former rikishi and sumo commentator Shoichi Kamikaze’s rebuttal of isolated xenophobic comments stemming from Takamiyama’s 1972 championship in the Nagoya Basho: “The notion that the National Sport of sumo cannot be lost to a foreigner is an odd one. Takamiyama came to Japan nine years ago and put out more than twice as hard as other wrestlers. He’s not a foreigner. He’s a sumo wrestler of Japan” (Kuhaulua/Wheeler, 169).

The language of Kamikaze’s praise is worth a closer look. Takamiyama is accepted not because of his championship, but in spite of it. Kamikaze is less impressed with the win than with the hard work, leading one to wonder how the Hawaiian might have fared culturally had he been some kind of sumo phenom who rose up the banzuke quickly rather than someone who had fully and obviously paid his dues. Takamiyama was embraced largely because he acted less as a competitor intent on conquering and excelling than a guest unwilling to abuse the hospitality of his hosts. The joy over his 1972 yusho notwithstanding, Takamiyama held the Sumo Kyokai in a kind of reverence, living and breathing its ideals of “patience and hard work,” as he still does and still likes to say. (Kuhaulua, 1998) Doing what he was told, fitting in, and not making waves were all more important than winning.

“I think he could have gone much higher,” Larry Aweau told me. “He was so much stronger than a lot of those guys, but he would rather stay steady than go all-out, all the time.” The prudence no doubt kept him from injury and allowed him to
set the longevity milestones of 1,398 makunouchi appearances and 1,231 consecutive makunouchi appearances—remarkable achievements in the unforgiving sport, the second of which still stands nearly twenty years after his retirement. But it also kept him a safe distance from ever becoming yokozuna. Takamiyama succeeded as sumo’s Jackie Robinson not because he excelled on the dohyo anyway near the way Robinson danced around the bases, but because he was never a threat.
Growing up, you see plenty, plenty guys go and come back. I mean, I'm not trying to bad-mouth the people or anything but it's... like you said, we had something that could bring us over here, make us keep our mouth shut, and put up with stuff and we got what we got today. Cause there are plenty kids I know, that even wen graduate with me, left, two years later was back. And you know what used to piss me off too, about that, was they always say, “Oh, I couldda been this, I couldda been that.” Fuck, you only get one chance. It's what you do with your chance. Even if you get one small chance, that small chance could lead up to something bigger, das why. They might not say 'em to your face, “Ah, you neva make 'um.” “Your kids are big for not 'ing.” But you heard people talk like that before back home. That's what I neva like people say about my parents. I just came up here, I knew that I had to do good, ah?—Chad Rowan 10/98 (Rowan, 10/98)

Akebono and I discussed the amazing growth he experienced during his senior year one morning on the 1998 Autumn Jungyo way out in the tiny town of Izumo, about as far west as you can go on Japan's main island of Honshu. The Sumo Kyokai was snaking its way towards Kyushu, where the November tournament is held, and was now demonstrating its game to a town wholly unremarkable beyond a single instance in religious history. Shinto legend has it that sumo was born in Izumo a few thousand years ago, where the gods Takemikazuchi and Takeminakata squared off on the beach for stakes somewhat higher than the Emperor's Cup or promotion. The
Kojiki tells us that Takemikazuchi took the win to solidify control of Japan for his line of descendants, which extends down to the current Emperor.

One of three other living connections between the Shinto gods and the rest of mortal Japan sat on the floor of a storage room in Izumo’s sports arena pounding out hand prints—the sumo equivalent of the autograph—attended by four beefy boys half-covered in sand and dressed in black mawashi. As he pounded away, the Yokozuna recalled his life on the Kaiser High basketball court.

“I remember when we wen play Kaimuki,” he said, as excited as though he were recalling one of his sumo championships. He was pounding his hand into an ink pad, and then pounding his print into a designated area on parchment-like pieces of paper already adorned with the smaller prints from the other two yokozuna’s hands, quickly falling into a rhythm for the familiar task of about one second for each thud. His attendants would remove the completed top sheet on the pile and place it somewhere on the floor alone to dry as he alternated with thud after thud between the pad and the parchment. “They was undefeated. They was the same district as us. It was the end of the season. Ho, 1 came out so fired up. 1 made the first ten points, and after that I couldn’t score. I think I was just over-fired up. I was six-five, three-twenty. I was taking offensive charges. I was... Ho, we was fired up that game, we had ‘em. We could have been the first team for beat them.” The Yokozuna reached the end of the pile and took a rag from one of the boys to wipe his hands. “But we lost,” he concluded. The pieces of parchment were now strewn about the room. “We wen fuck up in the end.” Another boy collected them in the precise order in which they’d been strewn, and then left the room. Though Akebono would see none of the
money himself, once he and the other two yokozuna painted the Chinese characters representing their ring names over the handprints, the collections would be worth a couple of hundred dollars each to the Sumo Kyokai.

“See what was real funny,” Chad went on, “was when I wen graduate from high school, the University of Hawai‘i wen call me and they wanted to give me one football scholarship and I never played football in high school. The reason why was Mr. Wolfe went over there and told them that when I put my mind to something, I can do ’um. If I was to try to go out and play football, and I really tried, I probably would’ve made ’um. That’s what he told the coaches at UH” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

Kanani Souza, current head coach for Kamehameha, was the man Wolfe had spoken to. I called him a few weeks later and found out that while Chad had been a few credits short to qualify academically for UH, Souza “was willing to do all” he “could for him” academically. “We were very interested,” he told me. (Souza, 1998)

While the fact that Chad even had a chance at UH after never having played in High School is remarkable considering his athletic level only a few months before, it occurred to both of us that the development went beyond the lines of the basketball court. “I only made honorable mention for basketball,” he pointed out, “but even that one year for me, during that one year, maybe thirteen, fourteen games, I went from nobody on campus to one full scholarship at HPU. I could’ve gone to University of Hawai‘i for football, and I was thinking to myself, ‘See, if I wen try harder from my freshman year I would’ve been able for go any school I wanted to.’” Of a sport he had not played since junior high, he thought: “I probably would have made ’um” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). Many newspaper and magazine bios have exaggerated Chad
Rowan’s performance in the Kaiser gym by referring to him as an all-star. In a poetic sense, he was.

His morning’s work complete, the Yokozuna lied down on the floor and pulled a blanket over himself. “And George,” he said, referring to George Kalima, “he the one always told me, the difference between me then and now is that I was one late bloomer, ah? Cause I started like blooming in my senior year of high school and I then I came up here, and that’s when I wen flourish. You see when they was blooming in high school, I was still not blooming, ah?” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

Akebono closed his eyes and I left him there, still watchfully attended by three of his boys.

When Larry Aweau arrived at the Nu‘uanu Funeral Parlor he knew immediately that these two big boys had as much potential as the Atisanoe kid had back in ‘82. Konishiki had become a huge star in the six years since Aweau had signed him up, going even higher than Jesse had, becoming the first foreigner to reach the rank of ozeki. There was even fearful talk of the gaijin one day becoming yokozuna, but Aweau privately dismissed such talk—the boy had picked up far too much weight, almost three hundred pounds added to the three hundred he already had when he went up. It was only a matter of time before his knees gave out despite the fact that he had four good years to go before reaching thirty. But this stocky kid helping carry the casket, Jesse would like him, maybe in a couple of years. And the taller one. He wasn’t built in any way for sumo, but the way he carried himself, with such assurance and grace, eyes clearing a certain path before him… Aweau had only
ever seen a handful of men walk that way, and they had all worn the brilliant white yokozuna rope around their waists.

He sought out the boys' parents as soon as circumstances allowed. "I'm recruiting students for sumo in Japan," he told Janice Rowan. "Do you think it's okay if I come back a couple of weeks after the funeral and sit and talk with your sons?"

To Janice Rowan, as it had with her boys, this question came out of nowhere. "When he said 'sumo'" she told me during our first meeting. "I could just see these fat Japanese guys pushing each other around the ring. I thought, 'Why does this man want my boys for that?'" (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

Without giving it much thought, she told him, "You know what. You'll have to ask them yourself." Aweau then approached the boys.

"You know what," Ola said, "you get one plane ticket today, I go right now." But at sixteen with two years to go before graduation, Ola was still too young. Aweau would keep an eye on the eager candidate (Rowan, George "Ola," 1998).

The question as to why anyone would want to get on a plane, go to Japan, and participate in something as far out as sumo is complex. Of all the sports in all the places in the world to choose from, why sumo? On the surface it is admittedly bizarre for any American kid to consider putting on a mawashi and a hundred or so more pounds to fight almost exclusively in Japan in a sport more Japanese than baseball is American. Sumo is not the NFL, and it is doubtful whether posters of
great yokozuna like Taiho or Chiyonofuji have ever adorned the walls of any American boy’s bedroom. In Jesse Kuhaulua’s case, joining Takasago Beya had been a natural step in a four-year progression begun with the Maui Sumo Club. His flight to Japan was roughly equivalent to American Tour de France cycling champion Greg LeMonde’s decision to move to Europe in 1981: it was the place to go to compete with the best in his chosen sport. For Konishiki and the rest of Larry Aweau’s recruits, the answer usually involved a combination of a number of motivating factors, such as dreams of grandeur, lack of other opportunities, a chance to learn the language, a sense of adventure, and simple curiosity. For Ola, nothing more than these last two would influence his decision.

As promised, Aweau showed up at the Rowan’s home two weeks later to take Ola out for what turned out to be the first of several meetings in restaurants owned by Aweau’s friends, where he knew they would get special treatment. While he certainly reveled in Aweau’s attention, Ola would have been ready to go to Japan anyway, given the chance. Had the plane ticket been for Wyoming and a shot at the rodeo, or a spot on some Australian Rules football team in Melbourne, he would have been just as keen to get involved. It was all a chance for adventure. And after having quit football, the former star was bouncing off the walls with inactivity. He had to be part of the game, and this was, for him, the only game left.

Chad hardly considered the strange offer. Fat guys in Japan, pushing each other out of the ring. That’s what he knew of sumo from television. It was thousands of miles away. And besides, he was already set to go to HPU and play basketball. “My family was never very well-off money-wise,” he wrote, “so it was the only way I
was ever going to get to go to school” (Rowan, 2). Chad gave Aweau the familiar excuse, explained the situation, and thanked him for the offer.

“I understand,” Aweau said, smiling. “Good luck in college. I know you’re going to do well” (Aweau, 1998)

At Hawai‘i Pacific University Chad Rowan was everything but an all-star, and still a long way from blooming to his full athletic potential despite the fact that he had continued to work with Wolfe and Sapaia throughout the summer. Used to being the go-to guy, and at least expecting to start, the big freshman was dismayed with the level of the other players on his team, and unhappy with the role he would be expected to play once the season started. Given the scholarship based on his potential rather than his current ability, he was red-shirted for the regular season, which meant he would not play at all. He was expected instead to practice with the team and continue to improve, with the idea that the following season he would be at the level of the rest of the team with all four years of his eligibility left.

It is difficult for me now to imagine Chad Rowan sitting patiently at the end of the bench watching all the action unfold in front of him, particularly in light of his prior roles at the chicken farm and the nursery, and on George Wolfe’s basketball team. Later on, starting sumo at a much lower level than he’d expected, he at least fought in real matches that determined his place on the banzuke. Knowing what I do of the maniacal effort he would later put into sumo training makes it even harder to believe he would willingly sit still for very long, brimming as he was at the time with confidence. Chad had become an athlete, and now he, too, wanted to be part of the game.
He did not, however, in any way, want to be a part of the classroom. I’ve come to know Chad over the years as one of the brightest, quickest-thinking, discerning people I’ve met—a bit insecure about the extent of his formal education, but certainly able to keep pace and indeed often out-pace the MBAs and company big-wigs with whom he does business as Akebono. He never enjoyed school at Kaiser, and HPU did nothing to alter his feelings about sitting at a desk under florescent lights listening to someone lecture to him for two hours at a stretch. “The biggest thing I learned,” he wrote later of his college experience, “was that I was only going to school to play ball, and not to study. I realized that I was not learning anything and that I really did not want to go to school anymore. I just got through twelve years of school and I did not want to go to four more years of it.” (Rowan, 2)

And so some three months into his first semester, he dropped out.

Soon after this big decision, Chad went to work as usual at the nursery and considered his situation. His boss had undertaken the ambitious new project of expanding the nursery, building his house on the property, adding an office, and paving the driveway with concrete. They were in the midst of unloading blocks of concrete hollow tile stacked on skiffs at the nursery’s entrance, which meant plenty of hard work for Chad. One by one, by hand, he unloaded and carried the blocks to the other side of the yard and stacked them, sweating in the afternoon sun, thinking of his mother and how she would handle the news of his dropping out. She had been so proud to have her oldest son attending college, on his way to becoming somebody. She would be mad enough to give him lickings, but that wasn’t what worried him this time. He just hated to disappoint her. As for what followed, his chances of becoming
a hotel manager, of becoming somebody, had changed dramatically, leaving this job the extent of his foreseeable future. (Rowan, 4)

He lugged the cinder blocks tirelessly, and tried to think of an alternative to college if he was still to help take care of his parents and his brothers. To become a hotel manager in Waikiki, he would have to be able to speak Japanese. Uncle Larry had offered him that chance months ago, and he hadn’t forgotten it, especially with Uncle Larry always stopping by to pick up Ola and take him to dinner, or to practice sumo, and to talk about Japan. “If you go up there,” Aweau had once told him, “you’re going to get all the glory in Japan. With your mind, I think you can be a yokozuna—the greatest champion in sumo. You’ll never regret going. I know you’ve got everything in you to make it. You just concentrate, and learn from them.” (Aweau, 1998) It was a free ticket—they would take care of everything. If Chad went to Japan for a couple of years, at the very least he would learn the language. And what if Uncle Larry was right? Yokozuna. He didn’t know anything about sumo. But he didn’t know that much about football, either, and they wanted him for that at UH. Sumo couldn’t be that hard. Just push the other guy out of the ring.

He sat down on the stack of blocks and wiped the sweat from his face, thinking, “I cannot be working for Glenn Miyashita my whole life, either.” He was the only one there now that Moku had gone to the mainland on his own football scholarship. And if Moku could go to the mainland, why couldn’t he go to Japan?

He thought of several reasons. Waimanalo was home. Most of his whole life had been played out between Makapu’u point and the nursery, near the north edge of the valley. His father’s health also concerned him. The diabetes had effectively
ended the man’s days away from home, and the nights spent in bars were over as well. His father was usually home now before ten, both for physical reasons associated with his health, and because his mom now insisted on caring for him more actively. They still fought from time to time, but their love for one another was obvious to Chad. Who would help his mother take care of his father? And his brothers were still young, especially Nunu. His mother could not be expected to handle all of this by herself. And then there was Ola. No one could be expected to handle that. But perhaps the most compelling reason to stay was to avoid the reaction he expected from his mother if he were to tell her he wanted to go to Japan.

Then there was sumo. Chad still found it hard to believe. Japan. What did he know about Japan? He couldn’t even speak Japanese. He’d taken one Japanese class at Kaiser, too, and all he could hear was gibberish. All he could see in his textbook was a bunch of squiggly lines and boxes and scratches. None of it ever made any sense to him, and so he’d spent most of his time in Japanese class just wondering what he was doing there. Among the few words he could remember was sayonara, which he’d been forced to say very early in the semester, when he withdrew in order to avoid certain failure. And now here he was, about to move up to Japan for good.

But he would be on TV, finally on TV. He had wanted to be on TV since he was four years old, when he used to pester his mother about it and she would tell him to “stop talking bubbles!” All the glory in Japan. This had to mean money, too. A better life for himself, for his family. He’d never even done sumo before. But then again, he had not played football in years, and was still given the chance at UH. He had gone from nothing to honorable mention in basketball in one year. The question
became not, “Why sumo?” but rather, “Why not sumo?” Fuck, you only get one chance, he thought. Even if you get one small chance, that small chance could lead up to something bigger.

He stood up and went back to lugging the cement blocks, thinking, If I put my mind to it, if I really try, I can do ’um. (Rowan, 10/98)

At the end of his shift, Chad deducted from his time sheet the cost of some flowers, which he gave to his mother when he got home. He wanted her to be in a good mood when he told her that he had decided to quit college in favor of sumo, but when he saw how her bright smile spread across her face at the sight of the flowers, he couldn’t bring himself to spoil the moment. When the flowers began to wilt after a few days, he tried again with fresh ones, with the same result. For the next month he brought fresh flowers about every third day only to clam up at the sight of his mother’s smiling face.

In the meantime, he called his Uncle Larry and explained his decision. Aweau was understandably thrilled after already having given up on the possibility of recruiting Chad and told him he would call Jesse Kuhaulua and get to work on arranging everything for his departure. “You’re never going to regret this,” he told Chad again. “You have everything inside you to make it.” (Aweau, 1998)

About the sixth or seventh time Chad presented his mother with flowers, he was met not with the warm smile, but with suspicion. He had to figure that sooner or later she would guess there was some reason behind the recent fragrance of her front parlor, and that she would call him on it, and that he would finally have to tell her.
“Something’s wrong,” she said. She was in the kitchen preparing dinner, while her husband and two other sons sat in front of the television.

“Mom, I just like get you some flowers. That’s about it.”

“Chad, what’s wrong,” she said, now giving him her full attention.

“Nothing, Mom.”

“Chad.” (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

After all the thinking and pondering, all of the planning, all of the worrying, he had not been able to come up with a way to explain to her what he had done over the past month. *Mom, remember how happy you were when you found out I was going to college? Remember how you always thought I was going be one lawyer? Well, after a couple of months I decided...* He’d gone over it a million times, and it never came out right. If he could make it come out right, he would have told her a long time ago. Instead, here he was trying to think of another way to put it off. Only this time she wasn’t backing away. Before, she would go back to what she was doing, busy with everyone’s dinner. But not this time. This time she knew for sure something was up. This time she put everything down and faced him, and she wasn’t going to turn around until she got an answer—a real answer. It had come down to this one single overwhelming moment. He closed his eyes. He took a deep breath. And he told her.

“What!”
Janice Rowan launched into a tirade that eclipsed any that the walls in the little house on Humunuki Street had ever had to withstand. The ironing board incident, the battles over what to do with Ola, the fires ignited in the name of her husband’s misbehavior—none of these came close. Leaving school was bad enough. But Japan? Sumo? In the end it was probably wise of Chad to drop both of these bombs at once to keep the damage confined to a single confrontation. But at the time, there could not have been a more uncomfortable room on all of Oahu—a feeling which did not improve when Chad’s mother had regained control of her temper, slamming pots as she went back to getting the meal together with a final, “No way!” No one knew what to say, and everyone knew it was probably best not to say anything just yet, especially Chad.

Randy Rowan was also hearing his son’s news for the first time, and he took it quite the opposite of the way his wife had taken it. He smiled proudly at his son, a display which helped, if only slightly, to cut the tension in the room for all of his sons. His son was going to be a professional athlete. His son. He would be on TV, like Jesse was when he won that tournament, like Konishiki was. His son was going be on TV.

He was the first one to break the silence: “I’m proud of you, son,” he said.

“Randy!”

“But Janice…”

“You know what, Randy. Your boy just gave up one scholarship to college. Who’s going pay for him for go to college now?”

“Janice, let the…”
"I don’t want to hear it."

"Janice…"

"Randy. I don’t want to hear it." She slammed the plates onto the counter and scooped rice onto each one with extra force, as though the act would somehow send her son back to HPU.

"Janice," Randy Rowan again broke the uncomfortable silence, "the boy’s been working for us his whole life, from since he was twelve years old. He’s eighteen now. He’s a man. It’s about time for him to turn around and do something for himself."

"Look you!" She turned around and faced him. "I told you I don’t want to hear it." (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

After an equally uncomfortable dinner Randy Rowan talked to Chad alone.

"All these years I spent, trying to get you into sports and stuff like that, I try give you the little push for do something. You know what? Like I wen tell your maddah, it’s time for you for do something for yourself. If going to Japan is what you really want, you have my blessings" (qtd. by Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998)

"But what about Ma?"

"Don’t worry about Ma. I’ll talk to Ma."

"Randy!" She yelled in from the kitchen, "I’m telling you, you stay away from that boy. Stay away from him." (Rowan, Janice, 1998)

For the next two months she would scold her husband for even going near Chad. And for the next two months, as Chad explained later, "I had to try and explain
to my mom why I wanted to go and that my Dad had nothing to do with my
decision.” (Rowan, 4)

After a long, drawn out battle, Janice Rowan finally gave in to her stubborn
husband, and her equally determined son. “I thought he would just come right back,”
she told me. “I told him, ‘Chad, you hate vegetables. What do you think they eat up
there? Vegetables, rice, and fish. What are you gonna eat?’” (Rowan, Janice, 1993)
On Oahu Chad had lived at places like Rainbow’s, where gravy smothers breaded
chicken, and the cardboard box it comes in—with two scoops rice, one scoop mac
salad—weighs as much as five Big Macs. He’d lived at Zippy’s and L&L. He and
George had practically grown up scraping change together so they could afford
Jumbo Jacks. And there was King’s Bakery, a diner worthy of its name that had
every local weeping when it closed in 1996.

Larry Aweau took Chad to King’s Bakery a few weeks before Kuhaulua—
now Azumazeki Oyakata—would arrive to sign him up officially. Uncle Larry and
Chad filled up on local food and discussed a bit of what he could expect in Japan.
Aweau had scheduled a meeting with the oyakata for the beginning of January at a
Waikiki hotel. “It’s going to be hard work,” he told Chad once he knew the boy was
committed to going, “a lot of work. It’s not like football—you get through, then you
go home and recuperate. Your home—that’s the same place you’re gonna be, twenty
four hours. So it’s up to you to push it. When you get up there, forget about Hawai’i,
forget about yourself. Just absorb everything.”

“What do I bring with me?” Chad asked.
“You don’t need to bring clothes. Just bring whatever you have on you. Your oyakata will buy what you need. He’ll take care of everything.” Aweau then handed Chad a Japanese text, and a Japanese-English dictionary. “Every chance you get,” he said, “you read a couple of words.” (Aweau, 1998)

One characteristic of local haunts like King’s Bakery was that you could just about guarantee running into someone you knew every time you ate there. On this day on the way back out to Larry’s car Chad ran into George Wolfe, and was eager to explain to his coach all that had happened in the past month.

“Hey coach, I’m not going to HPU,” he said.

“What!” Wolfe was as shocked as anyone. Chad explained everything and introduced Wolfe to his Uncle Larry.

“I wanna try sumo,” he said.

Wolfe was silent, thinking, as he told me later, “Man. Wow. Wow.”

“Do you really wanna do this?” He finally asked.

“Yeah, I really wanna do this.”

“Then just go over there and take care of yourself. They’re gonna put a lot of weight on you, but, you know, you gotta take care of your joints, knee, ankles. And it’s gonna be hard, real hard. But I know if you put your mind to it, just like you’ve been doing all this time with basketball, you can do it.” (Wolfe, 1998)

A few weeks later Randy Rowan and his two older sons drove with Larry Aweau to meet Azumazeki Oyakata in his Waikiki hotel suite and formalize the agreement. Chad was to sign a contract that would bind him to Azumazeki Beya for
three years, which meant that barring serious injury, he would not be allowed home until the agreement expired. But this was no normal three-year sports contract: according to Nihon Sumo Kyokai rules, Chad would have to remain with Azumazeki Beya for the remainder of his career, and his pay—according to the rank he attained—would not be negotiable. The real purpose of the agreement was to exact a solid commitment from the young Hawaiian, to make sure he would give the sport and the lifestyle a legitimate shot before giving up and coming home after having lived and trained at Azumazeki Oyakata’s expense.

Randy Rowan was the proudest father on the island that day. He knew who Jesse was. He’d seen the man on TV. He even remembered the tournament the man had won years ago, how he’d beaten those Japanese at their own sport. And now he’d become a boss, with his own sumo stable. The first foreigner to become one boss, and he was Hawaiian, too. And now they were going to have a meeting with the man to discuss his son’s future. His son Chad. He’d been pushing Chad into sports since small kid time. For a while he never thought Chad would be any good at sports. Not like Ola—Ola was good at everything, right from the start. Chad had the brains. He might become one store manager, or maybe even a doctor. But look now: they were driving to meet Hawai‘i’s most successful sports star so his son could become a professional athlete. His son.

They all got out of the car in front of the big hotel and Larry gave his keys to the valet. The lobby was a hive of activity, tourists coming and going dressed in beachwear, or what Randy Rowan knew from his bus driving days as the tourist uniform: matching bright aloha wear that looked nothing short of ridiculous, and
socks inside of beach slippers. Cheesy 1950’s Hawaiian steel guitar music was being piped in to set the mood the tourists expected when they’d set off to come all the way to the islands. There were more Japanese than local people, even behind the counter at the front desk. The way his boys looked around at all that was happening, this was already another world—not another Hawaiian in sight—and they were just in Waikiki. Wait until Chad got off the plane up in Japan. Japan! May as well have been another planet, so far away, so different from Waimanalo.

Randy Rowan was certainly not the only one who knew who Jesse was. By this point in his career Kuhaulua had become the kind of man who fills a room, with his presence as much as his size. A physically imposing figure to say the least, Boss has been referred to by other local sumo hopefuls as “The Godfather,” not because, like Musashimaru, he resembles Don Corleone in the least, but for the respect he commands just by being in the room. Time and again during morning practice, I’ve seen the keikoba’s mood change upon Oyakata’s entrance as though someone flipped a switch. Everyone stands a little straighter, does a few more push-ups, charges a little harder. When Oyakata leaves, a wave of relaxation crosses the room, his boys now free from the critical eye. He often affects the effort level during asa-geiko in this way without uttering a single word.

On this day when the Rowans walked into the crowded room, the idea of Professional Athlete became as real as the big man with the long side-burns sitting before them. The presence of the television crew and print reporters in the hotel’s suite added to his mystique. Still something of a local celebrity some three years
removed from his active career, he was now in the midst of proving himself as Hawai‘i’s first oyakata, and the local media were there to play up the idea of his role change. Chad was someone who now faced the same cultural challenges the oyakata had so successfully overcome in his own career. And the story even had an ethnic twist: Konishiki, Taylor Wylie, and John Feleunga were also from Hawai‘i, but they were Samoan, not Hawaiian.

While Chad, Ola, Larry Aweau, and Azumazeki Oyakata offer slightly different versions of the scene that took place that day, they all reach the same general conclusion Larry Aweau recalled when we discussed the big meeting. “When Jesse seen these two big boys walk into the room,” Aweau told me, “his eyes almost popped out. The first thing he did was talk to the brother, talk to Ola” (Aweau, 1998)

“So you’re the boy like try sumo?” The Oyakata’s voice was raspy, and the boy strained to understand.

“Yeah, I like go,” Ola said. Larry Aweau could imagine what Jesse was thinking as he looked the boy up and down: this one will be my first sekitori. He must be almost three hundred pounds already.

“He’s too young,” Randy Rowan said. “Bad enough for his maddah his braddah left college. This one has to finish high school still yet. He’s only sixteen.” (qtd. by Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998)

Oyakata then turned to Chad. As Ola told me, “He told Jesse, ‘I wanna wrestle.’ And Jesse told him, ‘You sure?’ And he said, ‘Yeah.’ But he was looking
at Chad, puzzled, ah? And he was looking at me, and he kept telling them, ‘No, I really want him.’ But I was too young, ah?” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998)

Larry Aweau stood in the hotel room recalling the first impressions the boys had made on him back in June—the clear-headed, straight-walking Chad, and the slumped over, confused-looking Ola. He was convinced that Chad was the better prospect even in spite of Ola’s obvious athletic talent. But his friend Jesse told him, “Oh, no! He cannot do sumo—he’s too tall!” Right in front of Chad and the TV crew and everyone else. Aweau then thought of the long search he’d been on for the past seventeen years, and how hard it had been to find anyone at all with any interest in going up to Japan, and here was a boy already to sign up and get on the plane.

“After he got through talking to Ola,” Aweau told me, “I said, ‘Jesse. All I’m telling you is, take this boy in. You will never regret it. He’s yokozuna material. I seen everything he has.’ I said, ‘I could give him to Magaki Oyakata, or to someone else, but I want to give him to you. You think it over.’” (Aweau, 1998)

“Are you sure you wanna do sumo?” Oyakata asked Chad.

“Yeah, I wanna wrestle.”

“Are you sure?”


Oyakata looked between the two boys again, the brothers. Maybe if he took the one now, he could get the other when he finished high school. “Okay, I’ll take
him," he said at last. Under the watchful eye of a proud and excited father, Chad signed the contract binding him to Azumazeki Beya, Jesse’s training facility.

Chad worked full time for Glenn’s Flowers and Plants until just before he left for Japan, not long after signing the contract. In just a few months he had turned the empty lot into a two-building, paved complex, all by hand, from unloading the tile to mixing and spreading the cement. He had done all this without complaint, and only much later admitted to me his boss “was one slave driver. Oh, the shit he used to make us do. He never buy one tractor for his nursery until after I wen quit and left. Then he finally bought one tractor.” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

Knowing that everything would be taken care of in Japan, Chad gave all the money this project had brought him to his mother the night before his departure. She had said little to him since giving in to his wish to leave, and had yet to get over her anger. He knew she was still convinced he would not be gone for long, which to him simply meant he would work harder to prove her wrong, and in the process, make her proud, make her forget about the fact that he quit college. He would also prove Boss wrong. Boss didn’t even want him; he wanted Ola. Boss probably just took him because he felt sorry for him. But just wait. He was going to show Boss, right from when he got to Japan, show him how wrong he was to make him look stupid in front of all those reporters. After setting aside the money for his mom, Chad gave all of his clothes to Nunu and Ola, along with most of his other things. He packed a small duffel bag with one change of clothes, some letters, some pictures, and his walkman.
Chad’s father came in to talk with him as he packed. “I’m so proud of you, son,” he said. “You really going be somebody. But one thing you gotta remember about the Japanese, I been working with them for long time now, ah? For Grayline, and now at Charlie’s Taxi. They always try for be humble, bow li’dat. Just remember this when you get up there. They going treat you like one supa star, but you remember: always be humble. Never brag or speak big-headed.” Randy Rowan hugged his son. “I’m proud of you” (qtd. by Rowan, 4)

Nunu walked into the room and said, “Ho, my bradda going be one supa star!”

“That’s right, Nunu. I not going come back till I’m yokozuna” (qtd. by Rowan, Randy “Nunu,” 1993)

“All right,” Chad’s father said with a laugh, “but you remember what I said. When you get up there, no speak big-headed.” (qtd. by Rowan, 4)

The Rowans drove to the airport as a family the following morning. Chad was to meet John Feleunga, a graduate of Oahu’s Farrington High School whom Larry Aweau had sent to Azumazeki Beya in July of 1986. Feleunga was to escort Chad to Tokyo’s Haneda Airport, where they would be met by Azumazeki Oyakata himself.

The notes that Chad Rowan handed me the day we met in his apartment and discussed the initial plans for this book back in 1998 began as the Yokozuna’s own first attempt at a memoir of his career. He had just bought a new computer and was, from the looks of what he wrote, in a reflective mood following a difficult tournament in which he had competed hurt. The memoir’s first words, “It’s a late night in
Japan,” evoked the number of “Foreigner in Japan” books and efforts at books I’ve seen over the years that ESL teachers are always starting. After a year abroad they want to tell you what Japan is really like and how the Japanese act, and the curious blend of the modern and the traditional and so on.

But the four single-spaced pages Akebono handed me were far more engaging than any book I’ve read of a foreigner’s experience in Japan, and not entirely because something of great significance ends up happening to the author. With no apologies to the fact that Chad Rowan doesn’t enjoy reading books and has written nothing beyond those four pages since dropping out of HPU, the account is well organized and ringing with the man’s voice. He appears to have written it all in one or two sittings, and then to have lost interest in the project, or to have become intimidated by the prospect of several hundred more pages yet unwritten. A ghost-written sports success story in Japanese was available at his retirement ceremony, but sadly, apart from the love letter to his wife and children at the end, it could have been written about pretty much any athletic success. Reading those four typed pages is a much different experience that makes me hope he goes on to write his own “Foreigner in Japan” book some day.

Here’s what he wrote of the perfect, clear, dry winter day he left Hawai‘i—the kind of day so clear you can see all the way to Maui: “It was a very ordinary day in Hawai‘i. The weather was nice and beautiful. I remember my mom still being angry with me. She wasn’t saying too much. On the other hand my Dad was so excited and proud. Before going to the airport, my family and I went out for our last breakfast together. After breakfast, we headed for the airport. At the airport there were some
people, mostly friends and family. When we got to the airport there was another sumo wrestler there. I knew he was going to be there but I didn’t know who he was. To our surprise his Dad and my Dad worked at the same taxi company. That was a big surprise to my dad and the father of the other sumo wrestler.

“I spent my last moments reminiscing with everybody and trying not to cry. What I realized was that the other boy was just ready to get on board and go. I kind of thought that was really funny, but I also thought that that is what it meant to grow up and go away from home.

“We finally said goodbye to everybody and were getting on the plane. I had such a hard time leaving. Walking through the gate made me realize that I could never come back being unsuccessful. I realized that I was not only doing this for me, but also for my family: my Mom, my Dad, and my two brothers.

“When I was growing up I was always a little bigger than everyone else my own age. I never was outstanding at sports or anything. Well actually there was something I was good at; I could bake. I don’t really know why but I could bake real good cakes. I used to bake the cakes and sell them to shops around our neighborhood. That is when people used to think that I would be soft or big for nothing. That is what slipped into my mind when I was walking through those gates. I could not let my family down. Not even if it killed me.” (Rowan, 4)

All that comforted Chad as he waited for the plane to take off was the memory of what Larry Aweau had told him, more than once: “They’ll be there to meet you at
the airport,” and, “Everything will be taken care of,” and, “You have everything it takes inside you.”

At eighteen, many people join the army or go away to college, huge life-adjustments to university freedom or military structure. They go to different parts of the country, perhaps even overseas. But while they can expect to be away from home for weeks, or even months at a time, first-year students who leave home in the fall know they will be back to visit at mid-semester, or at least Christmas, just as military recruits have clearly-defined leave periods. And more than likely, they are off to places where they speak the language. Chad Rowan sat on a plane headed for a place he knew nothing about, where he knew he would not understand their language, thinking, “I cannot come home being unsuccessful,” a much more vague definition of time he knew might be a matter of years.

“Take a look outside,” John Feleunga told him. “It’ll be your last look for a long time.” (qtd. by Rowan, 4)

Chad looked out at the palms planted around the airport and the green mountains beyond and reflected on his home and the people he had just left behind—something he would find himself doing a lot of in the months to follow. The plane took off and John went right to sleep, while Chad continued to reflect. He took out his walkman and played the one tape in his possession. He opened the envelope his cousin Bud had handed him and found one dollar, and a note which read, “Good luck Chad. We know you’re gonna make it. Keep this as your last dollar to call if you need anything.” (qtd. by Rowan, 4)
CHAPTER 5

The only guy I ever wen look up to in this sport was Ozeki. Konishiki-zeki. That's the only guy I could really relate to, because he came from the same place. Boss, [Azumazeki Oyakata] he was from one different generation, ah? I couldn't kind of understand where he was coming from. Had to be somebody who was there doing it when I was.—Akebono, 10/22/98 (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

Practice heats up in the two weeks preceding each of sumo's six annual tournaments, particularly among the sekitori, who would otherwise cruise through asa-geiko nursing their various injuries and passing along their knowledge to their younger deshi as they maintain their current strength. Phones ring and the top men—most of whom wind up facing one another in the tournament—figure out who is going where for de-geiko, and all end up choosing a sumo beya like playground basketball stars finding the right weekend court to run with the best. A lower-ranked juryo rikishi would be lucky to get one or two bouts in a room crowded with ozeki and sekiwake, so he chooses a heya where he can find rikishi at or just above his level. An ozeki goes wherever he likes, or he lets the competition come to him. And when the fights begin, the laid-back approach the sekitori normally take to practice is gone: they charge hard, and then everyone runs at the winner shouting, just like the lower-ranked boys begging for the next challenge fight. The morning wears on until most of them have competed upwards of twenty times each, and in some cases even
pushed one another across the ring in the blocking-sled exercise to finish with tears in their eyes, covered with as much sweat, sand, and salt as any scrawny jonokuchi kid. As the tournament approaches, and the same thoughts creep into everyone's head. Am I working as hard as Kaio? Am I working as hard as Takanohana? Or Musoyama? Or Musashimaru?

As a distance runner, I've never been able to make much sense of the sumo practice schedule. Raised as I've been on the theory that weeks of hard training should taper into a period of complete rest before race day, I looked on in awe at the way things intensified before the first live tournament I saw in the fall of 1998. I'd seen varying levels of effort among the sekitori in practice on jungyo—only twice in four weeks, in fact, did I see Yokozuna Wakanohana even set foot on the practice dohyo. But once we got to Tokyo, that fear George Kalima spoke of—Am I working as hard as the next guy?—had obviously set in, and everyone from juryo to yokozuna worked to squeeze as much as they could from the remaining two weeks. They went right up until the day before the tournament began—a time when it would have made much more sense for all of them to rest. And to top it off, they continued morning practice every day to the end of the tournament.

"That's one of the things that was hard to get used to," Yamato told me. "When we played football at Kaiser, we practiced hard all the time, but not on the day before the game, and definitely not on the day of the game. But see, everybody's doing it. Everybody wants to train as much as the next guy. It doesn't really make any sense; that's just the way it is." (Kalima, 9/98)
I talked about the idea of rest and its value on several occasions with Akebono, and in spite of the fact that he agreed with Yamato’s analysis in principle, there was never any other way to go about training. As he climbed the ranks he was expected to set an example, of course, by working hard right to the end. But he was always as driven as Tiger Woods to get in a few more practice bouts whenever he could anyway, convinced at all times that they were making him stronger than everyone else.

“That lack of rest might have had something to do with why Konishiki’s knees finally gave out,” I said once when the subject came up. The big ozeki had left the dohyo for good nearly a year before.

Akebono looked down for a moment and reflected on his sempai’s resolve. “Ozeki,” he said, “he was da kine, how you explain ‘em. He was one old warrior, ah? You know, no pain no gain kine warrior.” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98) Akebono meant the words literally, not in the form of some coach’s workout mantra; pain, to Konishiki, meant progress. It meant he was enduring, that he would be better for it. It meant, also, competing through nagging injuries rather than falling down the banzuke. It meant gaman, which is often accompanied by the words, saigo made: to the end.

By the start of the 1988 spring tournament Chad had seen a copy of the banzuke, that list of rikishi written according to rank that Taylor had told him about, and he’d been told which characters represented Konishiki—only a couple of spaces from the very top. He couldn’t read any of the other characters, but what he could understand from the document had been reflected in real life since the moment he
walked into Azumazeki Beya back in Tokyo. The copy of the banzuke he’d seen had black characters printed on fancy off-white parchment, about the size of the Honolulu Advertiser’s front page, and the ones on the top—names like Konishiki and Chiyonofuji, in the makunouchi division—could be seen clearly from across the room. The list was broken in half vertically down the middle, and then again into sixths stacked one on top of the other—one, he had been told, for each division, with the vertical half denoting the “East” and “West” sections of each division. The characters in the second division down, which had been pointed out to him as the juryo division, could also be seen from a good distance away.

But from juryo down through makushita, sandanme, and jonidan, the thing began to look like some kind of Japanese eye chart, all the way down to the jonokuchi division, where you just about needed a magnifying glass to make out that it was any kind of writing at all. He was in maezumo now, not even worthy yet of having his name printed in the microscopic brush strokes at the bottom. He would have to compete in four bouts in a qualifying round before really even being a part of sumo’s competitive world, nearly eight hundred places away from what he had seen on television in Hawai‘i and what he’d been expecting to walk right into.

It was a little like basketball, with the NBA at the top, then the college teams you see on TV, then the junior colleges, high schools, all the way down to junior high. Except no matter how hard Coach Wolfe used to run them, when practice was over he didn’t have to carry Michael Jordan’s bags or clean some college star’s toilet. When practice was over in basketball, everyone just went home. Ate what they liked, did what they liked, cruised with their friends. And when the season was over that
was the end of it. Here there was no season—it just never ended. Except for the
more complex promotions to juryo, ozeki, and yokozuna, a winning record would
send you up—either wither within the division, or to the next division—and a losing
record would send you down. After qualifying in maezumo, he would have to take
four out of seven in each succeeding tournament. If he ever became a sekitori, he
would begin to fight every day and have to take at least eight of his fifteen matches.
Until then he would have to wake up earliest, eat last, bathe last, and be ordered
around by everyone, including fifteen-year-old-kids. He already knew sumo to be
rich with ritual and with symbols, from the top-knots the rikishi wore to the small
Shinto shrines in each sumo beya. He would later see the paddle-like gunbai held by
the referee, the tsuriyane roof overhanging the dohyo. But the symbol that would
always matter most to any of the rikishi—was the banzuke.

In the way it defined sumo hierarchy for Chad, the banzuke revealed to him a
specific path towards success, and fortunately, thanks to how much he was already
coming to enjoy practice, he could imagine himself working his way up the list. It
was right there. Work harder than everyone at your level, and you should move up.
So of course you’re going to go over here, and the first time I show you, you’re gonna
mess up. I guarantee you. But the more we do it, you’ll get better at it. That’s just
the way it works in life. His shiko were improving, and his body was becoming used
to the relentless training schedule, if not also becoming stronger. He could now push
Taylor all the way across the ring and then back during the blocking-sled exercise,
and was coming to relish the feeling of accomplishment that came with being covered
in sand and sweat, having moved such a mountain of a man. He also now knew the
exercise by its proper name, *butskari-geiko*, just as he knew *keiko* to mean “practice,” *de-geiko* (day-gay-ko), “outside practice,” and *keikoba*, “practice area.” He knew that the difference between the sekitori and those below was in every way as pronounced as the white and the black of their practice mawashi. It might even be said that in the keikoba, Chad had come to experience that joy of vast, dramatic, intoxicating improvement that he’d felt on the basketball court, or that any beginning golfer or runner or piano player feels: you start from zero and watch yourself improve from one outing to the next, and the improvement doesn’t begin to slow until you’ve reached some level of competence. Chad did have a long way to go, but three weeks ago they were all having their way with a kid who couldn’t understand a word they were saying. Now not only were their words accumulating in his head, but he was actually beating some of them in the ring.

Back at Chad’s first Osaka de-geiko session that spring, the young Hawaiian watched the banzuke in living breathing action, when a parade of sekitori walked in as he was finishing up his final shiko. The best workout in town was here, where the big boys were running. Mitoizumi spread a handful of salt and took on a few challengers before losing. Then Nankairu. Then Asashio. And some of the other sekitori Chad didn’t know took turns choosing challengers. With the high level of talent in the room no one ever won more than two or three bouts at a time, since the winner was always more winded than the challenger. But when Konishiki finally entered the ring, he knocked off six straight opponents before he was, heavily winded, steered out. Konishiki always lasted the longest. Always.
Chad Rowan’s sempai in Japan by more than five years, Konishiki was something of a Godfather himself to all of the boys from Hawai’i. A bit easier for them to identify with than Azumazeki Oyakata, Konishiki was their greatest source of support. Bright, and obviously strong enough to overpower anyone in the sumo world, he enjoyed a special kind of insider’s respect from the boys. Konishiki took full advantage of this position of authority to impart whatever wisdom he had gained on his way up the banzuke, looking out for his charges like younger brothers, doing his best to point them in the right direction, both actively and by example. And by the time Chad Rowan arrived, Konishiki had a wealth of experience to share with the young Hawaiian. For unlike Azumazeki Oyakata, he had tested the limits of the rigid sumo world from the beginning.

In 1998 a huge sign hanging over the passport control area in Tokyo’s Narita airport summed up in seven words, in English, the qualified brand of hospitality a foreigner can expect to find in Japan: “Enjoy your stay, but please follow the rules.” The problem for a foreigner who plans to do more than just visit is that many of the “rules” are not written. Things are done the way they are because that’s just the way it is, a notion best captured by the well-worn cop-out, sho-ga-nai, which means, “It cannot be helped.” Sho-ga-nai is what salarymen are told when they are shipped overseas away from their families without their consent, for example, or when unreasonable hours of unpaid overtime are heaped upon them.

In the years before Chad Rowan’s arrival, sho-ga-nai was Konishiki’s most formidable opponent. He was never afraid to ask, “Why?” and was never satisfied with “sho-ga-nai” as an answer—an attitude simply not seen in Japan. While
Konishiki was bright enough to recognize this new culture's unwritten rules, he was not afraid to question them, and was not always interested in following them as Takamiyama had. And also unlike Takamiyama, Konishiki initially cared little about the feelings of his hosts—about competing politely by not showing them up in their National Sport. He had not come to follow such "rules." He had come to win.

Larry Aweau had been able to sell the sumo experience to Salevaa Atisanoe back in 1982, and the big kid flew up to Tokyo not long after graduating from University of Hawai'i Laboratory School with honors. Landing at Haneda Airport in time to qualify in July and then compete in the September Basho as Konishiki, the former high-school football star overwhelmed his opponents from the start, winning his debut tournament in the jonokuchi division, in the jonidan division in November, and in the sandanme division in January—twenty straight wins before losing on the final day. Since a large part of training in the junior divisions consists of putting on weight to gain strength, the American's advantage was clear: a compact six feet tall, he was already approaching four hundred pounds, a weight even many of the top-division rikishi never reach. What he lacked in knowledge of sumo technique he made up for with raw power, and quickness and agility uncommon for a man his size. The juniors were just no match for him, and after the Nagoya basho in July of 1983—his eighth, a record at the time for the fastest rise up the lower ranks—he was promoted to juryo.

Konishiki's size and his early reliance on power over technique made it clear to sumo purists that an American with an American attitude was invading their sport. Where Takamiyama had fit in to the sumo world by performing the role of underdog,
Konishiki stood out as a bully with an unfair advantage. His rise to the makunouchi division—also the fastest in history—bred a confidence in the American which in Japan seemed more like arrogance. He never really attempted to fit in, and compounded the problem by speaking his mind even before learning to do so accurately in the new language. He once boasted, for example, that he intended to remain in Japan only as long as he was successful and making money (Sharnoff II: 166).

Konishiki would never come off as well as Takamiyama had partly due to a lack of patience with the press in general. In an interview in his heya one afternoon in 1984, for instance, Konishiki was obviously irritable and tired—all of the other rikishi were napping at the time—as he fielded questions which appeared to insult his intelligence. (Any foreigner complimented for the hundredth time on his or her ability to use chopsticks can empathize here.) By the time they asked Konishiki what sumo meant to him, he simply said, “Kenka,” a term which translates as “fight,” but refers to something more along the lines of a street fight.

The answer was met with silence.

“Kenka, ja nai?” he said again, impatiently, condescendingly: “It’s a fight, isn’t it?”

“Like boxing?” The interviewer finally said.

“Hai” (Konishiki).

In many ways, of course, sumo is like boxing. But at the time of this particular interview, Konishiki had neither the ability with the language, nor the patience, to draw the important distinctions. The resulting disapproval showed him
that he had far underestimated the importance of his public persona and the reverence
in which he was expected to hold his sport.

Another instance. During a less-formal interview done around the same time,
the cameras caught him on the street. “Are you gaining confidence?” he was asked.

Konishiki nodded and said, “I will from now. I’ll get better.”

“If you get better,” the interviewer continued, “You may have to take on ozeki
and yokozuna.”

“Ataru, yo,” Konishiki arrogantly answered, using a term which translates
roughly to “It’s on target,” or, in this case, “That’s right: bring ‘em on” (Konishiki).
According to the sumo script, he was supposed to say “Gambarimasu” with great
humility, a word invoked by rikishi more often than the Lord Jesus Christ is thanked
for touchdowns in the NFL. It means, simply, “I will try my best.” Konishiki’s real
affection for sumo’s outward simplicity contrasted badly with his grasp of its cultural
significance.

His public arrogance, something natural and innocuous to an American
athlete, if not part of the game, was at odds not with sumo but with sumodo, the
austere sumo behavioral code/belief system responsible for a rikishi’s precise
language, deliberate steps, and lack of emotional display. In the Japanese language
the concept of do, which translates both literally and abstractly into the word “way”
or “path,” is used as a suffix to define accepted ways of following way of the gods
(Shinto), the way of the warrior (bushido), the flexible way (judo), and countless
other “ways.” (Kuhaulua/Wheeler, 47) The contrast here with Jesse Kuhaulua, who
excelled at sumodo while taking the slow and steady path up the banzuke, is obvious.
While Konishiki’s was approaching sumo greatness, he was all but ignoring
sumo—an oversight that would come back to haunt him. Yoshitaka Takahashi, a
professor of German literature and chairman at the time of the Yokozuna Promotions
Council, had this to say at the time:

The problem is that sumo is a kind of ethnic culture rather than a pure sport.
The life of a sumo wrestler involves cultivating wealthy patrons and entails
other obligations which would be negative elements for ordinary athletes. But
now this strong guy barges in with the idea that winning is all he needs to do.
(qtd. by Weatherall 50)

The notion of sumo as National Sport was lost on Konishiki, whose early political
failures undercut his triumphs on the dohyo. He would learn that sumo was not the
Olympics, but until then his actions—actions that any American athlete might take—
would do nothing to help him. They combined with his devastating performances on
the dohyo to frighten many Japanese—sumo purists and non-fans alike. Death
threats, an effigy nailed to the outside of a Shinto shrine, hate mail—it all rained
down on him like so many tsupari blows to the face.

Konishiki stood at center stage before an audience that extended far beyond
the mere thousands who watched him fight in the Kokugikan. Indeed, the first thing
anyone notices about Tokyo is how crowded it is. The wave of humanity
overwhelms foreign visitors the moment they walk through the door from customs to
the public part of the terminal. And while airport terminals in capital cities around
the world buzz with people, here there is a difference. After leaving the airport, it
only gets worse. The stacks of bikes at each outlying commuter station’s multi-
leveled bicycle parking lot belong to people who multiply in number as the train nears
the city center until it reaches one of the hub stations of the Yamanote line, which circles central Tokyo in a giant loop. Japan Railways employs extra white-gloved platform workers during rush hour at many of these hubs to stuff people onto trains like one might over-pack a suitcase. In a country famous for privacy and respect of the other person’s space, people jostle past one another without apology—less out of rudeness than because Tokyo would come to a grinding halt if every bump and push had to be accounted and atoned for. There is no such thing as a deserted street, or even alleyway. Walking down some streets can be like trying to exit the Kokugikan after a sold-out day of sumo.

The sense of this crowd as audience to Konishiki’s cultural drama is best understood by the rest of us gaijin who’ve had the chance to live in Japan. To begin with, people are always looking at you, even if you’re not Konishiki, and even if you don’t weigh six hundred pounds. Children will stare and point when they sit across from you on the subway. Sometimes they’ll tell their parents that you look scary, right in front of you, and then their parents will look at you too, and say, “Oh, he’s a foreigner,” as if that explains everything. I often rode the subway with George Kalima a couple of years after his retirement. While very few people recognize him as Yamato anymore, his bulk garners as much attention as his sekitori status ever did during his brief moment in the sumo spotlight. In the space of twenty minutes one night we heard the words, “Wow, he’s big!” eleven times as people got on and off the train, and each time everyone in the vicinity turned to look at him. (Blatant and very persistent rudeness among the famously polite Japanese with regard to anyone who looks different, including big-bodied or tall or short or bald Japanese, is another story
altogether.) The attention comes often enough for all gaijin that even when no one
notices you in the least, you begin to think all eyes are boring into you. Then the
feeling combines with your own understanding of the visual difference between
yourself and everyone else—particularly if you come from an ethnic melting pot like
Hawai‘i or New York—to create the impression that you’re totally alone, standing
before the footlights in front of an audience of millions wherever you go.

The drama metaphor really works for what Takamiyama and Konishiki and
Akebono and Yamato faced because of the heightened dramatic quality of real life for
everyone in Japan on the other side of the footlights. The members of this audience
also perform, on a daily basis, for one another. To be sure, acceptable behavior exists
in all cultures in one form or another; protocol and proper forms of address are not
unique to Japan. Similarly, work schedules in places like American hospitals or
hotels are set as rigidly according to seniority as they are in Japanese hospitals. But
in Japanese hospitals co-workers specifically refer to one another in sempai-kohai
terms, as in, “This is Takahashi-san, my kohai at the hospital,” and then act
accordingly, even outside the workplace. And while Americans put on different faces
for everything from a job interview to a first date, in Japan there is a special word to
name this daily drama: tatemaе. The face in front, or, the face shown. Its opposite is
also named: honne. One’s true feelings. Foreigners come into contact with tatemaе
immediately, whether they know it or not, when their first “Konnichi-wa” is met with
an enthusiastic, “Oh, your Japanese is so good!” Many of us come to distrust
tatemaе, to find it patronizing or even annoying. You know your Japanese is in fact
good when people stop complimenting it. *Tatemae* is cocktail-party small-talk taken to an art form, and can range from excessive politeness to outright lying. It is an act, but it does have a purpose, which is to maintain harmony, to keep certain relationships on a predictable, safely distant, efficient level.

Tatemae's relationship with *honne* is difficult to grasp in practice in familiar situations, since people certainly don't always talk according to a script. The real point in mentioning them at all is the fact that these modes of behavior don't just exist; they are named. That *honne* can be seen most often when people are drunk says much about the way Konishiki was initially perceived when he began to speak publicly: drunken behavior, perfectly acceptable in Japan, is an escape time where people are encouraged to let loose, to be themselves, even to speak their minds—in many cases, no matter who is present and who might be offended. Drunken people in Japan are called "cute," as a child might be. And Konishiki, hardly a master of cocktail-party small-talk at the time, was, in all his honesty, being childish.

The most difficult part of climbing the banzuke for Konishiki, and indeed all the gaijin rikishi, was not the sweat or the wins on the dohyo, but the expectation that they somehow join the rest of the Japanese on the other side of the footlights, as equal participants in the everyday performance. Or as George Kalima put it when I asked him about the obstacles he overcame before his own name *Yamato* was painted on the list's top level, "At first [the hardest part of sumo life] was being away from home. And then after I got over that it was trying to see myself as a Japanese person, so I could blend in." (Kalima, 6/98) Notice he did not say anything about *becoming* a

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2 The *tatemae-honne* distinction is a major thesis for most books in English claiming to explain "Japanese Culture." The very best discussion on this daily drama I've seen so far is Dr. Masao
Japanese person, or about assimilating. He had to be able to see himself as a Japanese person. In order to appear to have assimilated, George ended up creating two distinct roles for himself. “In my life now,” he told me back when he still wore the white practice mawashi and the chon-mage, “there’s two of me: there’s a Yamato, and there’s a George. There’s two sides. The Yamato side will always, you know, always say ‘I’m sorry’ and back down. But the George side will always stand up for himself. See, I kind of break myself off, you know? Because when you do sumo, it’s a totally different world. It’s a whole different culture. You have to learn it. If you’re alone, or just with friends, you can be yourself. But in the public’s eye you have to be a sumo wrestler. You have to be Yamato.” (Kalima, 6/98) In his eight years in Japan before I met him, George Kalima had learned much about tatemae and honne, and much about constructing culturally appropriate identities, or, again, in Kondoian terms, about Crafting Selves.

Konishiki had become equally adept at the public performance in the years between his comment likening sumo to kenka and Chad Rowan’s 1988 arrival. The criticisms against him had been tempered by his recovery from a knee injury sustained in an effort to hoist the 6’6”, 335 lb. Kitao from the dohyo in the May 1986 Natsu Basho. The move placed more than eight hundred pounds on the knee, ripping ligaments and forcing the sekiwake to sit out in rehabilitation until the fall tournament. The injury humanized Konishiki in the eyes of even the Sumo Kyokai, who rewarded the now-underdog with promotion to ozeki the following year (1987) for the diligence and character he showed in his recovery (gaman), and of course, for

Miyamoto’s.
the numbers he resumed putting up. Konishiki was still improving on the dohyo, but more importantly, he had become more aware of his larger role outside.

In a televised interview that year, a wiser, more mature, and more fluent Konishiki addressed, among other early mistakes, his 1984 kenka comment. His explanation combined an admission of guilt and adept back-peddling, and substituted the Japanese-English “fight-toh” for “kenka” when he meant “fight” in its positive context.

“My comment was misinterpreted,” he said to the interviewer. “I have the feeling of a fighter inside. Whenever I face a match I give it all I’ve got. It’s the fighting spirit in me. Even my coaches tell me, ‘Put up a good fight.’ They mean, ‘Do the best you can.’ The media thought I was talking about kenka. You shouldn’t do kenka with anyone.”

“When the Japanese first heard you,” the interviewer responded, “they thought you said ‘kenka;’ they thought you were talking about a brawl.”

“Yeah, I know,” Konishiki admitted. “It was wrong. I was talking about fight-toh no kimochi [the feeling of a fighter]” (Konishiki 1989).

Whether or not Konishiki was sincere in the interview is not the point. He had learned to follow the rules, at least publicly. He was certainly convincing, having finally learned—in large part from the reactions of his audience—the importance of his public persona in the folk-rooted performances of both sumo and the larger national culture.

The Kabuki term senshuraku refers to both the final day of a Kabuki performance (the traditional drama form occupying the National Theater), and the
final day of a major sumo tournament, a fact not lost on Konishiki as he neared sumo's leading role of *yokozuna*. Even after the last bout is fought and the Emperor's Cup is handed out, the performance, for Konishiki, the rest of the rikishi, and the rest of Japan, goes on.

As useful as this performer-audience metaphor is in showing some of the cultural moves Hawai‘i’s rikishi had to make to succeed in their sport, however, it only takes us so far. For what it’s worth, in fourteen countries and thirty-five states I have yet to find a place that even comes close to its level of hospitality, my current home’s claim to the “Aloha Spirit” notwithstanding. And yet despite the kindness so many Japanese offered them on an individual level, and despite the fact that they could learn to enact the sumo code, learn Japanese, and even, in several cases, adopt Japanese citizenship, in the end Hawai‘i’s rikishi would always be perceived as foreigners. For one thing, the visible difference in racial make-up would always set them apart. But more important has been official policy towards those in Japan not specifically of Japanese ancestry. In addition to not granting permanent visas even to tenured foreign professors at Japanese universities, requiring foreign workers to pay into the pension fund after three years but never allowing them to collect, and annually fingerprinting all foreign residents up until as recently as 1999, the Japanese government extends no political rights of any kind to its foreign residents no matter how much they have contributed to Japan. And while no foreigner in any country should expect the right to vote, in these ways official policy continues to single out as potential troublemakers not just those from abroad, but anyone in Japan who is not
ethnically Japanese. As late as 1998, Japan scholar Patrick Smith had this to say about what ethnic Koreans—many of whom have never been outside of Japan, and many of whom were implicated in Ishihara’s remark—could expect from their home country:

There is a long list of things the Koreans cannot do in Japan. They cannot expect to attend a major university or work at a leading corporation. They pay taxes as if they were citizens, but they cannot vote, stand for public office, or support a political party. They obtained the right to public housing and other social benefits, but only after protracted campaigns, and they still do not enjoy some of the benefits their taxes help to finance. Nor can a Korean, even a third- or fourth-generation Korean who has never been to Korea, carry a Japanese passport. They travel on Korean documents and cannot leave Japan without a reentry visa. In effect, Koreans must have an official permit to make a journey outside Japan (270).

For Konishiki, the real demarcation of Japan’s qualified acceptance of foreigners ended up coming down to one word: *hinkaku*. They let him come to Japan. They let him compete in their National Sport. They let him dominate its top performers. But when he dared approach the sacred white rope, people began talking about *hinkaku*, a kind of dignity many Japanese believe only a Japanese can possess, and one of the unwritten prerequisites for yokozuna promotion. Since a yokozuna is meant to act as a role model for the rest of Japan—a personal embodiment of strength, consistency of effort, and dignity—he must exude *hinkaku*. That is, he must demonstrate his understanding of his own bearing, place in the hierarchy, and effect on others. He should reflect this understanding in his physical appearance, dress, behavior, and speech, carrying himself accordingly without question or exception. The many aspects of *hinkaku* are given as much consideration as a rikishi’s strength in questions of promotion to yokozuna.
“We want our yokozuna to be more than just winning wrestlers,” Nihon Sumo Kyokai Chairman Dewanoumi Rijicho said in a 1992 Tokyo Foreign Correspondent’s Club lecture. “We want them to have a sense of responsibility, to sumo and to society at large. We want them to have a sense of manners and dignity that we believe is the most important thing in sumo” (Dewanoumi 6). Or to put it another way, “We want them to be Japanese.” Foreigners, while not necessarily excluded, must have full understanding of Japanese in this sense, including *tatemae*, and the “rules.”

Once Konishiki learned to act according to the “rules,” as he demonstrated in his 1987 discussion of his early cultural missteps, he did his best to ignore the noise surrounding his rise, and to prove himself worthy of promotion on the dohyo. The pressure associated with his position as a foreigner trying to prove himself had mounted as he climbed the banzuke, and went up a notch further with each of the five runner-up performances preceding his first tournament victory in 1989, when he was finally able to put together fourteen wins against one loss for the Emperor’s Cup, which he accepted in tears.

But the relief of having won a tournament was short-lived, as expectations rose for a victory in the Hatsu Basho, and finally, promotion to yokozuna. Konishiki fell short, as he did the following September after putting together two more runner-up performances. After the retirement of two of the remaining three yokozuna in 1991, promotion had seemed a question of “when” rather than “if,” but it was becoming apparent that Konishiki lacked the focus on the dohyo to put at least three successful performances together. The first accepted requirement for yokozuna promotion is to win two consecutive basho or compile a record of “equal worth”
before the intangibles regarding hinkaku are even discussed, but the American always seemed to break down when this chance at consideration was his to win or lose.

Less than two weeks before the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Konishiki won the Kyushu Basho and raised expectations yet again. A victory in January’s 1992 Hatsu Basho would finally put him on top, and even many Japanese fans were rooting for him. He had come to be accepted by many in Japan, and his role was unique: he had become an ambassador to both America and Japan in a time of rising tension between the economic rivals. But again Konishiki fell just short, going 12-3 and finishing third to Takahanada (14-1), the 19-year-old who, along with his older brother and Akebono (second at 13-2) represented the future of sumo. Still, all was not lost, for Konishiki’s strong performance in the losing cause made it possible—but by no means certain—that a win in Osaka’s Haru Basho would place his record in the “equal worth” category.

Konishiki did take the Emperor’s Cup in Osaka, but when he was not promoted he became embroiled in relations between the two countries that had been deteriorating since President George H.W. Bush’s attempt to sell cars on a diplomatic mission in January of that year. Japanese accusations of racism with regard to the Japan Bashing then at its height in America were met with a New York Times article quoting the American rikishi as claiming his status as a foreigner kept him from being promoted. “I cannot contain my feeling any longer,” he reportedly said. “I hope this makes a point to [the Association] so they just don’t leave me hanging” (Sanger I A 3:1). Konishiki later denied making the remark, saying another American Takasago Beya rikishi had answered the phone and impersonated him. The Times could not
confirm whom it had interviewed (Sanger II A:11). But either way, irreparable
damage had been done.

Amid accusations of racism coming from an America which had never held
any interest in sumo but which now linked Konishiki’s fate with such things as
Japan’s double standards on international trade, the Nihon Sumo Kyokai opted to
place the big man’s fate squarely in his own lap, by virtually guaranteeing his
promotion with a win in the May tournament. Yokozuna Asahifuji (1991) and
Yokozuna Hokutoumi (1987) had been promoted after three-tournament records of 8-
7, 14-1, 14-1, and 11-4, 12-3, 13-2, respectively—records the Kyokai could not help
but admit were inferior to the 13-2, 12-3, 13-2 record they claimed was not good
enough to promote Konishiki. But they claimed that they had been considering
tightening promotion requirements since Yokozuna Futahaguro abruptly quit sumo in
1988, reportedly shoving his okamisan to the floor after a heated argument with his
oyakata. (Futahaguro had been promoted without having actually won a single
championship. Ironically enough, he was also the opponent, named Kitao at the time,
against whom Konishiki ruined his knee in 1984.)

In his Foreign Correspondent’s Club lecture, Kyokai Chairman Dewanoumi
Rijicho went on to explain the subtleties of the “equal worth” promotion, its relation
to sumodo, and, without actually saying so outright, the reasons why Konishiki failed
to qualify:

We have what we call the Yokozuna Promotions Council with about 13
members and we look upon it as an advisory body, representatives of the fans.
They meet after the basho and make a recommendation, but they have no binding
powers. Then the Judgment Committee and the Board of Directors meet, and we
make the decision. There are certain cases where a rikishi might not have won
back-to-back yusho, but he may qualify because there’s a certain high quality to his sumo and he’s a good educator, a good leader, and he represents the best of what sumo is and teaches younger rikishi. It’s a little difficult to understand, but we would promote someone like this to sumo’s highest rank. And there have been cases where we’ve done it. As for Konishiki, we didn’t think he had the necessary record. In other areas of his character, it would be ill-mannered of me to mention here these personal things that we would like to see him change. It involves his own personality and is something we discuss directly with him. There are a variety of points that we considered, but it’s just that this is not the forum to discuss those points. There is also the idea of personal opinion. For example, someone might say that he might be too heavy as far as health is concerned. But we look at the important things to be aware of. We look at many different factors in the process. (Dewanoumi 9)

The Chairman’s defense here is wonderfully Japanese in what it says between the lines. Without the back-to-back wins, a rikishi is at the mercy of the opinion of a group whose individuals—none of whom have ever put on a mawashi—are accountable for the final decision. In addition, here are all the reasons why Konishiki is not qualified, including his record, his personality, and even his record weight. Konishiki may have improved his act in the public performance over the years, but in the end, he still lacked hinkaku, at least to the point that his borderline record would not stand alone as evidence warranting promotion.

At the time there was no getting this across to an American public raised on a “let the record speak for itself” theory of sport. Americans would never understand the cultural significance of sumo; after all, Konishiki himself had failed to grasp this central aspect of the sport early in his career. The noise escalated as a result of judgments based on generalizations about culture rather than on considering Konishiki’s situation as something unique, both in America and Japan, in that “us-them” climate stemming from the economic tensions of the time, Konishiki’s own early failures at sumo, and, perhaps most importantly, the communal nature of
Japanese culture. A country sustained by group memberships logically thinks of itself as an exclusive larger group. The larger group to which all Japanese belong—Japan itself—is most important, and Konishiki had been threatening it from the start. He was not welcomed initially because he did not know how to play his role within the community, and certainly never submerged his point of view in deference to the group. His chances at promotion after the Osaka Basho, however slim in light of his record and the more conservative turn the Kyokai wished to take regarding future promotions, may also have been snuffed because, to many, he was still considered part of "them."

Novelist Noboru Kojima, a prominent member of the Yokozuna Promotions Council at the time, went so far as to write an article in defense of the National Sport entitled, "We Don't Need Gaijin Yokozuna." "What makes sumo different," he wrote, "is its own particular characteristics of civility, which is the basis of Japanese morals and values. I cannot agree with a school of thought that would make a gaijin yokozuna as part of internationalization" (Newsweek). Japan had of course internationalized extensively in the twenty years since Takamiyama became the first foreigner to capture the Emperor's Cup. And yet whenever Konishiki came close to the sacred white rope, xenophobic comments like these appeared, as though time had stood still and Japan remained isolated as late as 1992. Konishiki brought more heat on himself for responding to Kojima's comment for what it was: racist propaganda. That he was honest enough to call the article "racist" was further at odds with the yes-man persona the Kyokai wished him to take on, a sort of political gaman to which the American was unwilling to submit.
The political pressure brought on by the escalating noise did nothing to help Konishiki on the dohyo, a place where the normal stress surrounding competition could be more than he could handle anyway. Konishiki’s career to this point had been marked by strong efforts which fell short in the face of pressure. While in the past he had put this pressure on himself, expecting his swift rise through Juryo to continue right up until he became yokozuna, now it was coming from everywhere. Through no fault of his own, Konishiki had become an ambassador for America—an America enraged at a country whose leader had branded them “lazy.” An America in the midst of an election year where campaign speeches were peppered with terms like “level playing field.” An America whose most widespread knowledge of the Japanese “culture” had come from a stereotype-perpetuating bestseller called Rising Sun. In Konishiki we had found a symbol of the American work ethic, a symbol of American superiority we so desperately seemed to need at the time.

In Hollywood, the American would have gone undefeated in the crucial tournament, left his precious yokozuna rope in the middle of the dohyo, and walked off into the sunset and back to an adoring American public. But in the actual performance, Konishiki, this time more understandably, failed to come through. He opened the tournament with four consecutive wins, but followed with a disastrous four-loss plunge which took him out of contention early. He finished out of the running with a record of 9 wins and 6 losses in what turned out to be his last run at the very top of the banzuke.
Right from when I first got here they were in all the newspapers and the magazines. That day we all joined together, me, Kaio, Taka, Waka, had reporters and TV cameras everywhere. At first I thought it was for see one more foreigner join sumo, but they weren’t there for me. They were there for Taka and Waka. Right then, that’s when I knew I neva like lose to those guys. They part of the reason I made it to where I am today.—Chad Rowan, 5/5/99 (Rowan, Chad, 5/99).

From time to time in conversations surrounding this book, Akebono has stopped mid-story to add extra emphasis to names that come up, partly to help me understand who the main characters in his life have been, and also to impart whatever gratitude he could to people he believes made his career possible. George Wolfe, Taylor Wylie, Konishiki, a former Azumazeki Beya rikishi named Imura, his cousin Nathan, Uncle Freddy, Larry Aweau, a few others. When I’ve probed about other names he seemed to gloss over, he’d say, “Plenty people like say they my Japanese Aunty, my Japanese dis, my Japanese dat. Maybe they wen help me, but it was ‘cause I was ‘Akebono’ already” (Rowan, Chad, 8/98). Sometimes he’d politely intimate that he was only in the relationship for business reasons, or he’d simply roll his eyes and change the subject. When Chad really wished to acknowledge someone, sometimes he’d say, “That’s somebody you should talk to.” He’d always say, “That’s one of the guys that was there all the way from the beginning.” The list is Akebono’s personal banzuke of people who really made a difference, and the list is short. “I can
count the people on my fingers right now and tell you who wen help me,” Chad has
told me. “All these other jack-asses, they just along for the ride—I neva meet most of
them until I made juryo. I mean people who I knew from the beginning, from
nobody, when I still had my short hair” (Rowan, Chad, 8/98).
Akebono’s banzuke developed as he and I spoke over the course of the four-week
summer jungyo tour, often only a matter of feet from his fellow yokozuna
Takanohana and Wakanohana, brothers Koji and Masaru Hanada. At the time they
were only grudgingly part of his list, as the competition that pushed him—even in the
totally relaxed and languid afternoons otherwise wholly free of any competitive
atmosphere.

Despite the long, drawn-out stretches of the jungyo tours, never did I see any
camaraderie among Akebono, Takanohana, and Wakanohana. Akebono’s dressing
room arrangements differed from venue to venue along the tours I followed through
1998 and 1999, from isolated to communal quarters. In some places Akebono
stretched himself out on a straw mat at the end of a long line of reclining sekitori
situated according to rank. In others he would share a smaller room with the other
two yokozuna, the two ozeki, and the two head referees. Sometimes the three
yokozuna would be put together. So except on a few rare occasions when he was
given a room of his own, or when one (or both) of the brothers was home nursing an
injury of some kind, Akebono spent close to six hours a day every day for weeks at a
time lying not more than twenty feet from his two closest rivals. Aside from one
occasion in the small city of Fukushima when Akebono very politely asked
Wakanohana to autograph some programs for a couple of visiting friends (to which
Wakanohana more than willingly obliged), not a single word passed between any of the three yokozuna.

Wakanohana is a small man by sumo standards, standing about 5’10” and weighing around 280 pounds. During his days on the dohyo (he has since retired) his round body was among the most solid in sumo—or any other sport, for that matter—marked by legs that rippled deeper than any body builder’s or track star’s. On the dohyo he could use those legs to make life miserable for the 6’8” Akebono, either by darting around to get him off balance, or by digging in with a double front grip on the Hawaiian’s mawashi and using all his might to tip him from side to side. (To that point, in fact, their career record against one another was even.) At the time he was easily the most popular rikishi in Japan, owing in equal parts to a lovable smile, his obvious position as a physical underdog who out-gamaned just about anybody, and his recent promotion to sumo’s top rank. He was often surrounded by high-level fans from whatever small town we happened to be in, to whom he spoke softly and affably, flashing that famous smile for their pictures. He always returned my greetings more with that smile than with the stoic countenance one would expect from a yokozuna, and I’m certain he would have sat for an interview at any time had I gotten Sumo Association permission—an act that would have brought me access to far more of the important characters, but that would also have compromised the integrity of this book.

Takanohana may also have spoken with me, but after watching him for several weeks it was clear to me that such an interview would have yielded little if anything beyond allowing me to pad my research with a sumo cliché or two. Much
more substantially built than his older brother at 6'2", 350 pounds, by the 1998
summer jungyo Taka had taken the Emperor's Cup 19 times and was, at twenty-five
years old, already considered one of sumo's all-time greats. He would always walk in
and silence the dressing room for a moment like Darth Vader, in a zone of his own
and seemingly unaware of anything at all around him. His attendants even followed
in a kind of formation. Sometimes he would walk out just as abruptly and disappear
for hours in the middle of the day, presumably off to train somewhere while his
competition slept. But after sitting and relaxing for a while, the famously robotic
Yokozuna would usually melt just a bit and begin to speak quietly to his boys, or to
any visitors who happened by. Once or twice his face actually seemed to morph out
of its usual forward stare and begin to look like it might move towards expressing
some kind of emotion.

Wakanohana has said, in kind enough words, that he could not be friends with
someone against whom he must compete, echoing a common belief among many of
sports' fiercest competitors. Takanohana, the most single-minded competitor of the
three, seemed almost pathologically obsessed with everything to do with sumo and
was constantly surrounded by an aura that asked that he be left alone.

When I asked Akebono at the time about his relationship with the brothers he
simply said, "They're the enemy" (8/98).

This had been the case since February 20th, 1988, when they were all officially
weighed and measured and registered as members of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai prior to
Osaka's Haru Basho. The place was a din of auto-winders and clicking cameras that
had nothing to do with the arrival of another gaijin rikishi. They were all there to see what they all believed was the future of sumo. Masaru and Koji Hanada, seventeen and fifteen-year-olds with the pedigree of sumo thoroughbreds, were registered as “Wakanada” and “Takadanada”—names that would change once the boys proved themselves worthy of the names made famous by their uncle Wakanohana and father (and Fujishima Oyakata at the time) Takanohana. The following day, the Hanada brothers’ faces were plastered across front pages nationwide. Chad Rowan could read none of the strange squiggles, of course, but he bought a paper anyway, knowing full well just from watching the hype what was being said about the brothers. He cut out pictures of each and taped them to the wall in Azumazeki Beya just over the area where he was assigned to sleep. Konishiki, Mitoizumi, Chiyonofuji—these men were not the enemy. He was not even in their league yet and wouldn’t be for some time. But Wakanada and Takadanada—they were no better than him, all the way down at the bottom. He looked at their pictures every night before falling asleep now, vowing to beat the Hanadas every chance he got.

His own sumo name was to be Taikai, a name meaning “Big Sea” and alluding, however vaguely, to his roots in the middle of the Pacific. “Taikai” is also a pun on takai, which means “tall,” in reference to the Hawaiian’s gangly 6’8” frame, which Chad managed to control enough to come away with four wins in the Osaka maezumo qualifying tournament for a place in the jonokuchi division at the bottom of the banzuke. He had overwhelmed his very first opponent at the tachi-ai—the initial charge—and blasted him off the dohyo in a bold, low-percentage move which worked convincingly enough to give him the confidence to put together the necessary wins to
qualify. And his very first loss underscored for him the permanence of result. The ring was small and circular, a test of truth with precious little room for error and only rare opportunities to recover from losing the tachi-ai. The moment he lost he cringed, a bit like a child whose errant throw of a baseball is headed straight for a window, wanting the moment back. If only he'd gotten his hands up faster, or stepped to the side, or anticipated his opponent's throw attempt, or known better where he was standing in the ring. The matches only lasted seconds, sometimes shorter than the practice bouts. But in practice you could just stand up there and challenge the guy again. Here, it was just over. All that training, all that waiting, and it was over just like that. He had come all the way to Japan to compete for five seconds at a time.

When the tournament ended Azumazeki Beya threw a senshuraku party, as each heya does after every tournament, usually at some hotel banquet room. The spread can be impressive and the party well-attended, depending on the number of rikishi in the heya, the number of sekitori, how well the okamisan relates with the heya's fan club and other sponsors, and the popularity of the oyakata. And while many guests are invited, anyone can attend as long as they pay a fee upon entry (Azumazeki Beya was charging about ninety dollars a person in 1999.) Back then Azumazeki Beya was high on potential and low on star appeal, but the senshuraku parties were crowded with well-wishers anyway, drawn by the presence of Azumazeki Oyakata himself. Among the guests at the 1988 Osaka party was a man named Tsunehiro Hagiwara.

Hagiwara, a prominent backer of Azumazeki Beya who supported Chad over the years like a father, sits alone at the top of Akebono's personal banzuke. And
while the financial support he’s lent has to have something to do with the esteem Hagiwara has earned, I suspect that Chad’s affection for him goes right back to the first day they met, back at that first senshuraku party, where the man deemed the clever “Taikai” an unworthy name for the tall, young Hawaiian.

I got to meet Hagiwara-san at the first birthday luau Chad and Christine threw for their daughter following the 1999 Natsu Basho. The sounds of the Hawaiian trio Na Kane Nui drifted through the valley on the military recreational ground Chad and Christine had reserved. George Kalima’s wife Naoko had her hula class sway to the sounds and tell stories with their hands. Friends came and went throughout the day to pay their respects and enjoy the best barbecue Tokyo had ever seen. (Thanks, Chef Dutch O’Neal.) When I arrived, Chad, who was busy entertaining and playing host, immediately introduced me to Hagiwara-san, who was sitting with his daughter at one of the long banquet tables beneath the white party tent.

“This the guy I was telling you about, the guy that wen help me from the beginning,” he said.

Hagiwara-san, a slight man with glasses and a perpetually accommodating smile, struck me right away with his enthusiasm, and a humble nature at odds with his high social status. He dressed conservatively and never tried to dominate the conversation, asking me many questions totally unrelated to my relationship with the Yokozuna about things like my time in New York and Hawai‘i and Japan, taking an interest which showed me that unlike many people surrounding the Yokozuna who were always claiming a privileged kind of “insider” status, Hagiwara-san did not stake his identity on being the friend of a celebrity. His big smile exudes confidence
and commands respect belying his relatively small stature. At the senshuraku party back in 1988, he had commanded enough of Azumazeki Oyakata’s respect to change the name of his newest deshi, a story he happily shared with me much later in our conversation.

“He was sitting down when I first saw him,” Hagiwara-san began. “When I walked over with Oyakata he stood up to greet me, and I couldn’t believe my eyes! He just kept rising higher and higher—I’d never seen someone so tall before” (Hagiwara, 1999). Hagiwara-san acted out as he told the story the same delightedly surprised face with which he’d greeted the young Chad.

His reaction to Chad’s height had to have been far different from the freak-show looks of wonder the boy was then trying to put up with. Hagiwara’s expression suggested a respectful awe that Chad had likely never seen before. They would usually all just point and stare and say, “Takai! Takai!” which sounded like his new name at first, but which he later learned simply to mean tall. Most people treated Chad like an animal in the zoo. But this Japanese man was different.

Hagiwara immediately suggested to Oyakata that Chad’s name should be changed—a practice not uncommon in sumo. Names usually change either when a rikishi attains a certain level of skill and power—particularly if a rikishi is to take on the name of a former great like Takanohana—or when the initial name is thought not to suit a newcomer. Hagiwara knew that Taikai fit Chad’s background, with its image of a vast sea. But it only matched his height in a cheap way, fitting the freak-show stares of wonder with which the average person must have greeted the
foreigner—in its pun on takai. Right on the spot Hagiwara thought of a name more respectful of the tall Hawaiian’s unique and majestic appearance.

“When he stood up,” Hagiwara-san told me, “it seemed like he would never stop rising. It was like the sun coming up in the early morning” (Hagiwara, 1999). His words evoked for me not the scene of their meeting, but of the first time I ever saw Chad, walking up the steps into the Azumazeki Beya keikoba, climbing a full two steps after I’d thought he’d already reached the top. It seemed like he would never stop rising. And so at that moment in the Land of the Rising Sun, Chad Rowan from Waimanalo became Akebono, which means “dawn.”

The names “Wakanahana” and Takahana” meant little of poetic significance and immediately foreshadowed name changes of their own for the promising brothers. The “Taka” and “Waka” parts merely evoked their father and uncle, while the “hanada” played on their real last name. But in the sumo world it was pretty much understood that the boys would one day take on the great names, “Wakanohana” and “Takanohana.” They would have to earn those names with great performances of their own, but to everyone watching on registration day back in February, 1988, both the name changes and the actual progress needed to precede them were just a matter of time.

The question as to why a young Japanese would want to take up the severe life associated with the National Sport, while far less bizarre than the same question applied to an American, still deserves attention. The total number of the Kyokai’s competitors—from the bottom-ranked fifteen-year-old boys on up to the 60-or-so in
the top two divisions—usually hovers around only 800 in a country of some 120
million people, while baseball and soccer attract a far greater number of Japan’s
promising athletes.

Some join sumo, believe it or not, because the sumo world is a place where
big guys can exist honorably without being teased. “Teasing” and “bullying” go on
far past adolescence in Japan. Much is made in cultural definitions of Japan as a
place of social conformity, and pressure to conform is indeed very real there. But
rather than through some kind of Orwellian fear tactics, in practice the social pressure
comes in the form of people being relentlessly annoying any time they see something
even slightly out of the ordinary. A bigger-than-average Japanese man looks
different from most people, and thus becomes the object of constant ridicule, both
from those he knows (in the form of obligatory fat jokes at absolutely every social
encounter), and those he doesn’t, as in, “Ah, Mr. Tanaka! It’s nice to meet you.
Wow, you sure are big. How much do you weigh, anyway?” If you look different in
Japan, or if you dress differently, negative attention to your physical self comes
almost as part of the initial social greeting. For many overweight Japanese teenage
boys who may never have had an interest in sport and who find themselves at the age
where teasing and bullying are at its fiercest, sumo is a way out of mainstream Japan.
The saddest part may be that the middle of the banzuke is clogged with non-athletic
types with no hope of ever reaching the salaried ranks who’ve committed themselves
to sumo as an alternative way of life: their topknots turn their size from points of
obligatory ridicule to points of honor.
Other Japanese rikishi are recruited from rural areas with little economic opportunity. As a former sekiotori explained to me, “Some kids, they come to the stable, but the ones the oyakata scout, they go to their house, they go to their parents, they give ‘em a million yen. ‘Give me your boy for sumo.’ These boys are fifteen years old, and their parents are like, ‘A million yen!’ These guys are from the mountains; they don’t see that much money. ‘Oh, okay, okay! You go do sumo!’” (Kipapa). They join sumo as a means of support, and often toil for years in the lower ranks with no hope of making it, fortunate to be fed and housed and to have a role to play. In this respect the Sumo Kyokai is a kind of social service, somewhat like America’s military can be. Other Japanese join in a rare show of national pride: “Because it is Kokugi,” the National Sport, one boy in the jonokuchi division told me when I asked him the burning question. Still others join as Jesse Kuhaulua had, as a natural progression of their junior high, high school, and/or college sumo careers.

Masaru and Koji Hanada joined because they were born into the sport. Sons of the great Ozeki Takanohana I and nephews of the great Yokozuna Wakanohana I, they had sumo in their blood. While Chad Rowan had not known the meaning of the term sumo beya until he was eighteen, the Hanadas had been raised in one. Young Koji Hanada entered his first sumo tournament when he was in third grade—and won. Six years after setting up his own Fujishima Beya upon retiring in 1982, Takanohana I gave in to the relentless pleas from Koji, who upon finishing junior high school had convinced Masaru to help him talk Father into letting them both formally become his deshi.
By official registration day Takahanada weighed a healthy 258 pounds, bigger than most of the other boys and a full forty pounds heavier and nearly an inch taller than his older brother. And unlike the rest of the shin-deshi registering that day, Waka and Taka had already proved themselves on the dohyo. Competing in high school, Masaru (Waka) had taken the All-Japan Senior High School Yusho, while his younger brother had easily taken the Kanto District Junior High School Yusho. Where Chad Rowan had come from nowhere into a sport as foreign to him as the language, these boys were sumo’s Ken Griffey Junior and Barry Bonds.

No one had any such expectations for the foreigner, who did little to prove his doubters wrong in his first two matches of the May tournament—his first as a true rikishi listed on the banzuke, as well as his first as Akebono. For one thing, his knowledge of sumo extended back only a few months rather than, like the Hanadas, a lifetime. For another, he was ridiculously tall for a stocky man’s sport. He lost whenever anyone got inside on him, and even his wins looked uncertain. While his shorter opponents bounced around the ring with firm movements and confident steps from side to side, Akebono was all arms and legs, flailing on the very edge of control and more often than not exceeding that edge. His aggressive style combined with his gangly frame to make his wins look lucky, like he just barely had those long arms and legs reigned in, like with the right step one way or the other, his opponent could so easily have thrown him off balance.

“He looked really shaky back then,” was how Azumazeki Oyakata put it to me (Kuhaulua, 1998).
So on the third morning of the 1988 May tournament, Akebono awoke in Azumazeki Beya as one of sumo's least experienced and least coached rikishi, took a long look at the newspaper photo of Takahanada taped to the wall next to his futon, and lifted the sport's most unlikely body to its size-fourteen feet—the larger to step out of bounds and lose by mistake—to face his third bout in the Kokugikan. Normally no one would bother to take the time to see off a young Jonokuchi rikishi as the click-clack from his wooden slippers echoed out the door and through the early morning streets to the empty Kokugikan. And no one, Boss included, had any hope at all that Chad would come home with a win that day. But that day Chad walked out of Azumazeki Beya to good-natured barbs from the rest of the deshi, because it was worth teasing him for the unlikely match-up he now found himself in: Akebono, the gaijin who couldn't even pronounce dohyo three months prior, was pitted that day against a young man most of Japan had already anointed a future yokozuna.

The Kokugikan was close to empty, as it usually is during jonokuchi bouts, hours before the sekitori arrive. Standing in the tunnel awaiting his turn to walk into the arena, Akebono could hear the yobidashi's calls echoing off the empty red seats, the sing-song names of each competitor. Far above he could see giant portraits of the recent yusho winners hanging from the rafters, and at last he walked down the hanamichi and took his place next to one of the oyakata beside the dohyo. The same yokozuna and ozeki would fight on the same dohyo later in the day, and the Emperor's Cup, which sat in a lobby showcase with a number of other prizes, would be presented to the winner at the end of the basho's final bout, also on the same dohyo.
When Akebono looked across the dohyo he could see Takahanada, whom he knew had already been anointed as one destined to hold the Cup, likely more than once. His face, not Akebono’s, had been plastered on the cover of every teen magazine when Chad arrived. The camera flashes back on registration day had been for him, not for Chad. Even though they both stepped up with 2-0 records, the rest of the boys at Azumazeki Beya had told him that morning he had no chance, like they might as well already hoist this Japanese boy’s portrait up to the rafters and crown him yokozuna right now, like he ought to be facing Chiyonofuji already and not some lowly gaijin no one had ever heard of. And yet they were both at the same rank, and both two-and-oh. If he ever had a chance to prove everyone wrong—Boss, his deshi, anyone else who doubted him—it was right now. If he ever had a chance to cement for himself the fact that he was going to make it in this crazy sport, it wasn’t by doing butsukari-geiko with Taylor. It was right now.

Chad stepped up as though he were fighting for the Emperor’s Cup himself. All he wanted was to beat this punk, to prove everyone wrong. It was why he had come to Japan in the first place. The boys faced one another. They bowed. They stepped forward. They each performed shiko once with each leg, Akebono awkwardly, Takahanada with a dancer’s grace. They crouched down. They stood. They crouched again. And then they charged.

Akebono immediately shocked Takahanada with a thrust to the jaw which stood him straight up, vulnerable to the American’s left hand, which came up
instantly to send Taka backwards so quickly he had no time to sidestep the on-rushing
Akebono, who finished him with a final right-hand thrust to send him sprawling off
the dohyo.

A smile and a touch of excitement began to spread across Akebono’s face, but
then he managed to catch himself in time and assume the stoic look he had been
seeing everyone else take after winning. This was the kid everyone was talking
about. This was the future of sumo. And he had beaten him easily. He hadn’t beaten
Chiyonofuji or Konishiki, but he had beaten the very best at his level on the banzuke.
None of this was lost on Akebono. But instead of raising his arms in triumph, he
returned to his place of origin on the dohyo and bowed. He stepped off the dohyo and
bowed again before turning to head up the hanamichi, just as he had seen the previous
winners do, just as he had done following his first two wins.

Rikishi who bring their “A” games to the Kokugikan frequently say they were
able to do their “own sumo” that day. They strive to win the tachi-ai because it is a
race to the driver’s seat, to see which of the two will be more likely to execute his
own sumo. Akebono’s own sumo involved tsupari—his relentless pushing attack—and
with it he was able to manage three more wins against one loss. The loss came
on the belt, during his opponent’s “own sumo.” The term also connotes the kind of
zen-like state a samurai hopes to achieve during battle, drawing upon hours, or even
months of the constant routines of practice to get to a state where the body moves on
its own, without being directed by thought. Akebono had been able to reach this state in what he pointed to several years later towards the end of his career as the most important bout he ever faced: the win over Takahanada.

“Ho, you seen the video of that?” He asked me one afternoon when we were discussing his rivalry with the brothers. “No one thought I could beat him, but I came up fast at the tachi-ai, and it was over. You shouldda seen when I got back to the stable—everybody seen me, they started cheering!” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99).

That Chad Rowan, a boy raised on end-zone dances and runs back up the court with arms raised, managed to hold all his excitement inside until getting back to Azumazeki Beya, over an hour later, is a feat that, at least to me, eclipses the win itself. Long before I met Akebono I wondered who “handled” him, or who schooled him in the cultural nuances of his adopted country, or who coached him behaviorally. I came to find out that the answer, even from the start, even from this first stunning confrontation with Takahanada, was no one. “Look around,” he explained his assimilation strategy to me once. “Don’t be ignorant. Look at the situation before you say anything” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98), a disciplined stance that sometimes came easily, but sometimes required all of his considerable strength. Such advice is the first step toward mastering tatemaе: before knowing what is appropriate to say, one has to figure out the situation. Chad had done so over the course of his Osaka maezumo bouts and the six bouts he’d seen as he waited beside the dohyо before his first three bouts in the May tournament—he had looked at the situation, and he’d figured out, among other things, that wins and losses were to be greeted with the same humble
bow. The face in front was to be one of stone, of respect for the dohyo and the opponent, regardless of the outcome.

The true positive feelings of his fellow deshi flowed briefly after Akebono had beaten his main rival and then bowed accordingly, when he returned to a hero’s welcome at Azumazeki Beya, but they didn’t last. Boss wound up treating what Chad considered a great triumph as exactly what it looked like: all arms and legs, barely under control, a launch of a gangly body fortunate to hit the target. It had been a lucky shot, not likely to repeat itself.

The first name to come up whenever Akebono discussed with me his short list of “guys who wen help me out from the beginning” was that of Bob Beveridge, the greatest source of this early support. From talking with Chad, I took Beveridge to be a veteran gaijin in Japan, a doctor, a guy who liked to drink, a guy who could talk non-stop, and someone who had helped supplement Chad’s sumo training. From his place on the Yokozuna’s short list of people to talk to—and the emphasis he earned even on this list—I took him to be a man who had earned Chad’s loyalty through something more like paternal love.

When I called the Doctor, he greeted me like an old friend and invited me to come to the “Lab”—his training facility—the very next afternoon to talk. He gave me explicit directions to a pay phone in Ebisu near the Lab, right down to which car on the subway would put me closest to the right exit at the station. Less than three
minutes after I called from the pay phone, a man in his sixties dressed in weight
lifter’s training pants and a blue t-shirt came rushing through the pouring rain to greet
me and escort me through a maze of narrow streets to his home in Ebisu’s residential
back streets. The shoji-style sliding door opened into a cramped room marked by a
counter covered with papers, something like a wet bar, complete with bar stools.
More papers were stacked up on shelves behind the bar/desk, and others overflowed
in boxes on the floor. This was The Lab.

“The training room’s upstairs,” he told me. “Here, have a seat.” I bellied up
to the bar and he took his place behind, kindly agreed to let me tape the conversation,
and started handing me papers printed in faded ink with stats and measurements.
“This is a little history on myself,” (his resume). “And I don’t know if you want
copies of this—this is the programs that we have, and on the reverse of that—that’s
just the basic programs and this also is some information about some programs. It’s
just a little bit about what we do here. But see, I have everything in Japanese, so I
just made these up in English for you. These are the measurements of what we did
with Akebono—I’ll explain those to you—you can keep all this. Boy, he was a real
lonely kid back then. Here, this is a book I wrote not too long ago.” He handed me a
vanity-printed volume entitled, To Your Health. The Doctor himself smiled from the
cover, dressed in his doctor’s whites and raising a glass in the form of a toast. “That
picture was taken in a sake house just around the corner from here” (Beveridge,
1999).

Over the course of the first hour, the topic of Akebono did not come up again
in our conversation—a fact that led me to believe that he, like Hagiwara-san, in no
way defined himself by his relationship to a celebrity. We talked about his tours in Vietnam, how I ended up in Japan, even his religious beliefs. Stories of how he met Jesse Kuhaulua back when he was Takamiyama evolved into memories of their common friend—a man named Kaiser Tanaka who had come to Japan from Hawai‘i back in 1934—and then back into discussion of the Doctor’s research. In this way I found Beveridge typical of a certain kind of veteran gaijin—the kind who lived in Japan long enough, without ever thinking of going back, to know how to get along, to cope, and in some cases (as in Beveridge’s), thrive. Theirs is a special kind of knowledge that has little to do with assimilation and much to do with how to make it as a constant outsider. In most cases they’re a bit eccentric, but they’re usually patient, understanding of a newcomer’s frustrations with Japan, and eager at first simply to ease some loneliness of their own by speaking English, and then to pass on their experience. It didn’t take long for me to see how a young and homesick Chad Rowan could find himself at home in Beveridge’s company.

Over the course of the afternoon I learned of Beveridge’s long and diverse career, stretching back beyond his substantial presence on the Tokyo sports scene—a presence that pre-dates the arrival of Azumazeki Oyakata. The career military man first came to Japan in 1952, and with the exception of tours in Vietnam and Germany, and various prolonged study excursions, has been there ever since. Along the way he earned eleven doctorates, refereed thirteen Japan Bowl football games, and founded the Life Science Laboratory—his all-purpose Tokyo training facility. He combined his study and experience to create a results-oriented approach to optimum physical, mental, and spiritual preparation for competition, mixing highly individualized
workout programs with hypnotherapy, diet, and in many cases, simple no-nonsense
good advice. He relies as much on his obsession with measurement and statistics as
on his vast life experience in advising athletes who seek him out to push themselves
to their highest potential. His clients range from Japanese Olympic hopefuls to Japan
League batting champions, to his old friend Jesse, who sought him out in an effort to
lose weight following his 1985 retirement.

Chad Rowan met Beveridge after practice one day at the end of March 1988
upon his return from the Osaka Haru Basho. Beveridge sat and chatted with Oyakata
during asa-geiko and watched the new recruit, somewhat amazed. When practice
ended the man said hello to John and Taylor, and then introduced himself to Chad.
He shook the boy’s hand, and then shook his head.

“What are you doing up here?”

Chad was taken aback and said nothing.

“Look at yourself, and then look at all these boys. Look at Taylor over there.
You belong on a basketball court. The last thing in the world you should be doing is
trying to make yourself into a sumo wrestler. Your build is completely wrong for this
sport.”

The Hawaiian remained silent.

“The only way you’re gonna have a chance is by keeping your stance wide,”
the man went on, “and keeping your ass down.” He demonstrated, motioning for the
Hawaiian to do the same. Chad already knew this, but obviously had not been
staying low enough. “If you don’t stay low, these squat guys are gonna blast you
right out of the ring. But in order to stay low, you’re gonna have to do something
about those legs. Look at this kid’s legs,” he pointed. “Rocks. Tree trunks. And he’s already compact. You’re gonna have to build those legs. And strengthen your lower back.”

This haole could run at the mouth. He would not hold back, and he would not wait long for a response before moving on. But in spite of the criticism, Chad was comforted to hear English for a change. This was already more advice than he’d gotten in his nearly two months in Japan. And this guy was treating him like one athlete, not like one tall freak gaijin. For once the comments on his height were constructive rather than inanely predictable. Finally Beveridge told him about the new “Lab” he had opened, and said, “Come over. Let me take a look and see what you got.” With that he left.

Part of the reason for Chad’s initial interest in Beveridge had to do with the fact that in the competitive microcosm of Azumazeki Beya, he had yet to find anything approaching the man’s concern. Taylor did help him plenty, but that relationship was governed, in the end, according to sempai-kohai rules. John was of no help whatsoever. He couldn’t communicate with the other deshi, of course. And his Boss, whom he could see act at times as a kind of strict father figure towards some of the other deshi, would often simply laugh at him and openly make fun of his long legs. This Doctor Beveridge, on the other hand, wanted to help. The guy may have been loud and a bit direct, but he did want to help.

Over the next several weeks, Chad mulled over Beveridge’s offer as he continued to battle homesickness—a feeling that was punctuated by envy towards all the Japanese deshi following the May tournament, when they all cleared out and went
home for the five-day vacation, leaving the place just about empty. By now Chad had already been away longer than most first-year college students are during their first semesters. To make matters worse, he still had no idea when he would get a chance to visit home. If he were to stick to the pronouncement he had given his brother—that of coming home a yokozuna—it would obviously be years before he tasted his next plate lunch, his next helping of spaghetti and hot dogs. Five days would do it, he thought at the time, just five days of family. Family. Everyone sitting around in Uncle Sam’s driveway—even Nunu and Ola. Mom and Dad. George Kalima. These Japanese boys were back at there hometowns right now, cruising with their old friends, their aunties and uncles and cousins, eating their mom’s cooking. And here he was staring at the walls.

If Chad could not visit his own family, he could visit someone else’s, which is what he vowed to do during the five-day break following July’s Nagoya Basho. He’d become close enough with a rikishi named Imura to be invited back to his hometown (following another winning record), and his Japanese had improved enough that he could actually feel a sense of belonging, as hospitable and accommodating as the family was. There was nothing to prove to anyone in Imura’s family, since they’d heard how hard sumo life was for Imura and could only imagine what the foreigner had to be dealing with. Chad could actually say he felt at home.

Imura, as it turned out, shares Chad’s birthday and remained a close friend after a neck injury forced him to retire to a permanent position as Azumazeki Beya’s cook only a year later. Imura believes that everyone has a kind of soul-brother in the world, and both he and Chad believe they have this kind of bond. Once, during a
basho after Akebono was in the makunouchi division, he sat down on a broken chair, fell to the ground, and wrenched his back. He lay on the floor, unable to move, with only four hours before his match. As the masseurs and acupuncturists went over his body, Imura held his friend’s hand. “I looked at his face,” Nunu Rowan, who was in Japan at the time, told me. “He was feeling my brother’s pain” (Rowan, Randy “Nunu,” 1993). Imura’s early emotional support helped Akebono stay on track athletically, but perhaps even more importantly, it helped Rowan adjust culturally. First Chad had made it into the community of his heya, and now he was working on acceptance in the larger world of sumo. And when Imura took Chad home, it was the foreigner’s most tangible step into the community of outside Japanese culture since joining Azumazeki Beya.

Perhaps the most important thing Chad learned by watching Imura and his family interact was what led him to realize that when his deshi were making fun of him at Azumazeki Beya, they were not just picking on him for sport. “I used to always think it was funny, because I always felt like I was getting picked on,” he recalled later, “but then I started to realize the Japanese style. They have a real funny way of showing their love, especially in this sport. The way they think is if they pick on you and beat you up, that is the way they show their love for you.” And as far as this method of showing affection was acted out in the sumo beya, he explained, “I think that is really fucked up” (Rowan, 3).

The prolonged, eye-tearing sessions of butskari-geiko and beatings with the shinai are both known among rikishi as kawaigari, or tender loving care. To be sure, this confusion has as much to do with gender as with ethnicity. “Manly” men across
cultures express love for one another in this way, and while sumo certainly represents “Japanese,” it is just as obviously hyper-masculine. But Chad’s observation on male culture in Japan is even more extreme because he comes from rural Oahu, where people seem to kiss more than they shake hands, and spread “I love you”s with equal informality.

Most Japanese very rarely utter the words “I love you,” and kissing in public—even among loved ones at airports and train stations and so forth—is simply not done (although for some reason it’s perfectly okay to kiss your dog right in front of everyone). When the time undeniably comes to express love, people can get completely uncomfortable and avoid the expression by teasing each other instead and then giggling the moment away, putting it behind them. “You’re ugly,” since it stands in so often for the words, “I love you,” actually ends up meaning the same thing, and since both parties know this, the giggles must follow in order to stave off any real emotional response.

When Chad finally began to realize that most of the boys in the heya had accepted him, and that their taunts at his long legs were in fact affectionate and they were not simply abusing him, he began, for the first time, to feel at home. And after all, even the physical kawaigari differed very little in form from the way attention could be handed out in the Rowan house on Humuniki Street. Kawaigari and lickings from mom, neither of them was meant as abuse: both were meant to make him better.

This long-awaited fraternal support from his deshi contrasted directly with the opinion in the heya that mattered most. Conspicuously absent from Yokozuna Akebono’s list of people who “wen help me from the beginning” is Azumazeki

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Oyakata himself. I have pressed Chad to the point of irritating him regarding how much Boss helped him, since it seemed obvious to me that Oyakata possessed all kinds of knowledge—athletic as well as cultural—that would have helped his fellow Hawaiian. And time and again Chad has insisted that “Once you become one boss, you become one boss,” and, “He was from one different generation” (cite), implying clearly that I should quit asking about Boss. In two years I only ever saw them address one another in Japanese, and only regarding official business. Over the years the Yokozuna’s distaste for his boss has deepened considerably for financial reasons. According to Akebono, hundreds of people paid several hundred dollars each to attend his ozeki promotion party, and then his yokozuna promotion party, and Akebono never saw any of the money. Akebono’s 1998 wedding generated more than two million dollars for Boss, and yet the Yokozuna had to pay out of his own pocket for his family’s places at the reception—and not just for the food, but also for the obligatory cash gift, which for such a prestigious wedding amounted to around a thousand dollars per person. In these and other cases, the Oyakata was taking what he was fully entitled to as head of the household, as most Japanese rikishi would see. But Akebono has seen it as most people looking from the outside would. He was hardly being “helped” by his boss; he was getting ripped off.

But even the sticky money points notwithstanding, it is doubtful that Akebono would agree that his Boss helped him very much, particularly to the extent that people like Bob Beveridge did. “You know, it’s just a difference in character,” Beveridge, who knows and loves them both, told me. “They’re both nice people. But they’re
different. They’re really different people. And, you know one would go one way and one go the other, and so they didn’t ring too well with each other” (Beveridge, 1999).

The difference in character—two decent guys who just don’t get along—was then later compounded by Akebono’s promotion to yokozuna. The friction between Chad and Boss is not uncommon between yokozuna and their oyakata, particularly when the oyakata are not former yokozuna themselves, like Azumazeki Oyakata. Oyakata have the sometimes-unenviable task of having to supervise the most important men in the sport, and to coach men who are more skilled than they ever were at sumo. Beyond certain details of Akebono’s business schedule that concerned Boss, and except for occasional obligatory small talk in front of guests at the heya, they didn’t talk at all.

Perhaps the most important reason why the two gaijin failed to get along early on, and why they continue to fail to get along, is Chad’s long memory for the ways he is wronged, including the ultimate insult: doubting his ability. Indeed, part of the reason why his list of important supporters is so short is that he will write people off of it quickly, and once they are written off, there is no hope of them ever making it back on. Boss may have lost his chance at Chad’s respect and affection from the day way back in the Waikiki hotel room when he rocked the boy from side to side, making him look silly in front of everyone. He may have lost it on that first day of asa-geiko, when he made the boy’s long legs the object of ridicule. And while we’re speculating, he may even have intuited that he could not possibly get the boy’s respect back, which would have justified for him his handling of the money Akebono earned for him over the years.
More than likely, Oyakata lost the boy’s respect over the course of Chad’s first few months in Japan by never attempting to hide his lack of patience—despite the fact that boy had never come home without a winning record, and had even beaten the Hanada boy. To Boss, Chad was not a fighter. His hips were too weak. He was not built for the sport. As the months went by, the man came more and more to regret his decision to accept the boy. He should have just waited for the younger brother.

Still, he had not given up completely, and resorted to frequent kawaigari in effort to ignite within Chad some kind of passion, anger. He regularly took the shinai to Chad’s skin, not always because Chad had messed up, but because he was not going into his fights with the intention of doing his opponent damage. And still only four years removed from his own career on the dohyo, the Godfather could inflict all kinds of pain with the bamboo stick.

One particularly harsh asa-geiko session, not long after another winning record in the Nagoya tournament, left Chad angry enough to fight off tears. The August air had hung thick in the big room all night and already sweltered in the morning darkness when Chad awoke. His skin was sticky with sweat even as he lay on the futon, close to the window. Summer blanketed Tokyo with a kind of heat the Hawaiian had rarely experienced. Except for a couple of weeks at the end of August and beginning of September when the trade winds take a vacation of their own, Hawai‘i’s summer remains a breezy eighty-to-ninety degrees. Tokyo is a steam bath from mid-June to mid-September—the kind where you pray for cool rain but get no relief when it falls, since the constant showers only thicken the air and make it harder to move, harder to breathe, harder to get out of bed.
The keikoba’s open windows made no difference. Climbing the twelve steps from the locker room was enough to have all the boys bathed in a sweat that clung to their bodies throughout the workout until enough accumulated to drip off, or fly off in a collision of bodies and spray and the taste of salt. Evaporation cools the body, but nothing evaporated in summer. When the rikishi stopped to towel off between bouts, beads of sweat would re-form immediately, and so they mostly tried just to keep the stinging water from their eyes. Not that the sting was much to endure, but more because the sweat would cause their eyes to tear, and then blur their vision in time for the critical split-second at the charge—often the only time in a bout when a rikishi can react to what he sees. Failure to keep sweat from one’s eyes could lead to a loss, or a blow to the head that would blur the vision further.

The bodies were also slippery. Rikishi who fought on the belt had a clear advantage in summer keiko, sliding their arms through for tight grips on the mawashi. Rikishi who relied on pushing—rikishi like Chad—found many of their tsupari blows glancing off wet shoulders, faces, chests, landing with decreased force if they landed at all. Chad found himself flying out of control often and into the paneled wall.

“What kind of sumo is that!” His boss yelled at him suddenly.

“Sumimasen,” he bowed humbly. Excuse me.

“Baka-yaro!”

“Hai. Sumimasen.” He squatted and charged again, ready to kill the boy in front of him. But just as his right hand came up at the opposing right shoulder, the other rikishi turned in the same direction to accept the force. Chad’s hand slipped off easily and he landed with all his weight and the force of his charge, face down on the
hard clay. But the pain came from above, as his boss kicked him and pounded with the shinai, enraged, shouting, humiliating the boy.

Chad plodded through his chores in a deep anger focused sharply on one man: Boss. He labored to breathe, unable to fully expand his lungs without feeling a sharp pain in his side. The stifling heat and humidity did nothing to help. Sweat poured from him even as he stood still, but he could not complain. He had seen other deshi point out minor injuries or colds in hope of a day off to rest their aches, only to be met with shame and scorn: “Baka-yaro!” Oyakata would scream, Fucking idiot! “Gaman!” Gaman. Forging on in the face of pain and suffering, an unwavering commitment to duty. He could be sure that any complaint about his ribs would be met first with “Baka-yaro!” and then, “Gaman!” So he didn’t bother. The pain just made him seethe.

As if this wasn’t enough for one day, he could hear his Boss’ raspy voice on the second floor landing when he finally made his way upstairs for a precious nap.

“Larry, you’d better come and take this boy home. He cannot do sumo,” (qtd. by Aweau, 1998). Chad froze and stopped to listen. Boss paused for what seemed like a long time, listening to the person on the other end of the phone. He guessed it was Uncle Larry. They were going to send him back. After all of this, all the fucking gaman, the kawaigari, the butsukari-geiko, and he was to go home a loser. No money for his parents. Everyone would talk about him, maybe not to his face, but they would talk: he get one big body for not’ing. Was going be like Konishiki, but he neva make ‘um. After all this. And he had only winning records so far. He longed to hear
the other half of the conversation, but then at last he heard Boss answer reluctantly, “Okay, okay.”

Had it been a conference call, Chad would have heard Larry Aweau telling his cousin Jesse, “Hey, wait, wait a minute: when you went into sumo it didn’t take you six months. It didn’t take you eight months. It took you almost a year before you knew sumo. So why don’t you give him a few more months? I know deep in him, he’s trying everything to please you” (Aweau, 1998). Had it been a speaker phone, Chad might have been reassured. But instead, all he got was the reluctant “Okay, okay,” like Boss had been talked into it, like maybe next time it would be easier to give up and actually send him back, send him back before he had time to really make something of his one big chance.

As one might imagine, it wasn’t much of a nap. Or much of a dinner. That evening found Chad all alone, again, standing in the darkened keikoba, staring intently into the full-length mirror as beads of sweat formed on his forehead. He stayed there for some minutes, staring into his own eyes. He cannot do sumo. The sting of the shinai. The weight of thousands of Japanese words yet to learn. Your build is completely wrong for this sport. The thousands of hours left to train. The distance between jonidan and juryo, the distance from home, the view from Makapu’u, the cool ocean. And Glenn’s Flowers and Plants. No more HPU, wen walk away from that, cannot go back. Fuck, you only get one chance. It’s what you do with that chance.
And then he turned and walked out into the thick air, up the familiar street, past the convenience store, and to the international pay phone around the corner, again.

"He was frustrated with so many things back then," his mother told me. "He would call almost every night. My phone bill got up to around seven hundred dollars a month. And we didn’t have that kind of money, but I knew he just had to get all that out of him" (Rowan, Janice, 1993).

Sometimes he just wanted to hear his mother’s voice as a distraction, to hear what was happening at home. Other times, he simply needed to unload. But now, the call was more of a cry for help.

But he would never quit. He tried to think of a way to put it so his mother would understand. He thought of his father, whose big dreams never seemed to materialize.

“Coach Wolfe wen tell us,” he finally said, “whenever you going make one big decision, to look in the mirror. To me, that’s one big decision. He said you look in the mirror, because after you make that decision, you going have to live with it. You going have to face that person in the mirror every day. If I go home now, I not going be able for face myself in the mirror. Everybody going say ‘Chad Rowan, he’s big for no reason. He cannot do not’ing. He wen give up.’”

“Chad, you come home, you’re not giving up. You tried, and you didn’t like it. Now come home to us. We love you.”

He hung up the phone not feeling any less lonely, but better for having vented. Come home. We love you. Mothers are supposed to say that. He couldn’t possibly go home and face her, or anyone else. “Ho, Chad, back from Japan? How was it? Wasn’t you going be one sumo wrestler like da kine, Konishiki? What wen happen?” What was he supposed to say? It neva work out? My Boss was one asshole? It wasn’t like they said? I couldda been this, couldda been that. No chance. Going home was out of the question. He would redouble his training, giving up his precious afternoon free time to the sauna-like conditions in the keikoba. He would do squats and shiko alone for as long as he could. And he would call Bob Beveridge.

While traditional sumo training is limited to what Chad had already seen, centered around shiko and practice bouts, by the mid-1980’s weights had become a part of many rikishi’s training regimens, with varying levels of success. A garage Konishiki had taken so much heat for renting and setting up as a personal weight room years before had led several sumo beya to add well-appointed training rooms in their basements. But while proper weight training has to increase strength, and while it certainly helped Konishiki, other rikishi hurt themselves by bulking up their chests and shoulders—a process which made them look more like athletes, but also made them top-heavy and easier for their opponents to maneuver around the dohyo. The “fat guy” stereotype of a rikishi has an athletic purpose: like a power lifter, the rikishi keeps the belly as a solid center of gravity, for balance. The ideal rikishi is strong in the legs and lower back, with the majority of his weight at or below the waist. Traditional sumo life—from traditional training, to eating chanko and napping—
revolves around creating and maintaining this physique and has done so unfailingly for hundreds of years. To augment the program with weights or other non-traditional training, a rikishi should be well advised.

“He’s a smart kid,” Beveridge told me at the very start of our first conversation. “Akebono, he’s a smart kid.” Both for following the directions, and for bothering to come by at all. Beveridge compared him to the other deshi at Azumazeki Beya: “They weren’t serious,” he explained. “John would come by, and I’d give him the details. See, I’m not gonna kiss their butt. I’m not gonna put a ribbon on this thing. They’re gonna take it or leave it, and their not gonna waste my time. After I made the offer, Chad came all on his own” (Beveridge, 1999).

While sumo purists frown on weight training in general, the idea of a trainer goes even further against the grain. The sempai-kohai system of running a sumo beya goes beyond a simple respect for who came first, an act of courtesy. In many ways it is a reflection of sumo as a kind of folk institution, something that is passed down through generations. Sempai are to be respected because they are expected to know more, to have gained wisdom through experience, wisdom they are responsible for passing down. As the most important sempai in any sumo beya, the oyakata is meant to be a kind of aged wise man, drawing from his years moving up through the system and then handing out pronouncements as holy writ in matters behavioral, athletic, competitive, and even medical.

The obvious problem with the “traditional” ways sumo treats things like training and injury is that the oyakata are nothing more than former rikishi whose knowledge is highly personalized, based only on each one’s own experience. Only a
precious few are college graduates, while most of them ended formal education at age fifteen when they joined sumo as shin-deshi. None are doctors, or versed in physiology or training methods beyond what they went through themselves rehabbing their own various injuries. That Azumazeki Oyakata has been known to go overboard in his passion for *gaman*, for instance, is a reflection of the man’s own active career: he still holds the record for consecutive appearances; he *never* sat out because of injury, and came to expect the same from his charges.

But part of Azumazeki Oyakata’s personal experience included Bob Beveridge, and so he was more than willing to allow Chad to train under the man’s care.

“See, I worked with Jesse before,” Beveridge told me of the oyakata, “and he knew I was here and he knew what I could do” (Beveridge, 1999).

During the afternoon I spent at the Lab, Beveridge and I eventually made it upstairs to the training room, where he advised a young 400 meter dash hopeful named Keith in his broken Japanese while he explained to me the entire program he’d put Akebono through. “This is how I explain it to people,” he told me: “it’s like a car. This is the engine,” he pointed to his power measurement on the huge chart in the corner of his workout facility, “and this is the carburetor,” he pointed to the heart numbers. The first is a point system measuring performance in three separate strength tests: “Lower body, and the back of the legs, and the upper body: how many units, how many times, equals that number,” he explained, pointing to the chart again. The other evaluates cardiovascular performance: “I put em on that monster machine and I work them hard.” The small room was crowded with standard-looking workout
machines that, as Beveridge pointed out, held constant levels of resistance, as opposed to free weights, whose resistance varies throughout the given workout motion due to gravity and leverage. “The recovery will tell me how good the delivery is,” he went on, “how good the pipes are, how clean it is. I can measure it numerically and see pretty well where they’re at. Two as a recovery rate is lousy. Three-to-four is average. Six-plus is outstanding. See, numbers never lie. Remember, you could have someone tell you, ‘Oh, I trained really good,’ or, ‘I trained really hard.’ Well, what does that mean?” Or in other words, “What does *gaman* mean?” Akebono scored a two in the heart test. Lousy. He returned the following day and scored 670 points on the strength test. “380 points for a man,” Beveridge pointed out, “prior to exercise, is what I consider to be a pretty strong guy” (Beveridge, 1999).

The Doctor then set about devising an individual program for the unlikely rikishi. “He was training for sumo. He was training to move houses. I just made him maximum power. You know, he picks up buildings. But when he came here he was tall and gangly.” So he put Chad on a 26-visit program designed to make him as strong as possible, to combat his huge natural weakness for his chosen sport. “I told him: ‘You’ve got a shitty body for it. Your legs are too tall, your ass is to high, your center of gravity is too high. If you keep your ass down, it’s the same thing as a flat bed carrying a bulldozer; that’s the reason why they’re six inches off the ground. If they were any higher, they’d go around a corner, they’d turn over the bulldozer. So it’s the same principle: if you keep your ass low and your head high and then keep your head over your ass, you’ll be very tough to handle. Don’t ever violate that
principle. Don’t you stretch yourself out. You stretch yourself out and they’re gonna
take your head and they’re gonna run you into the ground is what’s gonna happen to
you. But you make sure you keep your feet wide, you keep your ass low, and you
keep your head over your ass, and they couldn’t move you—if they hit you with
dynamite they’re not gonna move you” (Beveridge, 1999).

In the midst of telling me these stories Beveridge would interrupt himself
from time to time to assist Keith. In one instance he scolded the kid for dropping his
final repetition on the bench press rather than letting it down slowly: “Dame, Keith-
san. Saigo made. Saigo made.” Saigo made: until the very end. “Do the full set, no
matter how tired you are,” Beveridge told me. But his explanation went much further
than the usual tough-it-out, finish-strong gaman mantras: “The last one is the most
important. You have to control that last one because that’s the one that the brain will
remember. The very last one is the toughest, so if you bring it back slowly the brain
will go, ‘Oh, shit!’ And so it will remember that. The brain doesn’t want to listen to
the muscles. If you cheat with that last repetition, the brain will say, ‘Oh, you’re not
really that serious, so you don’t need that much help.’ See, the brain is really
stubborn as can be. It’s really stubborn, so you have to cooperate with that brain”
(Beveridge, 1999). Far more important than getting Chad though a difficult set on the
machines, Beveridge’s obsession with the brain must have left the young gaijin with a
weapon against his own nerves, self doubt, and any outside noise as he prepared for
battle.

“He uses hypno-therapeutics,” Beveridge explained. “He’ll look straight up
and then close his eyes. When he’s throwing the last salt and he’s looking out over
the audience, and you’ll just see the whites, and he relaxes. What he’s doing is he’s going into an altered state. We teach that here. One of my doctor degrees is hypnology.”

“When does the trance begin?” Those who’ve seen the face Beveridge was describing know it as the scariest face in sport. I had always thought Chad was just trying to look mean.

“Just as he’s throwing the last salt. What he’s doing is he’s shutting everything out. He’s shutting the whole world out. No sound, nothing, just, ‘Now I’m gonna kill this guy. This guy’s gonna be my enemy.’ So when he turns back around. . . We use a three-step procedure at first. We have them take three large breaths. Hold the breath. Step number two: look up as high as possible, and then close the lids over the upturned eyes. Now unexplained by medical science, when the eyes are up and the lids are closed, the brain automatically begins to transmit alpha signals. See, your brain has basically four frequencies. The one that you’re dealing with on a day-to-day basis when you’re awake is beta. You’re transmitting about 13 to 30 cycles per second as you’re hearing, you’re looking, you’re functioning. Now, when you’re watching TV and things get kind of slowed down at night, you go into a kind of subconscious level called alpha. Alpha is the first level of subconsciousness, somewhere around 8-12 cycles per second. That’s where I want the athlete to participate. Because in this alpha level, you are acutely aware of everything around you. You don’t miss a trick. You have radar. You turn into a cat, basically. This will happen when something happens at night and you’re startled by a sound, you can walk through a room in the darkness. Your body can do this. But we teach the
athlete to go into that alpha level. There’s two other levels, but they really don’t need to go into those other levels. They only need this first subconscious level where they can really perform well.

“We teach them a three step, which they can replace with any color, or any word later on. And let your air out slowly. And while you’re in alpha, you can tell the subconscious, ‘Blue,’” for example. ‘When I think of blue, I want to feel this way.’ And so in the future you just have to take a deep breath, and just think of blue. You don’t have to use blue, but we use blue because it makes you think of darkness, it makes you think of night. And then we use gold to bring you back out of it because it makes you think of sunrise. Later you can throw away the three steps. We tell people to practice, first with the three steps, and later with just the color.

“Almost all the way through Akebono’s had this ability. Nobody can hypnotize you. You have to hypnotize yourself” (Beveridge, 1999).

When Keith was through with his workout, Beveridge produced a bottle of wine and the three of us sat and relaxed, discussing Keith’s chances at making the national team (he was running in the upper forties), and other notable Japanese athletes the doctor had trained. Kim Beveridge would appear from time to time to see if we wanted anything to eat or any more to drink. She treated Keith in a motherly way, asking him about school, his brothers and sisters, his friends. She seemed thrilled about my own project, both happy for me and proud of Chad, saying, “It’s about time someone wrote a book about him.” I could see how a young Chad would have taken refuge in the little gym in Ebisu as often as possible. Even Keith here, who still lived with his family, was in no hurry to leave. To a homesick Chad stuck
in the loneliness of 1988, the talking story, the hospitality—it was as close to Hawai‘i as he had come since leaving that February.

"We saw a lot of him back then," Beveridge told me. "This was a home to him" (Beveridge, 1999).

A few weeks after Chad’s first visit to Beveridge’s Lab, and just before the start of the 1988 Aki Basho that September, Larry Aweau picked up his phone in Hawai‘i to hear an excited raspy voice, long distance. “Larry, Larry, don’t come!” Aweau recalled to me his conversation with Jesse. “He’s throwing everybody out of the ring!” (qtd. by Aweau, 1998).

Akebono took the momentum from practice to the Kokugikan and came away with five wins against two at Jonidan 52, and a promotion up nearly forty ranks to Jonidan 15 for November’s Kyushu Basho. He had gradually worked his way up to number three in Azumazeki Beya, behind Taylor and John, and finally found himself worthy of more personal attention, and even occasional praise such as this, from Oyakata.

And along with the need to prove Boss wrong, and the encouragement of Bob Beveridge, Akebono was spurred up the banzuke by the images that filled his eyes just before he closed them to go to sleep every night: the now-yellowing newspaper photos of the Hanada brothers. After taking the Jonokuchi division yusho with a perfect 7-0 back in May, Wakahanada had climbed all the way to the Sandanme division by November, where he would again post a perfect record to take the yusho. Not far behind was Takahanada, whose only loss in May had been the one he suffered
at the hands of the gaijin, and who would also compete at the sandanme level—at roughly the middle of the banzuke—in November. In spite of whatever pressure they felt to perform, the boys were certainly living up to expectations as they set the pace.

“They were good, you know,” Akebono told me much later. “Even back then. Wakanohana, when we were in Sandanme he was already beating Akinoshima, and he was one sekitori.” He paused for emphasis and then went on: “We used to practice more than a hundred bouts at a time” (cite). One of the peculiarities of de-geiko that deserves a bit of explanation here is this fact that rivals would train together, to, in effect, spar with one another as rival boxers would never think of doing. But there are no sparing partners in professional sumo—there are only those who do sumo, and to compete at your best, you had better know your place on the banzuke and train with the best around you. Once Akebono and the brothers reached the very top they did stop training with one another for fear of giving anything away in practice, but early on, fear of giving anything away was less important than becoming as strong as possible as fast as possible. Back then Akebono found his top competition at Fujishima Beya, where he went alone every chance he got.

“Was mean,” he told me. “The Oyakata had to make us stop, cause we all just wanted to keep wrestling” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99), no one wanting to be the last man to lose in the evenly-matched group. Takahanada never forgot his first loss to Akebono back in May and did his best to avenge it whenever possible. Akebono worked equally hard not to let this happen, and the smaller Wakahanada was quick enough to beat either of them in a given bout. These practices were unusually well-attended, considering the low rank of all three rikishi. With rare exceptions asa-geiko is open
to the public in all sumo beya. A few die-hard sumo fans make a point of attending from time to time, but always for the chance to see their favorite sekitori up close—never to watch anyone ranked below upper makushita. But these particular practice sessions represented the future of sumo in a very precise way: while sumo experts could look at other shin-deshi and merely speculate, there was no doubt that the brothers would become sekitori.

“When we’d finally finish practice,” Chad recalled, “they would all pack up and leave: the cameras, the newspaper people, everyone, before the sekitori even started practicing” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99). This attention initially had more to do with the brothers than with Akebono. But as 1988 wore into winter, everyone who watched them practice together began to include the young Hawaiian in their talk of sumo’s future. Akebono’s comment, “I neva like lose to them” stems in part from this kind of attention. He’d neva like lose in front of anyone, but with cameras involved, and opponents who had already been ordained as sumo’s next bright stars, his focus sharpened further.

Interestingly, if Taka and Waka have lists of their own, the name of the other brother surely appears on the list, but only in the same way Akebono’s would: as “the enemy,” as motivation to train harder. As heya-mates, the brothers only officially faced each other once, in a yusho playoff bout in which everyone who’s seen it agrees Taka took a dive. But by 1998 they were in the midst of a well-publicized feud and had long since quit practicing together. Competition between brothers can be the fiercest of all, despite what anyone likes to think of as the closeness of family ties. In the beginning, the Hanadas pushed each other up the banzuke as much as they pushed
Akebono, and for the same reason: losing to one another was worse than losing to anyone else.

During my initial time with Akebono back in the midst of his competitive life as a man bent on fighting Taka and Waka to stay on top, his grudging acknowledgement of their effect on his career amounted to the one comment on the motivational power of flashbulbs aimed at the boys (rather than at himself) on their 1988 registration day, and this anecdote of his early days of de-geiko at Fujishima Beya. But once he retired some three years later, the first two names preceding the sentence, “They the main reason why I made it” were those of the Hanada brothers.
CHAPTER 7

When people look at you making yokozuna, that's the first thing people ask you—do you get a raise in salary, do you get to do anything you want to do? From a regular person's point of view, maybe I'd look at it the same way. But the way I look at it, being a yokozuna is not a matter of your salary or how much free time you get. It's just the thought that the sport is so old and that it's the sport of the people of Japan. Before me, there has only been 63 guys who could do the same thing that I'm doing now. It's love and being proud instead of worrying about the money. It's the respect you get from being a yokozuna. That's the happiest thing for me.—newly-promoted Yokozuna Akebono addressing the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Japan, 2/13/93. (Akebono, 7,8).

No one who knows them both would ever call Akebono and Konishiki fast friends. Konishiki did show up at the first birthday party Akebono held for his daughter in 1999, and he was present when Chad married Christine the year before, but given the commonality of their situations and the years they have spent in sumo together, one would expect their relationship to be far closer than it is. Their unreasonably busy schedules keep them apart, to be sure, but the distance between them seems to go deeper than issues of convenience. When Konishiki turned out to be the only person to turn down my request for an interview for this book—on several occasions, always (and in his defense, reasonably) citing his tight schedule—and when Akebono wasn't surprised at the rebuffs, I began to pick up a limit to the way
the two men got on socially. I suspect whatever tension might lie between them goes back to Wakanohana’s theory (and Tiger Woods’, and Bob Gibson’s, to name just two other focused competitors) on the poor mix of competition and friendship.

Still, despite the social distance that separates them today, Akebono is full of gratitude for his sempai’s early help, and he is quick to point out the extent of what Konishiki did for him. When I brought up Konishiki in our very first meeting, Akebono, answered quickly for the first time in the interview, instead of taking a moment to ponder as he did after most of my questions: “Because of him, I’m at where I am today. He gave me advice in the ring, off the ring. He used to practice with me. He made me get strong. And it’s real important to have somebody like that because, like I said, we’re only human, and you get tired from doing this every day, and some days, you just want to run and hide. He would come look for me, watch, and you need somebody to push you like that” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98).

The most useful push came in early 1989, when Konishiki invited Akebono to join him on the spring jungyo as one of his tsukebito following the Osaka Haru Basho. The jungyo schedule is grueling enough for sekitori, who merely have to show up, practice, perform the dohyo-iri, and fight in one match. For tsukebito it can be a kind of hell, as they attend to everything from laundry, to errands, to packing and carrying their superiors’ trunks, all following a hard morning’s practice. While the jungyo I attended in 1998 and 1999 were held at indoor arenas throughout rural Japan where the Sumo Kyokai could charge hefty admissions fees for people to get a look at its stars, Akebono’s first jungyo was very much like the “circus” he once described it as, tents and all. Back in 1989 the jungyo were held as they had always
been: outdoors, in the form of country festivals. And instead of the catered lunches of 1999, lower rankers like Chad stood over steaming pots of chanko, just as if they had been at home in the heya. Rikishi fought and trained on outdoor dohyo, and at the end everything was rolled up and packed in trucks, and the lower-rankers walked towards the train station to meet the show in the next town.

Chad’s first trip out into Japan’s countryside opened his eyes to the fact that Japan was not just an endless, gray skyline. He saw mountains, streams, and forests, and rice paddy upon rice paddy. Japan’s spectacular cherry blossoms had already come and gone to welcome spring, and this time Chad could really appreciate the season, after having overcome his second winter. Some of the rural smells evoked the most powerful memories of Waimanalo he’d had since coming to Japan, as often smells only can. In some instances he could close his eyes, breathe in, and be at Glenn’s Flowers and Plants, or in the yard, or on the farm with Uncle Sam’s horses.

The first morning he was awakened in the dark and taken by a group of other tsukebito to wait in the cold for a bus to the jungyo site. They boarded silently when the bus came, and got off as silently fifteen minutes later in front of a big field. The other tsukebito acted as if on instinct, drilled as they already were in the jungyo routine. Chad helped them unload huge bundles and big green and orange bamboo trunks from two big trucks. He followed them to a spot in the corner of the field and helped lay out the tarps and cover them with tatami mats and place the bamboo trunks all in rows, just so. He carried Konishiki’s trunk and set it in front of the tatami mats near the back of one of the rows. The boys worked quickly without wasting a motion so that within fifteen minutes a neat shitaku-beya—the sumo equivalent of the locker
A room—about the size of a basketball court—was set in the corner of the field. Then they filed off for asa-geiko, either on the raised dohyo in the middle of the field, or one of the other practice areas off to the side where they used sticks to draw their own ring boundaries on the hard dirt ground.

They limbered up with shiko and went straight into a practice similar to de-geiko, with each match’s end signaled by the shouts from the next challengers. Chad had to scrap more than normal for his chances to fight in the morning’s fierce competition. He would learn later that practice time was precious on jungyo, since most of the rest of the day was filled with the kind of military movement that had started this one: pack, unpack, repack, and move. Find a coin operated laundry in the next town, do the washing, run some errands for the sekitori, and finally lay your weary body down for a few hours’ rest. Compared to this grind, life in Azumazeki Beya was easy. The rest of the tsukebito knew this, which was why most of them milked the training time for whatever they could—it would be their only chance to work their way out of all this.

When the sun rose higher and sweat began to sting his eyes, Chad was summoned by another of Konishiki’s tsukebito. Practice, at least for them, was over. He followed the other boy back to the shitaku-beya, where sleepy maegashira were already lying on their tatami mats, chatting with their own tsukebito, or reading magazines, or plugged into headphones, or talking with local reporters. They all sat within a few feet of each other, these men who did their best to punish one another for a living. They sat according to rank, and the last four spaces were still empty. Chad was told to wait by Konishiki’s bamboo box.
The place fell silent when all six hundred pounds of the big man entered, flanked by two other tsukebito. He went straight back to his space as though he had been there the day before, greeted along the way by everyone he passed (*ZaiMass!*). A tsukebito helped him take off the yukata and he layed down on the tatami mat. Another tsukebito wiped the sweat from his face with a towel. A third fanned him. The first one handed Chad the yukata to fold, and then stood by with a bottle of spring water.

Not long after Konishiki was settled, another hush fell over the shitaku-beya, more palpable than the last. Shouts of "*ZaiMass!*" interrupted the silence and spread over the area as a man with a chiseled face walked in Chad’s direction flanked by four tsukebito, his piercing eyes clearing a path before him. Those in his path jumped to the side and bowed. He did not acknowledge any of them. The man was much smaller than Konishiki—perhaps less than half his size—and yet every eye was drawn to him as if he were descended from the Emperor himself. Chad bowed and offered his greeting as the man passed. Only Konishiki’s greeting was returned with a nod.

The man walked to the last space in the shitaku-beya, where four more tsukebito waited with towels. Two of them held up the towels as curtains and he disrobed. Two others helped him with his mawashi, and then the towels fell to reveal a body thick with muscle, right down to his deeply-cut abs. *Mean. Can kick everybody’s ass.* Chad knew who he was. Yokozuna Chiyonofuji. The man Taylor had spoken of in such awe. He couldn’t have weighed three hundred pounds, yet there was no doubt he could—and would, if he had to—take anyone in sumo. *Mean.*
Strong. Chad had heard stories of him lifting Konishiki off the ground. The man commanded respect, just by walking into the area. Respect, not from fans or people who knew he was famous, but from the very people he competed against, not because of his string of championships, but because they all knew beyond any doubt that he was the strongest man among them.

Then, just as suddenly as he had arrived, the Yokozuna walked out the way he had come and towards the dohyo to begin practice.

The Yokozuna. The image of his entrance stayed with Chad through the rest of the morning, even after he had prepared and served the morning meal and resumed his post waiting in attendance for Konishiki, who chatted with Mitoizumi. Off to one side, lower ranked rikishi dozed in the warm breeze. Visitors with special passes went from one sekitori to the next to shyly ask for a photograph. And off to the other side, Chiyonofuji spoke quietly with a man in a suit as two of his tsukebito whispered with one another. Chad’s eyes were drawn to him, and one word stuck in his mind: Respect. There had to be over a hundred guys stretched out across the small corner of the field. And here at the top of them all sat Chiyonofuji. The Yokozuna did not just sit; he presided over the rows of reclining rikishi stretched out before him, even as he relaxed in the quiet afternoon, paying no attention to anyone but his guest in the suit. He presided, but not regally like a king would; it was because his position of authority was understood.

Later the mood shifted as abruptly as it had earlier in the day when the Yokozuna had made his entrance. A tsukebito opened one of the three bamboo boxes emblazoned with the man’s name and passed out white gloves to the rest of the
attendants. Another prepared Chiyonofuji’s apron-like kesho-mawashi. A third opened a long, mettle case to reveal a samurai sword in a gold-studded scabbard. The tsukebito all held their hands carefully before them as surgeons would to avoid germs and dirt, their gloves contrasting with their black mawashi. One of the gloved tsukebito reached into one of the bamboo boxes and, with some effort, lifted out a thick, brilliant white rope.

The smiles in the area disappeared as though someone had flipped a switch, and an aura of business-like respect fell over the entire shitaku-beya. Even Konishiki looked on intently as the boys uncoiled the rope to its length—some six feet—and affixed five strips of wide zig-zag white paper to its wide center. Chiyonofuji, his chon-mage now sculpted into the formal flower shape worn by sekitori in competition, was helped first into a kind of soft, cloth under-mawashi, and then into his sparkling kesho-mawashi. At last he leaned forward on the shoulders of one of the boys, while the other five surrounded him to tie the massive rope around him like a belt. The boys strained to pull the rope tight and tied a single-looped knot, punctuating the act with a deep chant of, “Uh-who-uh-who-uh-who!”

Chiyonofuji was now more than mean, can kick everybody’s ass. Maybe it was the folded white paper strips swaying from the rope. Chad had seen smaller versions of these strips every morning, hanging from the miniature Shinto shrine in Azumazeki Beya’s keikoba. This man could lift Konishiki off the ground, but now that somehow seemed less important. The respect he had commanded earlier had come from his obvious strength. But now, here in all his trappings, with the big brilliant rope around his waist, he commanded a different kind of respect that stood
out to Chad above the man’s now-obvious strength. This respect had the whole of Japan and the history of the sport behind it. Chiyonofuji was not some heavyweight champion of the world or some NBA star with a championship ring on his finger. He was a man of honor, standing tall with a kind of dignity Chad had never seen before. He was the Yokozuna.

The brush with sekitori life and the continued contact with upper-rankers like Konishiki and Chiyonofuji both motivated and educated Chad so that upon his return to Tokyo and throughout the summer, he was able to pile up three more winning records and find himself in the upper fifth of the makushita division—the highest of sumo’s non-salaried divisions, and the most difficult from which to be promoted. While most of sumo’s promotions are objectively based on the number of wins a rikishi manages in a tournament, the most important promotions are more subjective, either because of the stakes involved (such as with yokozuna promotion), or because a number of worthy candidates are depending on those above them to lose and be demoted or to retire, as is the case with promotion from makushita to juryo. A 4-3 record from the bottom of makushita, for instance, will get you promoted up a few spaces, while a 4-3 record from Makushita 1 may not get you promoted to juryo. If no one in juryo winds up with a losing record and no one retires, a 7-0 record from Makushita 1 will not even be enough to get you promoted to juryo.

Makushita, then, is about the toughest place to be on the banzuke, both because of this numbers game, and because of what awaits just above it. Nearly all rikishi—even many of those who have gone on to take the Emperor’s Cup—look
back to their promotion out of makushita as the high point of their careers. Makushita rikishi toil daily along with those below and sleep in a big room with their fellow deshi, while those in juryo and makunouchi live like spoiled princes and have their pick of beautiful women. In many cases, makushita rikishi are stronger than sekitori but haven’t had the luck or the consistency to put together enough wins to push them over the top into one of the treasured 26 juryo positions. At times during a hon-basho they may have defeated one sekitori (top makushita rikishi are sometimes pulled up to juryo for individual matches), only to return home to attend to another. Some of them are former sekitori who have tasted the glory and are desperate to have it back. The rest are simply desperate, fighting with an intensity level that rises with each step up the division’s more than one hundred ranks. In every other division, winning and losing is always on the line, and sometimes the glory and spoils of a division championship are on the line. But in makushita, freedom, money, respect, sex, and all that goes into the life of a sekitori—all of these are on the line. Because so much is at stake, these are both the most exciting matches to watch, and the most difficult to win.

Chad saw his steady-if-unspectacular winning pace in makushita eclipsed by both of his most frequent training partners, the young darlings of the sumo world. Takahanada matched a perfect May record with his second Makushita Yusho in September. At seventeen he was already being compared to a young Chiyonofuji by those who would watch him train, which he would do as if in an artist’s trance, lifting each leg as high as possible for each shiko as though it were a ballet move. Even as he punished himself with one bout after another, his efforts seemed comfortable,
smooth, even elegant. Where Akebono made drastic adjustments in stance and relied on violent, explosive techniques, Takahanada made subtle refinements to stir the perfect mix of speed, technique, and strength and pour it into his natural talent.

Wakahanada was right behind him despite his September losing record at Makushita 5 in the banzuke’s most dangerous neighborhood. If there was any pressure to perform at the levels of their famous father and their former-yokozuna uncle, it did nothing to negatively affect their performance on the dohyo.

Chad knew these boys had already been picked by many as heirs to their uncle and to Chiyonofuji, as the next yokozuna. It was almost assumed that everyone would soon be greeting these boys with shouts of Zaimass! and bowing humbly as they walked by, that they would each be flanked by a squadron of tsukebito. But Chad knew he could beat either of them at any given moment. He also knew that no one had ever thought of even mentioning his name in a sentence containing the word yokozuna. For some reason, they had been granted a level of respect he thought he had also more than earned by now, and the fact that it hadn’t come burned him up inside.

The subjects of Taka and Waka came up only once or twice over the course of my afternoon talking to George “Ola” Rowan, but their presence hung over the prison’s visiting area the whole afternoon. Here was Ola, a charming guy with a monster build that, unlike his brother’s, was perfect for sumo, even in 1998 after years of being locked up and doing nothing. Here was a seasoned athlete, a fierce competitor, a guy who knows better than most anyone how to handle himself in a
fight. Taka and Waka had just become the first yokozuna brothers in the history of sumo, and here Ola sat, wasting away in prison. It pained me to hear him go on about his past, and the pain increased with the kindness and candor he showed me throughout our talk. As he went through the stories, I sat there rooting for the Ola he was telling me about, hoping somehow it could all come out different.

“All the delinquents together,” he told me of his own experience during the waning months of 1988, when his brother and the Hanadas were being picked as sumo’s future, “was trouble, you know what I mean. They don’t understand, when you put all the terrible kids together in one da kine, I tell you, it’s going create something, you know what I mean. Guarantee. Especially you going put a whole bunch of drug addicts together” (Rowan, George “Ola”). While the Hanada brothers worked to push each other up the banzuke, Ola was spiraling into deeper trouble back on Oahu. Another fight and bad grades had landed him in the Olomana School Hawai‘i Correctional Center for Youth, an alternative institution down the road from Kailua High. Designed to straighten out kolohe boys, in practice, once again, it had the opposite affect on Ola.

“One day he went to school,” Mrs. Rowan told me, “they called me and told me to pick him up because he was drunk or high or something. So I took him to Castle Medical Center. He was drunk. And she told me that he brought the alcohol to school, and I said, ‘No he didn’t. No he didn’t. I like tell you why my boy comes to school real frustrated.’ I said ‘You know what. Before I take him out that door, he needs to strip. I strip search him. I do it everyday, and I told him until he can make me trust him, this will continue. This morning I strip-searched him. And you
know what. I go through his BVD’s, his bag, his pockets, everything. And I don’t let him go turn around and walk back into the house. So we both go out the door, and he goes out the door before me, and I’m still holding onto his bag. And then I bring him here. So you don’t tell me he had this alcohol in his bag. Somebody gave it to him. And I brought him right to you. I gave him right to you”” (Rowan, Janice, 1998).

With just over six months to go before graduation, Ola dropped out of Olomana. “And that’s when he was really on the road,” his mother said. “You know, come home whenever he like, do whatever he like. I think by then, from going to Olomana School—in the beginning it was just the alcohol, but when you group these kind of kids together….” (Rowan, Janice, 1998).

The why-would-you-want-to-join-sumo question does not exactly apply to Ola, since he would likely have jumped at any free plane ticket. The serious answer, if there can be one in Ola’s case, is that for him, sumo was very much a last resort. Larry Aweau was called, and Ola was signed up to head to Japan by summers end.

“I told him, ‘You have to forget about Hawai‘i,’” Aweau told me. “‘Some of those boys will be younger than you, and you’re going to have to do what they say. You do whatever they tell you, and you’re going to make it’” (Aweau, 1998). Ola must have been the best-prepared of Aweau’s recruits, thanks equally to Aweau’s perception that the kid needed as much cultural coaching as possible, and to the time Aweau made him spend at Oahu sumo aficionado John Jacques’ North Shore practice dohyo learning the basics.

And then there were the frequent phone calls from Japan. “I used to talk to Chad and he used to tell me the kind of stuffs that would go on up there, so I was
ready,” Ola told me. “I had a kind of a head start. I knew what was coming. Chad
used to call home and tell me, ‘You know what. You think you can handle being
away from home, coming to Japan? You get homesick, you not going give up, ah?’ I
told him, ‘I going try. That’s all I can tell you’” (Rowan, George “Ola”).
CHAPTER 8

If he could have handled the lifestyle, I don’t think I would have been the first foreign yokozuna. I mean, I could kick his ass when he came up, but Ola was crazy. No matter how much we throw him down, he’d always come back for more. I’d go out to one nodda stable for practice and come back all tired, couldn’t even move. And here comes Ola: “Chad! Let’s go lift weights! Let’s go find one basketball! I like practice more!” Fucka had too much energy! If sumo was just one sport and not one way of life, I think he would have made ‘em before me.—Akebono, 5/99.

George “Ola” Rowan looked through the plane window in September 1989 at the same gray skyline his brother had seen a year and a half before not with uncertainty, but with excited joy. The place was filled with as many possibilities as similar-looking buildings. He talked almost non-stop with Troy Talaimatai, Azumazeki Oyakata’s Samoan recruit from just outside downtown Honolulu. Ola had no fear, none of the loneliness his brother had felt when he had taken the same journey. He saw only life, the moment, the big city, a place to get in the game and play.

A much more enthused Azumazeki Oyakata met him at the airport—more excited both because Ola was the one he’d wanted in the first place, and because Chad had begun to surprise him by proving himself. If the tall one could do it, imagine what the brother could do! Taylor, whom many likened to Konishiki thanks to his beefy build, was now only a step away from juryo, and John and Chad were not
far behind. Troy showed great potential of his own at a perfect six feet tall, 350 pounds. And now Ola: the natural. Oyakata envisioned an unprecedented five sekitori in his four-year-old heya, an incredible feat in light of the fact that the average time between opening a heya and producing even one sekitori was ten years. And while Chad and John might make juryo, and Taylor could go as high as ozeki, Ola could go to the top. This one had the body, the talent, the fighting spirit. It was on the way to the airport when Azumazeki Oyakata allowed himself to consider the possibility of producing a yokozuna, a historic achievement for any oyakata, and of course something no foreigner had ever done. George “Ola” Rowan would be his yokozuna.

Chad could understand Boss’s enthusiasm. He too was happy to be together with his brother. During his dark, homesick times he actually used to miss Ola and the way he drove everyone crazy. But he also knew that Ola would have a hard time dealing with sumo life all the way down at the bottom of the banzuke.

“I was glad he was coming up,” Chad told me in mid-1999, “so we could do ’um together.” Talking about Ola was never exactly difficult during our interviews, but I could always hear a hint of regret in the Yokozuna’s voice when his brother came up, and disappointment, and then a kind of sho-ga-nai resignation that the sumo life just wasn’t something Ola could fit into. “The thing about Ola is that when it comes time for fight,” he said, “he’s ready for fight. I neva worry about that. I just wanted for keep him out of trouble” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99). And then he looked down, shaking his head.
After Okamisan’s welcome breakfast Ola was dropped into sumo life as Chad had been, to make it or not. But Ola needed no one to tell him, “Stand up for your rights, Hawaiian!” Lacking his older brother’s patience, he spent much of the time fighting against himself, and against the heya’s sempai-kohai system. As often occurs in settings governed by seniority, those closest to the bottom deal out the worst kind of arbitrary punishment to those below them, sometimes for good reason and sometimes simply because they can.

According to Ola, his own first experience of this kind came at the hands of Nathan Strange, an Englishman from Kent who had badgered Azumazeki Oyakata with several letters expressing his wish to become a rikishi. Oyakata had finally given in to the 6’3” eighteen-year-old just before Ola and Troy arrived. Strange was even more of an outsider at Azumazeki Beya than Chad had been in his early years, struggling to deal with both sumo culture and the heya’s expanding local Hawaiian culture. Not only was the kid a gangly foreigner; he spoke with an Austin Powers-thick English accent that invited constant ridicule from the local boys. And he was white. Haole. Mixing Samoans and Hawaiians together was risky enough, but this guy was haole. For a local boy like Ola, it is one thing to be smacked in the face by a Japanese, in Japan. Getting smacked by some haole was an entirely different matter. One does not hit a Hawaiian in the face and not expect a reaction, especially if one is white. And one does not complain to Boss about any of the rikishi, especially if that rikishi is Ola.

“This guy Nathan, he was jealous” about Chad looking out for Ola, as Ola put it to me. “And he was making false accusations to the oyakata, and I got busted, I got
grounded. So I was so piss of at him, and still yet you gotta respect the guy, ah?
That’s the Japanese custom. But in the ring, that’s one different story. And I was so
mad at him, and Chad told me, ‘You know what. This the time for you for get back at
dis guy. So we was practicing, and after you pau [finished, in Hawaiian], you push
the guy out, another guy run up. You take the first guy that’s standing right in front
of you. So Nathan was there, and he came, and he just bumped me. And I thought he
was getting aggressive, so I went, ‘Oh, yeah!’ He came charging at me. I wen open­
hand slap him, he wen fall down in the middle of the ring!” (Rowan, George “Ola,”
1998). Despite winning records in all of his hon-basho appearances, Nathan Strange
would last just three more months in Japan.

Unfortunately Ola was unable to confine his aggression to the keikoba. He
learned he had to “scrap for what you like” just as quickly as his brother had, but
lacked his brother’s judgment regarding proper time and place. “Look around before
you do anything, and don’t be ignorant,” were words that Chad lived by, words that
had allowed him to wield a two-by-four in Azumazeki Beya’s big room upon his own
arrival, because the time was right. Ola entered a much different demographic, one
where the words, “Stand up for your rights, Hawaiian!” had become less of a
necessity. With Taylor, John, the Rowans, and Troy, Hawaiians or Samoans from
Hawai’i now made up nearly one-third of Azumazeki’s deshi and occupied the
Azumazeki Beya banzuke’s top three spots. It had become equally important for the
Japanese deshi—all of whom were Ola’s sempai—to assert themselves.

“Used to have this guy, Umi,” Ola recalled, “Umi-san. And he would go out
every night. He would come home, and go straight to the younger wrestlers and pick
on 'em while they’re sleeping, wake ‘em up, pick on ‘em, all that kine stuff. And so my brother used to stay up with me until I went to sleep. He was just like a protector, ah? At that time. So the guy used to come home and he used to pick on us—me and Troy especially. And so one day he came home drunk, and he was sick. And me, I was fed up. Every night I used to da kine, I was fed up. He came up to me. He was kicking me and stuff like that. I wen stand up, I wen punch him. He wen scream. Okamisan came running down—was in the middle of the night. So I was on the ground, Chad was trying to da kine, I was pounding him, Pow! Pow! Pow! I was yelling in English, I just went on punching him” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998).

If Ola had ever worried about the lickings his mother used to hand out, he was in for a shock.

“You know what kawaigari is?” Chad asked me when we talked of Ola’s time in Japan. I told him I took it to mean the time towards the end of practice when butsukari-geiko ends up going on long enough to make a rikishi cry in exhaustion and pain. I’ve since learned it to also be a cruel kind of hazing done to everyone from university students, to salarymen, to kohai nurses locked in rooms alone with a sempai who verbally abuses them for up to an hour. “No, I mean real kawaigari,” the Yokozuna said. “Ho, that was the first time I seen that, and I only really seen ‘em twice. They made him do butsukari for one hour. Then they made him do push-ups for one hour—we’re all standing around watching. Then my boss told me to leave the room. I said no, I like see what they do to him. I told my brother, ‘They’re not beating you just for beat you. They’re doing it for one reason’” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99).
In all fairness to Oyakata, such seemingly drastic disciplinary measures have been a part of sumo at least since the current sumo beya system of training began to take shape in the mid-19th century. In the broader context of the rest of Japan, few would even bat an eye at any oyakata’s use of the shinai—a point my wife drove home for me in a story of her not-unusual experience as a student at one of Tokyo’s more prestigious all-female private high schools: one day when she was fifteen she was called to the front of the room and beaten over the head with a four-inch-thick dictionary to the point of dizziness and nausea—symptoms of a concussion—because she forgot her textbook. If beatings are a first resort in high school classrooms, we should not be surprised, even in extreme cases like Ola’s, when beatings are used as discipline in the sumo world—a community where violence is simply a part of the daily routine. In Chad’s case Azumazeki Oyakata had used the shinai in effort to light a fire of anger. With Ola he used it for quite opposite reasons, to break him like a stubborn stallion.

“So 2:30 in the morning I had to put on my mawashi,” Ola told me, “go in the ring, and do butsukari with John Feleunga, Imura, and I forget who else. So tired. They’d slam me against the wall, slap me. Brah, they was slapping me hard. So Oyakata, he wen make me stand in the push-up position for long time, and every time I fall down I had to start over. Had to stay there for one hour. I was getting so tired and Oyakata kept hitting me with the stick. I said, ‘You know what. Hit me all you like.’ Brah, that’s when he wen trip out. He wen stop. But when I went upstairs, I wen look in the mirror, I went, ‘Wow!’ You know on the part where the mawashi
was not covering? Ho, was all purple, get mean welts. That’s how you beat animals, you know what I mean?” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998).

Ola’s experience here complicates the admirable fact that Chad Rowan made it as Akebono because he was able to keep his mouth shut and put up with sumo’s harsh realities, since it’s so easy to consider Ola’s anecdote—corroborated by Chad and several other rikishi I interviewed—and come down on Ola’s side: that’s how you beat animals. Put up with this? With a back covered in purple welts? No, Ola couldn’t handle the lifestyle, but he was also too smart for the lifestyle to be able to straighten him out according to its antiquated forms of corporal punishment, smart enough to think, hey, I wen mess up, but I not one animal. And so kawaigari didn’t work any better than the back seats of the police cars of his youth. If there was trouble even in this relatively tame, law-abiding country, Ola would find it. “He was out every night,” Chad recalled, “right from the first night he got here” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99). He was grounded in his second week for failing to make it back to the heya before curfew. Having gotten lost in the maze of narrow Tokyo streets, he had to call and arrange to be picked up. He followed up this gaffe with a night on the town with a foreigner living nearby, a night that found him returning to a locked Azumazeki Beya well after midnight. He slept at the friend’s apartment and returned the following morning. “I was scared of Oyakata, because of what I seen how furious he get before, so I neva like go,” he recalled. “So I finally went and da kine, dis, dat, and I had to do butsukari for long time. Ho, Chad wen get pissed off” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998).
Ola's problems outside the ring contrasted with the way he performed in the ring, just as all of his athletic performances had. He was grounded or punished for several similar transgressions, but able to hang onto the confidence of his boss with improved performances in the keikoba. He came to throw everyone out of the ring except for Troy, John, Taylor, and his brother, who were all a level above everyone else. He manhandled the Japanese, and the Englishman.

But the days when he could hold his own against Chad were over, if only for the time being. “I been in the ring before, and he beat the shit outta me,” Ola said. “He used to throw me all over the frikken’ place, and he used to kick me li’dat, he used to hit me—not with the stick, he used to slap me. And you know when you get covered with sand, you feel it. I get up and I look at him, he laughing. When I go the next time, I try. I keep coming back” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998).

“I was hard on him,” Chad told me. “I guess I was kind of disappointed. He came up with Troy, and that guy from England. They all came just before the Aki Basho and did maezumo the same time. Ho, you should have seen Troy when he came up here. We was like, ‘Ho, look these young punks.’ We like show them how strong we were. First time in the ring I let Troy hit me in the chest, ho was like one freight train running into me. Boom! Fucka knocked me right into the wall. Right up until he got sick, he was bad. I guess I was disappointed in my brother cause I expected him for be like that, so I was the hardest on him. Even Boss, he told me, ‘Don’t push him so hard. You can’t expect him for know everything right away.’ I was the hardest on him cause he was my brother, and I expected a lot from him” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99).
That Chad had such an easy time of it with the brother who had been physically tougher than him in every way says much about the violent nature of sumo. For the past eighteen months, Chad had been learning how to fight. He had been doing little else but familiarizing himself with man-on-man confrontations to the finish. To charge forward intending to hurt, to slap at the head in front of him with full force, repeatedly, had become second nature. The best fighters are those who fight often, and Chad had had more than five thousand of these confrontations since leaving Hawa‘i. Ola—or any other scrapper from Hawa‘i, for that matter—had no hope of competing with him.

It’s also important to note that by now Chad saw the sumo training system as something that worked. Everything about it, from the early unkind comments of his fellow deshi right down to Boss’s shinai, had been as effective, in its own way, as butsukari-geiko had been at strengthening his body. That he was now treating Ola no differently than he had been treated those first lonely days eighteen months before—and out of concern rather than malice—suggests that Chad had not just bought into the sumo system, but that he had come to take its practices as gospel.

Still, no one would get up off the hard clay faster than Ola, and be more willing to come back for more. “As big as you are, brah,” he would say, “I going find one way for drop you” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998). A fighting coach in any contact sport often waits years for such determination. In fact, it’s not unfair to compare Ola to the fifteen-year-old Mike Tyson, who was not only coached, but adopted by legendary boxing trainer Cus D’Amato. D’Amato saw the same type of
when-it’s-time-for-fight-he-ready-for-fight instincts in Tyson that the now-sumo-savvy Chad could see in his powerful younger brother.

The major difference is that Tyson would never have to conform to the kinds of behavioral standards required by sumo—the way of sumo. When the furious killer instinct so admirable within the acceptable parameters of sport appears outside the ring, the fighter appears brutal rather than strong, a bully rather than an athlete. We are surprised when a traffic incident involving Mike Tyson comes to blows, even though the man has spent most of his life being programmed to use force as a swift, effective, first resort. But boxing is not Kokugi. Kokugi is both sport and institution. The endless hours in the keikoba are singular in purpose: to defeat another man as quickly as possible, using force that nearly always involves physical punishment. But sumo effectively harnesses the rage it encourages in the ring with its rules as an institution—with sumodo.

While rikishi perform the most dramatic confrontation in a society which strives for harmony and shies away from confrontation, they are also among the most polite members of a culture based on form. I walked through Sapporo one evening during summer jungyo with Murakami, one of Akebono’s tsukebito, on an errand to McDonald’s. With his chon-mage and yukata robe the eighteen-year-old drew stares from everyone on the crowded streets, but walked with dignity and pride, unconcerned with how he stood out. When some people walking past us mistook him for Gojoro—a top division rikishi—he said to me in English, as if to emphasize the point, ‘I am Murakami!’ Everyone reacted to him in one way or another and he was unfazed in his role, polite enough to stand for photos with giggling teenage girls,
always speaking in honorific language in a gentlemanly tone that belied the bruises on his face. A rikishi could damage anyone on the dohyo. But no car accident involving Murakami will ever come to blows.

The sumodo that troubled Ola and, to a lesser extent, Konishiki, are taught primarily in the heya through absorption and exposure to the system, and the clear expectations. The do is reinforced for shin-deshi in a hall at the back of the Kokugikan two hours daily for their first six months—unless they are on the road in non-Tokyo basho. As a not-for-profit foundation registered under Japan’s Ministry of Education, the Nihon Sumo Kyokai must maintain a place for study. Shin-deshi are required to attend the Kyokai school. In addition to formal training of the techniques and exercises they are expected to pick up in practice, they learn sumo history, how to ascend the dohyo and what steps to take in the pre-bout ritual, how to paint their signatures in Chinese characters, and details of the Kyokai hierarchy. They also learn the rikishi oath, chanted religiously in each heya at the end of each day’s keiko.

Here is how Ola handled the part of the oath where rikishi promise to do their best to learn from their ani-deshi: “The Kokugikan, you know there’s a sumo school behind there,” he told me. “I had to go that, I went that. Ho, cuz. The oyakata, whatever, I forget his name, the ani-deshi who was from our stable, that would go and train us and stuff like that at the school, ho, I wen end up slapping one of the Japanese over there in the bathroom. [Laughs.] I was sitting down in class. He wen go tell the guy, the ani-deshi from our stable. Ho, brah! You know the geta slippers? Pa! Right in the head. I wen stand up. I wen slap the ani-deshi” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998). In other words, another student told the ani-deshi that Ola was sitting instead of

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standing. The ani-deshi disciplined Ola with his wooden slipper, but Ola retaliated, and later slapped the informer in the bathroom.

This incident earned Ola several more hours of butsukari-geiko, several more hours in the push-up position, and several more bruises from the shinai. After his anger subsided a bit, Azumazeki Oyakata used the unheard-of incident as an opportunity for yet another lesson on culture. "You cannot go bringing your local attitude up here," Ola recalls his boss telling him. "I mean this is not Hawai‘i. This is Japan. You gotta respect..." (qtd. by Rowan, George "Ola," 1998).

"You know what brah," Ola interrupted his oyakata. "These guys is getting carried away, brah, you know what I mean?" (Rowan, George "Ola," 1998).

The scrapping continued in Azumazeki Beya, though from here it stayed confined to the Rowan brothers. Just as his mother had predicted, Chad had slipped right back into Older Brother mode, feeling responsible for every mistake Ola made. He continued to ride his brother, which is what led to most of their fights.

"You keep doing this to me!" Ola would shout. "You act like you not my bradda!" (qtd. by Rowan, Chad, 5/99).

"You neva understand, Ola! It don’t work like that up here. Up here get no such thing as braddas!" Ola, of course, had never bothered to consider about how things worked "up here," or anywhere, for that matter. And so the first resort was to fight.

"We used to scrap," Akebono told me much later. "I used to crack him with the baseball bat. I’m one wrestler—I not going hit him with my hands—that’s my bread and butter right there" (Rowan, Chad, 5/99).
The 1989 Kyushu Basho banzuke, a document as full of drama and irony as any epic poem, promised an exciting tournament from top to bottom that November. All the way at the top, Chiyonofuji looked to add to his perfect 15-0 September record—a feat about as rare as baseball’s no-hitter. A few spaces below, Konishiki stood in danger of demotion following his one allotted losing record as an ozeki. Takahanada was debuting as the class of February ‘88’s first sekitori, in the juryo division. With some luck, Akebono could assure his own juryo promotion with another strong performance at the top of makushita, provided enough sekitori dropped from juryo. Wakahanada was right behind him after posting a losing record at Makushita 5.

Ola wound up in a Fukuoka hostess bar staffed by painted Filipino girls in short skirts and low-cut blouses. Hostess bars are the depths to which the geisha art form has fallen over the years, places where pretty young girls earn big money sitting around tables with their Japanese customers, pouring their drinks, laughing at their jokes, and giggling at the occasional grope. Sex is usually discretely on the menu but not always ordered. Exotic foreign women do well in hostess bars, so it is not uncommon to find the places staffed with buxom blonde women or foreigners from Southeast Asia. Customers requesting foreign hostesses can use the empowering experience as a chance to fool themselves into thinking they speak English well.

“Oh, have you been to America? Your English is perfect! You don’t even have an accent!”
That the Filipino girls in this particular Fukuoka bar spoke English was either to Ola’s benefit—because he could make himself understood—or to his further peril, in light of what the communication led to. A group of well-dressed men at a table across the room noticed Ola, who stood out as much for his size as for the fact that he was a foreigner, as well as the fact that he sat alone. While the Japanese can take hospitality to extremes when welcoming and helping wayward foreigners, people Ola’s size tend to cause as much fear as curiosity and so they are usually left alone. But the men who noticed Ola—there were four of them—were too much at ease to be afraid of anything. They sat around the table more like a fraternity than a group of co-workers or friends, generally ignoring the girls who sat between them. Two of them laughed easily from time to time, while the other two—several years younger—joined in when they felt it was appropriate. At the signal of one of the older men, a fifth member of the group who had been standing by the door—maybe just out of high school, if that, impeccably dressed and groomed—summoned one of the girls from the bar, spoke with her briefly, and then sent her to Ola’s table.

“Hello!” She smiled at Ola. She explained that the gentlemen wanted him to join them.

“Who are they?” Ola asked. He had been watching them since he walked in. They behaved differently from the other groups in the bar, with more confidence. While he likely would have eaten up anyone’s attention at this point, he figured that these guys were important.

They welcomed him with smiles and handshakes. One of the younger ones could handle himself in English, and of course the hostesses were there to translate.
They poured him a drink and sat him between two of the girls and watched his charm kick in. He made them understand he was an American football player. They made him understand that they wanted him to leave with them.

"Brah, he took me all over," Ola told me. "I neva have to pay for nothing. He took me to chicki-chiki houses. He took me drinking every night. He bought me clothes—nice kine clothes, da kine, like suits. They took me to a house," more than an hour’s drive away, on the island of Shikoku (Rowan, George "Ola," 1998).

Their black Mercedes Benz pulled up to a guarded compound. The guard was dressed in suit and tie and bowed to the driver as the car rolled past along a driveway lined with security cameras. The car stopped and someone opened the door and shouted, "ZaiMASss!" This startled Ola, like he was suddenly back at the heya, or at some type of sumo headquarters. But it continued with whomever they passed as they walked through the huge compound, the shouts of "ZaiMASss!" and the deep bows, none of which Ola’s host acknowledged. They showed Ola to a room they indicated would be his, smiled, and left him alone for the time being. For the next week they did nothing but entertain him in the lavish style to which they had introduced him.

"Mom, I cannot find Ola," Chad said in a phone call home. The Kyushu Basho had already been going on for four days.

"Now what happened?" she asked him, without surprise.
“He’s been gone for two days. He wen cut right in the middle of the basho. No one knows where he went, and Boss is all piss off. I like go look for him and kick the fucka’s ass.”

“No, Chad,” his mother told him. “You stay right there. You don’t even know where to look. You just take care yourself. You concentrate on fighting. Ola going turn up, or knowing him, he probably going call somebody here. We’ll find him, just take care yourself.”

“I know, Mom, but I’m all shame now, my braddah messing up li’dat. And it’s all the time, Ma. I like lick him when I see him.”

Janice Rowan hung up the phone and went straight to her son’s room. She looked through every drawer and in every pocket of every jacket he had left behind for the names and numbers of all his friends.

“I called all his friends,” she told me, “and I made sure I talked to the parents. I told them, ‘My Ola’s in Japan. My Ola’s disappeared. I know my Ola will make contact with somebody here. So if he does call, can you let me know’” (Rowan, Janice, 1998). Sure enough, Ola called one of the friends about a week later. They talked, and he promised to call back the next night. The friend told Janice Rowan that her son had called to arrange a drug deal. Compared to places like Honolulu or New York, drug dealers are about as prevalent in Japan as blondes and red-heads, but Ola had managed to find one. And though he didn’t know it at the time, he had found one of the biggest and best-connected yakuza mob bosses in Japan.

His mother made it a point to be at the friend’s house for the scheduled phone call. “Ola, where the hell are you?”
He wouldn't tell her.

“You know what Ola. I got the number for where you're staying. So either you tell me where you are, or I'm going send your brother after you.”

“I'm okay, Ma,” he told her, “I stay in Shikoku. These guys is taking good care of me, buying me all kine stuffs, taking me out for expensive dinner.”

“What guys.”

“Just these guys. They trust me. They like take care of me.”

“They like take care of you. You know what Ola. They like use you for carry drugs into Japan for them. Let me ask tell you something, Ola. You don’t know the position you put Chad in. All the work he did to get where he is, all the shit he went through, and finally he’s about to make it. You may think it’s not affecting anybody else. Let the newspapers get a hold of this. What you think they going do to your brother? And it’s going be too late to say ‘I’m sorry.’ It’s going be too late for you to say ‘I’m sorry.’ Go back to your brother.”

“No. He going lick me.”

“No, go back to your brother. I want you back there. Don’t force me to send your brother after you, or come up there and get you myself. Go back to your brother. Jesse will give you back your passport. And Chad will put you on the plane. Go back there” (Rowan, Janice, 1998).

Ola finally agreed. He knew he would never adapt no matter how much he was beaten. He would never have the patience to see juryo. He also knew that his mother was right, that he was ruining it for his brother.
“I talked to your brother,” Janice Rowan told Chad. “He’s coming back to the stable. Just make sure that when he gets there you take him to the airport and put him on a plane.”

“No, Ma,” Chad told her. “He comes to the stable, I going kick his ass, and I going make him stay.”

“No, Chad, you don’t need that responsibility right now, because you’re working on yourself. You start doing that, and things just going be harder for you” (Rowan, Janice, 1998).

To the surprise of his hosts, Ola finally owned up to who he really was. To them it meant a bad business idea at best, potential trouble at worst. It must be noted that while yakuza are thought of in Japan as gangsters to be feared, they are in many respects among Japan’s most hierarchically organized, well-appointed, detail-oriented businessmen. Yakuza clans are structured very much like sumo beya, based on a mix of strength and seniority, and, like the Hanadas, membership in a particular family. And all moral questions aside regarding the way yakuza conduct business and the types of activities they are involved in, the clans act as sumo does for some of its recruits, as social services, places for young men lacking other opportunities. So it is no surprise that to them, someone like Ola was bad news, and that to return him would be good politics. They immediately contacted Azumazeki Oyakata.

“I wen pull up in one Mercedes Benz limousine,” Ola recalled with a smile. “All the guys was tripping out, the guys that was in the stable. I jump outta the car, they already know: ‘Oh, this guy’s up to no good’” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998).
But this time Ola would not face kawaigari, or even a reprimand from Boss. The conversation was short. “You going be punishing me every single day for this kine stuff,” Ola told Boss. “I cannot go through this. I cannot” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998).

“We going send you home,” Oyakata told him. Without even giving him until they returned to Tokyo to get into further trouble, Azumazeki Oyakata put his best yokozuna prospect on the plane out of Fukuoka the following day. The boy with the killer instinct and the perfect sumo build had lasted just over two months in Japan.

Sumo’s timeless progression continued without even noticing the abrupt end of the potential gaijin yokozuna’s career. The Hanada brothers again pushed one another to winning records. Akebono was able to block out the problems surrounding his own brother long enough to put himself even closer to the brink of juryo promotion. Troy, Nathan Strange, and Musashimaru all earned majority wins. All would be promoted for the New Year’s tournament. While none of these rikishi came to sumo with as much potential for the sport’s violent confrontations as Ola Rowan had, all of them were able to recognize that sumo, as a cultural institution, was bigger than any of their own personal accomplishments. All acted accordingly. Four of them would go on to become yokozuna.

But just as Konishiki seemed to have perfected his sumodo, having humbly accepted the Emperor’s Cup in November and then humbly putting it up for grabs in January without ever publicly considering the possibility of promotion, his sumo deserted him. He fell completely apart in the New Year’s tournament after a loss on
Day Six, which led to four more consecutive defeats and sayonara to any chance at promotion. Only after he had taken himself out of the picture did he manage to recover and upset all three yokozuna to finish the tournament. The 10-5 showing, while good enough for an ozeki, effectively erased his fine November performance. One does not just become yokozuna by having a good day, or by knocking off any or all of the current yokozuna. The right to be considered for promotion is earned by maintaining consistent, dominating performances under intense pressure. Rather than prove he was equal to such pressure, Konishiki showed how situation could mess with mind to turn what should be easy wins into impossible ordeals.

That the public requirement of humility Konishiki had finally learned to enact may have seeped into the competitive corner of his mind and diluted his killer instinct is an assumption I don’t have enough information to make. But further down in what I’ve already defined as the banzuke’s most dangerous and pressure-packed neighborhood, the gaijin more naturally adept at constructing identities appropriate for certain situations—rather than at acting, as Konishiki appeared to be doing when he was saying the right things—never seemed to let his I-will-try-my-best off-dohyo persona interfere with his reckless, hands-to-the-throat, punishing self on the dohyo. Sure, Konishiki had missed out on a chance at yokozuna promotion, but he would wake up the next morning in his already-comfortable life as an ozeki. Had Akebono stepped up onto the dohyo with anything less than thoughts of destroying his opponents, he may have lost, and would have awakened in a room full of boys, a slave, even more miserable than before for having missed his best chance at becoming a prince, at taking home a woman any time he wanted, at donning the white
practice mawashi, at being greeted by everyone throughout the sumo world with respect.

And upon his promotion following the tournament, there was no switch from sumo to sumodo, no let’s-say-the-right-thing kind of acting. Instead the Japanese saw the same kind of natural shift of identity they themselves perform throughout the day—the kind that depends on the situation, the group in which they find themselves, and their status within that group. Akebono had become only the eighth foreign sekitori ever, and had reached juryo in fewer tournaments than all but four of all the sekitori in sumo history. Of his incredible feat, the gaijin had this to say: “I thought that if I make it to the juryo division in five or six years, that would be fast. . . that would be good enough for me” (Akogawa C:4). Azumazeki Oyakata, who had just produced his first sekitori a full six years faster than the average oyakata who opens a new heya—reacted with tears, and these words: “I thought it would take seven or eight years before I developed my first sekitori” (Suzuki, 18).

No words could possibly have been more culturally and politically correct, even though by now Chad clearly had his sights set on the white rope. And yet, Chad was doing something far more sincere here than saying the right thing. As he admitted to me, in the moment he had considered with a sense of pride that becoming a sekitori was a great accomplishment in itself—an accomplishment whose value he was now fully aware of after having lived in a world of hundreds of men who never made it after five or six years, after ten years, or at all. Here, then, was one of the many cases where tatemae and honne happened to be in accord, at least in the moment of the press conference.
Azumazeki Oyakata knew that his yokozuna was long gone by now, back in Hawai‘i and well on his way to prison. There is little doubt that Ola Rowan could have handled the overthinking part of sumo that tended to plague Konishiki at these big game moments. If there were two situations on this planet where Ola actually could handle himself, one was on the field of play, and the other was in a fight, and the sumo moment combined both of these in a way that would have tilted the balance almost unfairly in Ola’s favor every time. But the cultural performance and the complex shift of appropriate cultural identities it required—at this vital part of sumo life, Ola simply had no chance.

“I wasn’t pissed off when he left,” Chad told me. “More like I was sad, disappointed. It wasn’t any one thing. He just couldn’t handle being tied down, the sempai-kohai shit. He couldn’t handle the lifestyle” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99).

The Nihon Sumo Kyokai operates a small museum just off the Kokugikan’s main entrance that always ends up reminding me of Ola. They rotate the exhibit of sumo memorabilia every couple of months to display ancient kesho-mawashi, woodblock prints, yokozuna ropes, gyoji costumes, programs, old gyoji gunbai paddles, noteworthy banzuke, and the like. But of all the powerful visuals connecting us to sumo’s long and storied past, the one I always end up spending the most time looking at is on permanent display: lining the top of the display cases in a row stretching about three-quarters of the way around the room are the framed 10”x15” portraits of all the yokozuna in order of their promotions, stretching back into the mid-19th century when the rank was created. The first several images are colored wood-block prints. These are followed by grainy black-and-white photographs,
which are followed by color photos. Until I first saw this image I used to compare promotion to yokozuna with election to Major League Baseball’s Hall of Fame, despite the fact that Hall of Famers are retired and have nothing left to prove upon their election. But I have been to the Hall of Fame and found more than two hundred plaques stretching back only to 1936. Chad Rowan’s was the 64th yokozuna portrait hung in the Kokugikan’s museum in some 150 years of sumo in its current form. And it was the first of a non-Japanese.

If you visit the Kokugikan museum today, you’ll find that Akebono’s is no longer the last yokozuna portrait. It is followed, sadly with regard to the athletic talent Ola brought for his brief stay in Japan, by the portraits of two brothers.
When I met Chad he wasn’t that nice of a person, I guess cause all of the stress and stuff, but when I got to know him, he was one nice guy. Real humble. But mean personalities. I’ll tell you how he is. I been over there seven and a half years.

The jungyo tournaments: comes in the morning. Doesn’t say one word. Sits down. Lies down. Rests a while. Gets up: “Mawashi!” Put on his belt, put on his yukata, walk straight to the dohyo. After he practice he comes back, take a shower, then he start talking. “Oh, my back sore.” He neva like joking around. After that, then he jumps out of the shower, then he goes to eat. Different attitude. Quiet again, eating. Then he go back to his room. Joking around, talking story, listening to the radio, talking on the phone. Time for wrestle. Pau. Attitude again. That’s why I used to watch his moods. I used to just practice with that. I know how he act already. I know what pisses him off. After practice, he go back to the shower, nobody bother him. Come back from the shower, eat, nobody bother him. After he pau eat, then you can talk story with him. You gotta catch him one perfect time. You don’t catch him one perfect time, he’s a bitch. Nobody can talk to him at all.—Percy Kipapa (Daiki), 12/98. (Kipapa, 1998)

One crisp autumn morning in 1998 I followed Yokozuna Akebono through the back door of a western Honshu small town municipal gymnasium. I knew by then not to talk to him, at the very earliest, until after he had practiced and showered. His don’t-bother-me look cleared the way through the crowded shitaku-beya, where
everyone fell to bowing and greeting him as he passed, saying nothing to anyone other than the required quiet greeting to the two chief referees.

But when he happened in front of a juryo rikishi named Hoshitango, he stopped long enough to exchange a few how’ve-you-been pleasantries before moving on to where his own tsukebito waited in the corner of the big room. Morning after morning on three separate jungyo exhibition tours, I had never seen him do anything other than shut everyone out and bee-line for his tatami mat, and here he had not only acknowledged the lower-ranker; he had *stopped and talked with him*.

“I give that bitch *credit,*” was all the Yokozuna said to me as he stretched out on his futon.

Hoshitango had arrived in Japan from Argentina around the same time Chad Rowan had, and rose to juryo at a reasonable pace before being sent back down with injuries. Now just over thirty, he had only recently made it back to the privileged life of a sekitori. I suspect that the great respect the Yokozuna had for him had less to do with the fact that they had both endured as foreigners than with the fact that Hoshitango had never given up on his return to juryo, even after years of battling injuries on the cusp of promotion in makushita. *I give that bitch credit.*

The scene came to embody for me the pride Chad Rowan had in being a member of a special group of men: those who had endured, trained, lost enough to deeply respect the sport, and won enough to stand among its elite. That strong reverence with which rikishi hold nearly everything to do with their sport—Chad Rowan had it more than anyone else I saw day after day on jungyo, with the possible exception of Takanohana. Despite the odd complaints to me about things like the
way he felt was being used by Boss, or the jungyo schedule, Yokozuna Akebono practiced sumo like it was religion. Despite the just-one-noddah-scrap language he occasionally used to refer to certain bouts, he understood and even loved the depth of sumo as a way of life.

Hoshitango had gotten what amounted to the Yokozuna’s blessing because he had gamaned his way through years of setbacks, and he had become, once again, a sekitori.

Chad Rowan awoke one morning at the end of January 1990 to find himself not in the big room among his fellow deshi, but all alone in a room of his own back and away from the street. The sky was beginning to lighten as he rose from his futon, since it was now already past seven o’clock. He thought to fold the futon and put it away, but then thought again. Someone else would take care of it for him. Someone else! And someone else would cook the food, do the dishes, clean up, and even go to the video store for him if he wanted. Someone else would accompany him if he went out shopping, and someone else would carry home whatever he bought with the thick wad of ten-thousand-yen notes stuffed in his wallet. He looked around the room, all his own, his own private space, so far from the corner of the big room where he used to cry himself to sleep, his stomach growling in hunger, his ears stinging from the cold. Stand up for your rights, Hawaiian! Stand he had, and now not only was he heyagashira—his heya’s ranking rikishi—he was a sekitori. He’d proved everyone wrong. He’d made ’um.
Someone else was also waiting to help with his mawashi when he got
downstairs to the changing room—a clean, white length of canvas like the ones he
had only seen during de-geiko and on jungyo. Konishiki and Mitoizumi wore white.
Yokozuna Chiyonofuji wore white during practice. And here he was, putting on the
first white mawashi ever in Azumazeki Beya.

When he marched up the stairs, practice came to a halt and shouts of
“Zaimass!” rang out, drowning Akebono’s own greeting to his Oyakata. Taylor
approached offering a ladle of water. John then did the same, followed by two other
deshi. Until this morning Chad’s promotion had simply been an exciting event that
had come and gone, a celebration of achievement. But in its wake, it had, on this
real-world level, left him The Man at Azumazeki Beya.

The Sekitori took a place near the far corner of the keikoba and settled into
warming up with shiko leg stomps as the lower-level practice bouts continued, and
two of the younger boys stood beside him holding towels. Another of the kids was
thrown his way after a prolonged struggle in the ring, barely missing his legs. But he
paid no attention, even as the boy fell all over himself apologizing. Akebono simply
stared straight ahead, hammering his feet into the hard clay, squatting deeply at the
knees, and repeating the motion as beads of sweat began to form on the sides of his
face.

He looked up and saw Boss looking at the action in the ring, a bit quieter than
normal. One of the boys in the ring was giving up his mawashi too easily and really
getting thrown around for no other good reason, and Boss wasn’t saying anything. It
occurred to Chad that he now fell somewhere in between Boss and his other deshi, that he should take charge.

Azumazeki Oyakata did not have to say another word for the rest of the morning. Akebono continued to offer advice as he saw fit. And he did so easily, not with the soft-spoken, deferential voice he used when addressing sempai and sekitori ranked above him, or the silky, humble voice that would come to mark his perfectly-performed television interviews. Instead he spoke in his keikoba voice—a booming, authoritative baritone that commanded respect just with its sound: “Forward! Forward! Don’t you get the point of sumo? Move forward!” He went on to supervise butskari-geiko in deep shouts of encouragement. He then counted off the stretching exercises at the end of practice. He called on one of the younger kids to lead the sumo oath, occasionally glancing at Boss for approval after a command, or a reprimand.

“We had a bunch of guys gunning for it,” Akebono told me about his intuitive transition to sekitori, “and when I wen make ‘um, I felt like I had to set one example for them. I felt like my boss expected that from me. He neva told me I had to lead everyone, but I just knew. Like being the oldest, my mother never told me I had to set one example for my brothers. I don’t know how fo’ put ‘um... She just expected it from me” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99)

What came through most in the way I saw the Yokozuna take charge was something that had been developing since before he ever put on a white practice mawashi and led his first practice: great respect for everything having to do with sumo. Even back on his first day as a sekitori, he was not just teaching those ranked
below him; he was handing down precious knowledge that dated back centuries, and he was doing so according to the way such knowledge had always been handed down. More than an apprentice-master system, sumo was a kind of folk tradition, a monastic kind of order to which the gaijin had been initiated by his climb up the banzuke.

"Don't you know the meaning of sumo?" had become far more to him than a coach’s shout of motivation. *The meaning of sumo* had to do with work, with strength, with patience, with technique—all nothing more than abstractions to those of us who have not put in the work of folding mawashi after practice or standing patiently in attendance for a sekitori dining in splendor, or felt the pain of running up against a four-hundred-pound body in total exhaustion. Chad knew that his new white mawashi was akin to an advanced degree defining him as an expert on *the meaning of sumo*, and that with his promotion to sekitori status came the responsibility of passing on that expertise. Gaijin or not, he was now a guardian of an ancient national tradition, and the role he now embraced was to enlighten those ranked below him—nearly all of whom were Japanese.

I also suspect that part of the reason why the keikoba could be filled with the constant flow of Akebono’s booming voice was that he couldn’t stand to see any mistakes go uncriticized. The greatest athletes are known to perform with an artist’s intolerance for imperfection. Whether they were born gifted, or whether they chiseled themselves into images of greatness, they tend to have little patience for failure—either their own, or from those around them. Michael Jordan would never hesitate to reprimand his teammates on the court for mental lapses. Joe DiMaggio’s

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3 Chad actually holds a Ph.D. from Clayton University. Dr. Bob Beveridge arranged for the degree after granting the Yokozuna a number of academic credits for “life experience.”
icy glare was known to effectively reach any one of the Yankees all the way from deep center field. John McEnroe’s well-known outbursts at bad calls were aimed at error as much as injustice. All three of these men were known to be affable and witty away from their professions, but on the court or on the field, extreme arrogance was the condition for their success. Had they not demanded perfection, they would never have found it within themselves.

As much as he hides it in the service of sumo’s behavioral requirements, and as purely humble as he can be, Akebono has a streak of arrogance to match that of any other great athlete. It often revealed itself on the jungyo I attended as his near-total contempt for things done wrong. As kind and open as he was, usually holding court in a constant flow of jokes and stories to his boys, he could easily be irritated into sullen moods by the shortest misstep—the single forgotten water bottle or the unreplaced battery in his CD player. At the time I equated some of his more extreme reactions with a lack of empathy and a poor memory for the tsukebito grind. But looking back now I would say that Chad’s respect for getting the job done had been there all along, even during his own days as a tsukebito. As Konishiki’s tsukebito on that first jungyo back in ’89, for instance, it’s hard to imagine Akebono forgetting any water bottles, or anything at all. And so by 1998, if you couldn’t get right what he had gotten right, you were worthy of contempt.

One miracle of Chad Rowan’s cultural performance as Akebono has been his ability to hide this streak of arrogance in the service of sumo’s off-dohyo requirements. While the idea of arrogance as a condition for success is as old as competition itself, no one has ever said that humility wins wars. Humility, in fact,
will almost always hurt the true competitor. Tiger Woods, for instance, will wake up on a Sunday morning knowing he will win, while his competitors, in awe of his greatness, will settle for “having a chance” to beat him. But unless he personally cares how people feel about him, Tiger Woods never has to hide his confidence; he never has to act humble. He may choose to sometimes, but he doesn’t have to. When Akebono became a sekitori and began to emerge as a leader among his peers, he became more confident and far less reverent of those above him on the banzuke. But no one was the wiser. At the stage of his career now where Konishiki had been for his “kenka” and “Ataru-yo!” interviews, Akebono was never willing to say anything more than, “I will do my best,” according to the script. Sumo’s mix of humility and swagger is the trickiest part of the sport’s performance—one that Konishiki was never able to fully master. Chad Rowan, the gaijin leader of Azumazeki Beya, had it down from his first press conference, with his father’s advice not to “brag or speak big-headed” fresh in his mind.

Of the accolades and perks separating sekitori from those below, the chance to share success with his parents was Akebono’s most cherished prize. “Doing what I doing was for them,” he told me. “They could live through my eyes” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). By September of 1990, Akebono had flown through enough opponents to find himself in makunouchi. Sumo’s major leagues. NHK TV broadcasts back in Waimanalo. “The publicity, they used to like that,” he went on, “they come over here: ‘Ah, you know that’s my son.’ The first tournament they came, ho! I got my kachi-koshi,” his winning record, “and nobody was paying attention to me. They was
paying attention to my maddah and faddah in the stands. TV cameras, one the whole side of the stadium, the Kokugikan, they was banzai-ing my parents” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). Meat Bombs and Black Ships, as Konishiki had been referred to at the same stage in his own career, could never expect such treatment.

Chad and select friends and supporters wined and dined the Rowans in a fashion they would not have dreamed of only a year before. But the way they were welcomed by the rest of Japan indicates exactly how well-liked Akebono was among his hosts—sumo fans and non. The parents of the latest gaijin sekitori were treated like celebrities in a world of wonder that could hardly have been further removed from Waimanalo. Their Chad, who had gotten on the plane scared and determined just over two years before with the conviction that he had to succeed for his parents, and his brothers, “even if it killed” him, had made it for them, and he’d made it big.

“And you know what was so cute,” his mother said, recalling the reception the Kokugikan had given her, “when they were doing that, he goes, ‘There they go again! Attention’s supposed to be on me but instead it’s up there on them.’ And he said it real loud, too, so people could hear. We were sitting on the level of the Emperor.” The Emperor’s box looks down on the dohyo from the first row of the Kokugikan’s second level. It faces south according to Shinto tradition in a nod to the days of outdoor sumo, when the Emperor would always face the sun. “When he came out he started looking, and I guess the lights were on him and he couldn’t see us, and I shouted out, ‘Chaddy-boy!!’ And later he goes like this: ‘Mom, mom. The whole world heard you call me ‘Chaddy-boy.’” She loved every minute of what she came to refer to as “The Circus” (Rowan, Janice. 1998).
And Randy Rowan simply basked in the role of the Father of a Professional Athlete. “My faddah, he was the one wanted me fo’ go, ah? To Japan.” Akebono told me. “And when he came up here, he kept saying that, ‘That’s my son.’” Chad’s mother said as much: “Oh, my husband loved it. He loved it. Because he always had a tsukebito. Not one, he had two. My husband always had two at a time. And oh, he loved it. He just loved it.”

Unfortunately, he never wanted the party to end, and was reluctant to leave when the tournament was over.

“Mom,” Chad said to her at the time, “he cannot stay, because I’m gonna be going on jungyo.”

“Well you tell Dad that, because I’m going home. Ola just got out of the hospital, and there’s Nunu, and now my Windy,” she said in reference to her sons—one of whom had just been stabbed—and the foster daughter she had recently adopted.

“I no like make him feel like he has to go, Mom, but I not even going be here. Maybe if you stay too it’s all right, so you can take care of him but...” (qtd. by Janice Rowan, 1998).

Janice Rowan agreed to persuade her husband to return with her, again citing the children. “Well he got mad at me,” she recalled, “and because Chad wouldn’t keep only him, he got more mad, and he said, ‘Okay, when we get home I’m going pay you back.’ Well you know what he did when we got home? He decided he was going eat anything he wants, and anything that he shouldn’t, and that he wasn’t going take his insulin. So I said fine. I decided, ‘If that’s what you’re going do, I’m going...
find a job.’ So I went and found a job. After five days he couldn’t get off the floor. So I told him, ‘You know what Randy. I’m kind of getting tired of this.’ Then he finally realized, then he asked me to call an ambulance, so I called an ambulance and got him out of there. But by then it was too late. He lost his leg” (Rowan, Janice, 1998).

When I first met Jan Rowan back in 1993 she came to tears at the mention of her husband, who had died only a few months earlier. Five years later when she spoke of him in greater depth for this book (including the above anecdote), she talked of him in frank and bitter tones, angry that he was gone and that he could just as easily still be with her. In both instances what came through most clearly was the fact that she missed him.

If having a son on TV had not fully established the Rowans’ celebrity in Waimanalo, their return from Japan certainly had. They had much to tell about “The Circus,” about their adventure being ferried around like king and queen, about all the adoring fans. Their son was “somebody,” and they each were now “somebody,” parents of a kid who had made good. Results of Chad’s bouts had been making local news for the past year. He was assumed to be following in the footsteps of Takamiyama and Konishiki, as if he would win his own Emperor’s Cup or be promoted as high as ozeki in just a matter of time. Only a handful of people in Hawai‘i actually knew how far Chad had really come, and the distance still separating him from sumo’s elite. But it was enough that Chad Rowan, the big gentle kid who had never been much of an athlete, was “making good.”
“That’s why a lot of guys from Waimanalo,” Ola told me, “like George Kalima and da kine, dem, that’s why they said, ‘You know what. If Chad can make ’um, why can’t we? He neva had the ability to wrestle before’” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998). One of the many Waimanalo TVs tuned to sumo belonged to George Kalima, who saw his friend Chad, a professional athlete, winning matches. George had suffered a different kind of culture shock in working for UPS in suburban Los Angeles, and returned to the islands after five months to see news of his friend’s athletic success everywhere, even though Chad had never played football at Kaiser. George’s interest and curiosity grew over the next year. He had been a stand-out lineman on both offense and defense at Kaiser, and was already better built for sumo, from what he had seen of it on TV, than his taller friend. He talked to Chad on the phone from time to time and always heard the same excited words: “We could do ’um together, just like we was going do with business!” Finally, he called Larry Aweau.

“George Kalima, that was Chad’s schoolmate,” Aweau recalled, “but I couldn’t put George with Chad. Oyakata would have taken him, but I didn’t want that. When you’re going to school together, schoolmates, school chums all throughout life, you’ll be talking all the time in English, and that’s not what I wanted. You’re going there for a purpose. I had gotten acquainted with Magaki, he was a good friend, so I thought it would be better to send George to him,” about a mile away from Azumazeki Beya (Aweau, 1998).

Kalima entered Magaki Beya as Yamato in time to complete maezumo in the 1990 Kyushu Basho, where he performed well enough to have his name added to the growing number of foreigners included on the banzuke. His brother Bumbo (Glenn)
arrived two months later, and the Kalimas pushed themselves through the same early troubles Akebono had faced when he arrived in Japan, compounded by a series of injuries for both of the brothers. Sumo life was much harder than Yamato expected, but with the help of his boss's English-speaking driver, and the support and guidance of his best friend, he was able to settle into the daily grind of marching up the ranks.

To the rikishi from Hawai‘i, Chad was as much a big brother as a sekitori, going out of his way to impart advice, making himself available if any of them needed help. “Konishiki wen help me so much when I got up here,” he told me. “I wanted to do the same for the next group that came up” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98).

“Before the tournaments me and Bumbo used to go over to Azumazeki Beya to get a pep talk from Hawaiian,” Yamato told me. “He always told us, ‘Don’t try to run into da adda guy. Look past him, and try run right through him.’ We always went to him for that kind of advice, cause he was Da Man” (Kalima, 9/98).

That November Akebono found himself, for the very first time, pitted against sumo’s official version of “Da Man,” Yokozuna Hokutoumi. Yokozuna spend, depending on the number of top-rankers on a given banzuke, from half to two-thirds of a tournament facing other yokozuna, ozeki, sekiwake, and komusubi—three ranks known collectively as sanyaku. With some forty rikishi in makunouchi and only fifteen matches for each to fight, only rarely is a yokozuna paired with anyone below Maegashira-4 or 5. To the maegashira, fighting a yokozuna can be the highlight of his career, particularly if he wins. Lower maegashira face every bout with a yokozuna as an NBA player approaches a playoff game, less because of the career-
long pay raise that comes with a win against a yokozuna than for the chance to create the memory of a spectacular upset.

Just before the dohyo-iri that afternoon, Akebono watched the boys put on their white gloves and take out and stretch Yokozuna Onokuni’s rope to its length. He watched the boys attach the five paper strips, and then wrap the heavy rope around the big man as he leaned on one for support, and then work to tie it in the back. He knew that at that very moment Yokozuna Hokutoumi’s rope was also being stretched out by white-gloved tsukebito in the opposite shitaku-beya. (Rikishi are assigned to either the East or the West shitaku-beya according to their place on the banzuke. If, say, two East-ranked rikishi are paired to compete, the lower-ranker must spend that particular day in the West shitaku-beya.) Earlier Onokuni had commanded respect due to his obvious strength. But now, here in all his trappings, with the big brilliant rope around his waist, Onokuni was not merely some heavyweight champion. Neither was Hokutoumi. They were men of honor, and here before him Onokuni stood tall, with a kind of dignity Chad had not seen since watching Chiyonofuji dress during jungyo more than a year before. He was the Yokozuna.

Akebono lost easily to Yokozuna Hokutoumi. But something had happened in the course of the fifteen minutes he had spent out in the arena, during the parade of sponsors’ flags around the dohyo, during the extra attention the gyoji gave their match by announcing it as the last and most important of the day, and even over the short course of the bout. All the pomp and ceremony surrounding the fight with the Yokozuna had turned out to be just that: pomp and ceremony. On the dohyo, the rope was gone. And once hands hit clay and bodies collided, the rest of the man’s aura
disappeared, too. Yokozuna were mean, could kick everybody’s ass, as Taylor had put it so long ago. But without the rope, they were just men, no better than himself. He told me as much when we discussed his early bouts against yokozuna, referring specifically to his second yokozuna bout in January 1991, against Yokozuna Asahifuji, as “just one nodda scrap.”

In the New Year’s tournament Asahifuji was expected to beat the up-and-coming foreigner, a kid barely worthy to step into the ring with him. Just another Maegashira. Instead, Akebono overwhelmed the yokozuna, summoning a frenzy of shouts from the crowd and the rain of red zabuton pillows upon the dohyo that accompanies such spectacular upsets. Akebono squatted in his original position. The gyoji knelt before him and held out his gunbai—the lacquered paddle-shaped fan with which he indicates the winner of a match. An envelope emblazoned with Akebono’s name, and with Asahifuji’s, lay on the gunbai. Akebono waved his hand over the envelope as he had been shown and collected the prize—some three hundred dollars for each sponsor flag that had circled the dohyo less than five minutes before.

But Akebono walked up the hanamichi with a prize worth far more than money. He now knew for certain that the rope could be his.

Chad now had to prove to himself that he could win consistently when it mattered most, as a yokozuna is expected to do. So far Akebono had been consistent enough to move up the banzuke, but he had yet to find himself in a position that would test his performance under pressure. Unlike both of the Hanada brothers, he had never been in contention for a yusho at any level. (Waka had taken the
Jonokuchi Yusho in Chad’s very first tournament; Taka had taken the Makushita Yusho twice with perfect records.) Neither had he ever been in danger of demotion with a loss on the final day. Instead, his fast hands had helped him put up a string of consistent, unspectacular winning records.

That string had reached 16 by the 1991 New Year’s tournament—16 straight since his entrance without a single losing record, which turned out to be one tournament shy of the record set a generation earlier by the Hanadas’ father, who, having climbed the banzuke at a much slower pace, had piled up his winning records against weaker competition than the makunouchi rikishi Akebono was already facing.

It’s easy to have the competitive arrogance of a Michael Jordan on Day One, or after piling up a few wins, but could he step up with any such confidence when there was something immediately on the line? Just over a week after beating Yokozuna Asahifuji, Akebono got his first taste of this kind of yokozuna-like pressure, whether he wanted it or not. While every win certainly matters in sumo, the length of a tournament takes some of the pressure off of the early matches. No one is eliminated on day one or two, for example, as would happen in a tennis tournament. Instead, pressure to win is allowed to build over time. As the numbers accumulate and the days pass, each bout means more and more until a rikishi is eliminated from the yusho race with, say, his fourth loss. For those out of the race, the pressure reaches its sudden apex after the seventh loss, which turns each following bout into a must-win situation to avoid demotion. Akebono ended up here early when Takahanada sent him to his seventh loss on day ten, putting him in the unenviable
position of having to win his last five bouts in order to get his kachi-koshi and break the senior Hanada’s record.

The real consequences of a major sumo tournament are the main ingredients in creating the depth which turns sumo into so much more than a mere physical test—that cause thoughts of consequence to creep into the mind a rikishi has worked so hard to clear. That a rikishi’s position on the banzuke is decided simply by the wins and losses he accumulates in a hon-basho—wins and losses that could measure out to drastic changes in salary, prize money, and even living conditions—can be thought provoking enough to alter a match. Thinking in any sport, beyond split-second decision-making done in the heat of battle, is nearly always bad. “When you wrestle,” Akebono said early on in his career, “sumo is so fast you don’t think about it. You train a lot so your body gets into the movement of sumo. If you think, that’s when you lose” (qtd. by Akogawa C:4). Part of the point of sumo’s relentless daily training schedule has to do with this Zen-like goal it shares with other martial arts: to clear the mind and let the body react on its own.

Facing not one, but five straight must-win bouts, Akebono employed Bob Beveridge’s self-hypnosis along the way to steamrolling his remaining opponents, beginning with sekiwake Tochinowaka and ending with a share of the record, promotion to komusubi, and his second Outstanding Performance award—one of three special prizes awarded at the end of each tournament.

“I neva think about winning five straight,” he recalled for me. “I just got up there every day, tried to put each one behind me. After the wins started piling up, had plenty confidence the last two days” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99). Confidence which got
him his “eight,” and then pushed him to another 8-7 mark in March that made the record his own. Along the way he avenged his November defeat at the hands of Yokozuna Hokutoumi, handing the eventual yusho winner one of his only two losses of the Osaka Haru Basho, and was rewarded with promotion to sekiwake—the highest rank his Oyakata had ever attained, and well within sight of something he only talked about privately: his own promotion to yokozuna.

Takahana da was proving himself equally adept at learning to handle high-pressure matches. Unlike Akebono, prior to the 1991 Haru Basho Taka had stepped up several times when losses would have—and did—send him down. Back in makunouchi for the second time in Osaka, the eighteen-year-old stormed through a pack of lower maegashira to eleven straight wins before losing to Konishiki on Day Twelve. He finished as runner-up at 12-3 and collected both the Fighting Spirit and Technique prizes while nearly shattering the youth record for yusho winners by two years. But this was nothing compared to the noise he would make in May.

In a Natsu Basho Day One bout watched by an astounding 44 percent of the country, Takahanada was paired against Yokozuna Chiyonofuji for the first time, a bout to be fought on a dohyo composed of equal parts clay and irony. The young Hanada’s father’s brilliant career had come to a close some ten years before, not long after a devastating loss to the up-and-coming Chiyonofuji had convinced him his greatness was permanently gone. And now Takahanada stood poised to face his first yokozuna, eager to prove himself worthy of the predictions heaped upon him since
the day he joined Fujishima Beya. The bout should have been boringly one-sided—with the yokozuna taking the kid to school.

I’ve watched the video of this bout several times, and even though I know the result, the match always unfolds with the unbelievable quality of the 1986 Red Sox Game Six collapse—the Bill Buckner Game, in which the Sox lost it all after being just one strike away from winning the World Series. The young Taka calmly comes up with a double grip under both of Chiyonofuji’s shoulders, and as he pushes forward you think, this isn’t happen… Wait just a second… He’s gonna… That didn’t just… He beat him? Five minutes later, fifteen years after the fact, you’re still thinking, He beat him?

The Yokozuna managed a win the following day, but it was obvious to many that he looked different: the champion’s swagger and the steely gaze for which he had become famous were gone. After another loss on day three, Chiyonofuji admitted to himself that he no longer had the magic to continue a career that had included 31 yusho (an incredible 20 after he turned thirty). Twenty years to the day after Taiho—the greatest yokozuna of all time with the record 32 yusho—announced his own retirement following a loss to Takahanada’s father, Chiyonofuji spoke softly through tears to a Kokonoe Beya packed with reporters. The reign of the great Yokozuna Chiyonofuji was over.

The Hawaiian invasion of sumo continued when Percy Kipapa joined Azumazeki Beya in September of 1991 under the name Daiki and quickly became both Akebono’s and Azumazeki Oyakata’s personal project. A football stand-out at
Oahu’s St. Louis High School, he stood over six feet and weighed well over three hundred pounds by the time Larry Aweau had met him. The big kid was easily convinced, both because the idea of Hawaiians joining sumo had become a lot less unusual, and because it impressed him as a pure confrontation between two men. “I seen one match on TV, Sumo Digest,” he explained to me. “Chiyonofuji, he’s less than three hundred pounds, he wen lift Konishiki off the ground. I thought, ‘Ho, these guys strong!’” (Kipapa, 1998).

I met Percy briefly at a Waimanalo party in the summer of 1998, and interviewed him for the first time at his home a few months later. He generously talked on for more than two hours as though we were old friends, and within the first fifteen minutes I felt he should have been writing a book of his own. After winning the Makushita Yusho with a perfect record and going as high as Juryo 10 in 1995, Percy was forced by his own string of injuries to retire a few months before I met him. Over the years I’ve come to know him as a keen observer, a man with a great memory for detail, and a great storyteller who loves to talk, to entertain, and to keep everyone involved in the conversation, and then punctuate most everything with his infectious laugh. (When I made the guest list for my own wedding two years later I wanted a Percy at every table.) He was a natural for the social duties a sekitori—or the tsukebito of one, as Percy often was for Akebono—is expected to perform.

“Some of our sponsors get restaurants,” he told me midway through our first talk, after this skill of his had become apparent, “and they invite you to their restaurant, and the day you go there, maybe they have half price on everything. So when you go over there, they say, ‘Oh, that’s Akebono’s deshi! Akebono! Oh,
when’s he coming?’ So we promote the restaurant, give it a boost. And they give us go-ju-mae-en (about five hundred dollars) for coming. So that was the under-the-table money we was making a lot. The guys who used to see me practice, like Ikeda-san, they’d come up to me, give me money, ‘You take care, you do good.’” (Kipapa, 1998).

Percy Kipapa did not, however, simply walk into such perks. Local boy or not, he was treated just like any other shin-deshi from the start in an Azumazeki Beya bursting with testosterone. “I guess that guy John Feleunga was more the kine person out for himself, ah?” he told me. “Cause when I went over there he gave me one hard time, him and Troy Talaimatai, cause I was the only guy from the east side. Had the Waimanalo, the Kalihi [town], and the Waianae [west]. I was the only one from Waihole side [east]. My first impression when I saw John and Troy was, ‘God damn!’ They was humungous. I mean we were same height and stuff but they was just... They was huge. Our stable had all the big guys from Hawai‘i.” (Kipapa, 1998).

It also had a rikishi named Suji, who turned out to be a kind of self-appointed guardian of the Azumazeki Beya sempai-kohai system. “When I started I was eighteen,” Percy told me. “When I started I had worked dishwasher before, I had to clean around my house before, I had to cook at my house before. So when I went up Japan, I had pretty much an idea what for do already. How for use one broom, how for use one mop, how for use one frying pan, how for turn on the stove. But these young Japanese boys, they don’t know how for hold a broom, turn the knob on the stove—they don’t know what the hell they’re doing. And I don’t blame them. At
fifteen, fuck, I was looking at waves! These kids, they’re innocent when they start. And the way the Japanese look at it, ‘I started this way, that’s how you’re going start.’ So these fuckas beat up their kids, whack ’em in the head with the frying pan.

“I used to look at them, I used to wait, ‘Fuck, you do that to me, I going whack you back.’ But I know one guy eva did that to me, his name was Suji, I neva whacked him back, but when I came juryo, you get the kawaigari, I pushed him one hour straight, I beat his ass up so bad. Cause one day I was on the phone with my Maddah, he told me for wash dishes, I told him, wait, I told him, ‘Matte, yo,’ and in Japanese, that’s using authority. He came up to me and grabbed my head and went, ‘Poom!’ So I gave him the kawaigari of his life and when it was finished I went up to him and went, ‘Poom!’ Ever since that he gave me respect.” (Kipapa, 1998).

Respect, counsel, knowledge, and even friendship would eventually also come from Akebono, but not before Percy had proven himself worthy, both on and off the dohyo. Just as Chad’s sempai Taylor had helped him initially without buddying up to him—that is, paying the shin-deshi as much attention as his rank warranted—Chad began to help Percy at first only where the sekiwake’s help was socially permissible: in the keikoba. The kid was certainly big and strong enough for sumo, already weighing more than three hundred pounds. But he was softer than Chad himself had been back in the winter of 1988.

“When I went up there,” Percy told me, “every time I wen do one move on somebody and hurt ’em, I was like, ‘Ho, you all right?’ Trying to help the guy out, and they neva like that. My boss was telling me I got too much aloha for the guy.” (Kipapa, 1998). The solution, of course, was the shinai, which immediately began to
connect with Percy’s skin regularly. Oyakata and Akebono would alternate in the
effort to turn the shin-deshi into a fighter.

“You go after somebody,” Boss would yell, “you gotta break his arm, let him
suffer on the ground!” (qtd. by Kipapa, 1998). Percy learned quickly that if he did
not do as he was told, Oyakata would come down on him with wild fury. His size
and potential earned him this special attention—attention he would have been happy
to do without.

“I was scared of my boss,” Percy admitted to me, “cause he was more than
one father figure. How he talked to you, what he’d do—I don’t know how he did it,
but when he talked to you he put fear in your mind. Chad seen that too. And
surrounding around him, the energy is so strong when he walk into some place:
’ZaiMAssss!!’ I mean, people react to him when they see him. It’s like the
Godfather. You look at him, you tell yourself, ‘Oh, you cannot mess with the guy; he
got power behind him.”’ (Kipapa, 1998). A full fifteen years after the end of his long
career, Azumazeki Oyakata still cut an intimidating figure. It cannot be forgotten that
while his position had shifted from fighter to coach and administrator, his respect was
founded on his ability to inflict pain, to win violent confrontations.

The most telling observation regarding Oyakata’s treatment of the Hawaiian
and Samoan deshi came from Ola Rowan, who said, “It’s like when you have one
father who’s the coach of his son’s team. Of course he going be harder on his son.”
(Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998). While much has been said about the role adjustments
Takamiyama, Konishiki, and the rest of Hawai‘i’s rikishi made, the first and only
foreign oyakata virtually re-invented himself a second time with his retirement from
the dohyo. Azumazeki Oyakata was responsible first for, as he saw it, his foreign deshi’s assimilation to the sumo world, and then for their development as rikishi—all of this in addition to the normal pressure any oyakata faces in his position as a Sumo Kyokai elder. “I guess once you become a boss, then you become a boss,” Percy said. “That’s what Kotonishiki used to tell me. He used to wrestle with my boss. When I made juryo he used to tell me, ‘Your boss, when he was wrestling, he was a nice guy. He never used to talk to nobody about practicing, stuff like that. He used to sleep himself. But now he one boss, he act like he used to practice every day.’” (Kipapa, 1998).

Terms like “re-invent” and “assimilation” resonate with Oyakata’s idea of thinking Japanese, and suggest an abrupt kind of identity shift that winds up being at odds with the subtle, seamless identity shifts Chad Rowan was already executing flawlessly—in his movements between the roles of Oyakata’s Deshi and Percy’s Sempai, to name just two. That the one of the kindest men I’ve ever had the pleasure of speaking with could lose it as Yamato describes suggests that he was far less adept at crafting selves than Akebono, who commanded respect without resorting to scare tactics. So when Akebono used the shinai, it was more with the deliberation of a horse trainer than the anger of a man in the throes of a temper tantrum. “Yeah, had to use the bamboo stick sometimes, the bat sometimes,” he told me, “but was always for one reason. With Ola was because he kept fucking up. With Percy was for one different reason” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99).

“They used to hit me with the bamboo stick,” Percy told me. “Constantly. Every day. Every day for two and a half years. So I told Chad one day, ‘You’re
doing this to me to get me angry at the guy I’m wrestling. But the more you hit me, the more I like hit you, but I cannot hit you. I wouldn’t think about hitting you, but the anger is not going towards the person in front of me. It’s the guy who’s hitting me.’ But that’s the way I guess they was trained, ah? Because they say they see potential in me and stuff li’dat. Trying to get me stronger. So after two and a half years, that’s how I started getting strong, cause I neva care after a while. I said, ‘You know what. I’m gonna break your arm, or I’m gonna hit.’ So then everybody I wrestle, I try and hurt ’em.” (Kipapa, 1998).

One afternoon following a particularly hard asa-geiko session, Azumazeki Oyakata took an exhausted Daiki to a local university to practice with their sumo club. Percy was too sore to lift himself from his futon following lunch, let alone put in any more practice that day. But he managed to drag himself downstairs and into the car, and then to be thrown to the entire university sumo club, one student after the other. “I did 198 bouts that day,” Daiki told me, “was so piss off. Only reason I neva make it 200 is when we got to the university, was so piss of at my boss I try for hurt everybody I face. At the end there was no more nobody left standing. The next day I had to do forty more matches with Troy and John” (Kipapa, 1998). The nicest, sweetest man ever to put on a mawashi tried to hurt everyone he faced.

With the fighting spirit now matching the powerful body, Daiki was beginning to develop the potential of a natural fighter like Ola Rowan—aggression bubbling just beneath the surface, so hard to keep down in the service of sumo’s behavioral requirements. But the similarity between the big Hawaiians stopped with their ability to scrap. Looking to Akebono’s incredible example of keeping his own huge stores
of aggression confined to the keikoba, Percy thought of a kind of sempai-kohai
coping strategy. “My first years over there I was bullshitting around,” he told me. “I
was sick, or my body was in pain. But after my second year, I neva like be sick. Even
if I was sick I like practice. Cause everyday after practice you gotta go upstairs and
you gotta do Chad’s chores, and you gotta do yours, then all the guys been here long
time, they tell you what for do. They used to tell me things, I’d be like, ‘Hai!’ Oh,
yeah, okay. Wait till tomorrow. That’s in my mind, what I’m thinking. That’s what
made me stronger than them. They hit you. And foreigners, we gotta get the last
whack. That would irritate me more than anything else. ‘Put away my futon!’
They’d say, ‘Put away my futon.’ And I’m thinking, ‘Ho, I can squash him if I like
right now! But I’ll put ’um away. Tomorrow, we get in that round circle and I’m
gonna fuckin’ damage you,’” (Kipapa, 1998).

Only once Percy began to climb the banzuke did he begin to attract the
Akebono’s attention outside the keikoba, in part because Percy clearly understood his
own place on the banzuke. That is, even barely a year into his tenure as a rikishi,
Percy looked up to those wearing the white mawashi in an I-give-that-bitch-credit
kind of way. Akebono noticed, and Percy was rewarded. “We’d go out, drink three
bottles of tequila,” Percy told me. “Come home five-thirty in the morning, practice.
Was crazy, come home all drunk, drunk as hell. And when it was cold all the
windows in the keikoba were closed, the steam is coming off your body, you could
smell alcohol. Ho, was so fermented inside that place. Cuz, your mawashi was all
soaked, all beer, all alcohol. Was so crazy, the life. . . You could make one movie
about all the girlfriends I had. They’d say, ‘Oh, you Akebono’s brother?’ I’d say,
‘Whateva. I’m Akebono’s brother.’ When I went up there, Chad, he was the Mack Daddy of Mack Daddies. He was a Don Juan” (Kipapa, 1998).

Percy wound up being one of my best sources for this book, both for his skill at making pointed observations, and his ability to tell a story.

From what I know about Akebono’s expectations and Percy’s loyalty and attention to detail, I wasn’t surprised to find that over his seven years in Japan, Percy was the Yokozuna’s most trusted attendant. “Anybody who’d talk back to him,” Percy told me, “I was right there. Pow! I remember we used to go out, and these guys from the Navy, these military guys, they come in every so often, they didn’t know we talk English. They thought we only spoke Japanese, and they were talking shit about us, and Chad get all quiet, mean. So I walked straight up to the guys: ‘What you say?’” It’s fair to imagine the usual Westernly-ignorant sumo-fat-guy jokes, and a bit frightening to imagine the consequence. “Chad seen that and every time he go out after that he tell me, ‘Percy, we go.’ And I always used to be on the side of him whatever he did. He was closer to George Kalima because he wen grow up wid ‘im, but ever since I came close to him we was real tight” (Kipapa, 1998).

In the middle of the 2000 Natsu Basho Percy was up visiting Japan to star in a television commercial, and the three of us sat on the floor at Azumazeki Beya eating chanko after the light morning practice. Akebono was in good spirits after beating Musashimaru’s young deshi Miyabiyama, who had recently been promoted to ozeki, with a fierce slap to the head that Percy was quick to compliment him on.

“Say hello to Maru for me!” The Yokozuna said in Japanese with a laugh.
The two spoke about what was going on in Hawai‘i, what Percy was doing in Japan, where he was staying. Percy explained that he’d taken the train from Meguro—a first for him, since he’d always ridden in taxis as Akebono’s tsukebito—and that he’d surprised himself by arriving at the heya before practice even started.

“Ho, was like when we used to sneak in before practice after staying out all night,” he said. “Had to be real quiet, real careful, so I wouldn’t wake anybody up.”

The Yokozuna stopped mid-bite. “See, that’s what these fuckas all need to learn,” he said, waving his chopsticks around the room at the boys standing at attention in their black mawashi, covered in sand and sweat. Since Chad and Christine had moved into a house more than an hour from Azumazeki Beya, during tournaments he’d stay in his old room at the back of the second floor, where he’d become troubled by the noise level in a house without a full-time sekitori to keep everyone on their toes. “That’s what you call respect.”
When I first arrived in Japan in January of 1992, a guy named Takahanada was all over the television news. There was some controversy over whether or not he should be allowed the traditional sake toast if he were to win the tournament Francis kept talking about, since he was only nineteen and not of legal drinking age. When he actually came through in the final day, even I could tell he was what most people were talking about—I’d hear his name all the time on the train or in restaurants. I didn’t know he was the youngest yusho winner in sumo history. I didn’t know who his father was and how popular he had been. Rather simplistically, I figured that when someone wins a sumo tournament, the whole country goes as wild as a single American city does when the World Series is decided. Sumo was huge in Japan, I thought, and I would start paying attention.

What I did not know in January of 1992 was that the National Sport was riding what I later learned to be an unprecedented wave of popularity. Along with the interest surrounding the foreign presence of Konishiki and Akebono, and a third sekitori from Hawai‘i called Musashimaru, Takahanada and his older brother Wakahanada helped to keep sumo near the top of daily newscasts. By themselves the brothers changed the demographics of the Kokugikan crowd from blue-haired mainstays to an army of squealing teenage girls. They were indeed the nation’s
heartthrobs, gracing the covers of every tabloid and teen-zine at train station newsstands across the country. Soon after Takahanada had ended the great Chiyonofuji’s career the previous May, two of the other yokozuna also retired, and the last remaining one would be gone by mid-'92. The sport was left wide-open for Konishiki’s final shot at promotion, and for the new Ake-Taka-Waka guard to attempt to fill the void, turning sumo into the hottest ticket in town. Many fans braved the January cold and camped out overnight to beat lines that would stretch from the Kokugikan ticket office all the way to Ryogoku station, nearly two hundred meters away, for the chance to see Konishiki go for the rope, or to see if any of the exciting new challengers could stop him.

I kick myself every time I look back at that tournament for not having gotten interested in sumo even a month before I actually did. With the focus and pressure on Konishiki from the start, Takahanada and Akebono methodically matched each other win-for-win after Akebono beat Taka to even their records at one loss apiece. Taka then sent Konishiki to his second loss in the final bout of day five. Konishiki fell further off the pace two days later with his third loss. And after a Day Twelve fall to the small, feisty Kotonishiki, Akebono found himself just one win behind Taka and, for the first time in his career, still in contention on senshuraku.

Coming into the final day with a chance to actually win it all had Chad more excited than he had been since his arrival. Sleep was out of the question, as it had been for his oyakata back in 1972, as it had been for Konishiki back in 1989. In spite
of the humble line he always fed the press, his own sights had been set on the yusho for a year now. He was not nervous, but rather anxious about the day ahead.

Akebono did win on senshuraku. But he could not fight for Misugisato, whom Takahanada beat to take the yusho. Akebono had to content himself with his first runner-up performance, his second Fighting Spirit prize, and his third Outstanding Performance award. While not yet the winner, he was obviously on the right track. Takahanada, as he had with his promotion to juryo, his promotion to makunouchi, and his own first runner-up performance the year before, was setting the pace, and Wakahanada was not far behind, having also finished in double digits at 10-5. Konishiki wound up with a decent 12-3 finish that left his hopes for promotion alive—just barely—if he could come through with a convincing win in March.

When the March tournament rolled around, I began to watch Sumo Digest, a nightly re-cap of the day’s bouts which skips over the four-minute ritual between each bout and finishes in a neat half-hour. While I’ve since come to appreciate the ritual as a means of building dramatic tension, Sumo Digest offered enough of the whole pageant to draw me in: the gyoji’s costume, the one throw of salt they did include, the dohyo and the guys who swept it clean, the names of the characters and what personality they allowed to show through. Some of the guys looked woefully out of shape, but then put up surprisingly good fights, leading me to wonder what the NFL might look like if its linemen’s bodies were not disguised by jerseys and pads. But most important at the time was the fact that at long last, here was something on TV that I could understand: two guys fight; one wins and one loses; a number is put up. After I got to know some of the names, I was hooked.
While I cheered on several of the Japanese rikishi, as a foreigner trying to make a go of it at the time in Japan I found particular vicarious enjoyment in the wins put up by Konishiki, Akebono, and Musashimaru. Back home, Japanese investors were busy at the time buying up American trophy properties like Rockefeller Center and Pebble Beach. Sony had just bought Columbia Pictures, and Japan considered itself poised to take over the world economically. President Bush (Sr.) had recently vomited on Prime Minister Koichi Miyazawa. Miyazawa later publicly called American workers “lazy.” All of this was tough to deal with on a daily basis, and so it felt good to be able to win barroom arguments with talk of the National Sport.

But I also began to look to the rikishi from Hawai‘i as inspirations for any gaijin living in Japan. During those first few weeks, simply getting from the station to my tiny, cold house was a challenge, and little things like buying food, using a pay phone, getting film developed, all became big things that began to wear on me. Walking into a pharmacy without being able to read anything went quickly from fun and exotic to demeaning. I tired of people staring at me wherever I went, and many of the cultural adjustments I had to make annoyed me once the excitement of being in another country had worn off. But then I would turn on the TV and see Akebono, his hair styled in a samurai chon-mage, bantering away fluently in Japanese in a post-bout interview, and I would think, “What must he have had to go through? And what must he be going through now?” To most of us gaijin, Konishiki, Akebono, and Musashimaru were heroic far more for what they were dealing with culturally than for what they were getting done on the dohyo.
It also seemed to many of us at the time that the gaijin rikishi were fighting an unfair fight, that they were being held to a higher standard of behavior than their Japanese counterparts. Takahanada could slap an overzealous fan without consequence, for instance, as he did in mid-1992, but if Konishiki spoke openly about sensitive issues like discrimination, as we have seen, he would be roundly, loudly criticized. Yamato confirmed the dilemma for me years later when he told me, “If you’re a foreigner, you have to be more Japanese to be accepted” (Kalima, 6/98). He meant more Japanese than even the Japanese themselves.

While Konishiki was busy dealing with his frustrations over not having been promoted to yokozuna, Akebono was doing exactly what Yamato spoke of: he was being more Japanese than anyone else, including Takahanada. When Konishiki was said to lack hinkaku, American pundits like Mike Ryoko—syndicated in the Japan Times—came down hard on what they saw as a typical example of mighty Japan’s discriminatory practices. But just as it is fair to speculate that someone like Takahanada would have been promoted had he been in Konishiki’s position, it’s easy to see why, in a broader cultural context, Konishiki was not. Despite what he had learned about the “rules” and Japan’s public performance, Konishiki was still not even close to being “more” Japanese.

Of everyone near the top of the banzuke in 1992, Akebono was the best example of someone with hinkaku. In the dignity with which he carried himself (Larry Aweau had seen it way back at the 1988 funeral), his understanding of his place both on the banzuke and in the sempai-kohai scheme of things, and in the way his peers regarded him, Akebono appeared less like a foreigner than simply a model
Sumo Kyokai rikishi—even more so than his boss had at the same stage of his own career. He acted as a member of the group, treating his rivals with respect—even deferring to the Hanada brothers at times rather than publicly challenging them as a boxer, or a young Konishiki, might have done. He had learned the meaning of sumo—of sumo do—and demonstrated his respect for it every morning in practice as he handed down its secrets to those ranked below him. In the same Natsu Basho that saw Konishiki fade in what turned out to be his last real chance at yokozuna promotion, Akebono ended up in a senshuraku battle against Wakahanada to either force a playoff or decide the overall winner, which Akebono won overwhelmingly to take his first yusho, humbly accepting the Emperor’s Cup.

The following day representatives from the Sumo Kyokai came to Azumazeki Beya to announce Akebono’s promotion to ozeki—one step away from the white rope, and one step higher than Akebono Oyakata had ever gone. And with the retirement of Yokozuna Hokutoumi leaving sumo without a yokozuna, for the first time in history, the top-ranked rikishi on both the East and West sides of the banzuke would be foreigners.

Nearly lost in most of the 1992 noise in the National Sport was the quiet rise of a third sekitori from Hawai‘i up the path beaten by Konishiki. Separate from the Larry Aweau stable of Oahu recruits, Fiamalu Penitani had been handpicked by Musashigawa Oyakata back in June of 1989 and entered sumo under the name Musashimaru at the same time as Ola Rowan and Troy Talaimatai. Penitani’s situation was different from those of the other Hawai‘i boys in more ways than just
the fact that he was the only foreigner in Musashigawa Beya. Born in American Samoa, he had moved with his family to Hawai‘i at age ten unable to speak English. The Penitanis had little trouble adjusting into the predominantly Samoan-Tongan-Hawaiian rural town of Makaha—the farthest dot on the Oahu map from Honolulu—and so when Fia arrived in Tokyo after a notable football career at Waianae High School, further cultural adjustment seemed a natural step. His relative isolation from other foreigners would speed the process, in spite of how difficult it could be for him to be alone in the afternoons with no one to talk to at all.

During the hours of down time on the long 1998 summer jungyo, I visited often with then-Ozeki Musashimaru. He was always open and friendly, happy to have the company of someone else who spoke English who also had a connection to Hawai‘i. We talked most often about his nephews, who had been in the second grade class I'd taught as a student teacher the previous year. Stories of Ala and Leighton would then turn to talk of his hometown, what his old high school friends were now up to, when he planned to visit next. He still managed to get back a couple of times a year, and was happy to share pictures of his last visit with me, scenes of a big, happy family relaxing on Yokohama Beach, way up Oahu’s west shore just past Makaha. Even in 1998 he could look homesick to me, so I asked him how he had ever managed in the early days following his arrival.

“I didn’t tell nobody,” he admitted, “but that’s natural you know. You’re here by yourself. You don’t talk Japanese. No one talks English. You just look at your wall, you look at your magazine, you listen to your music. Nobody talks to you. And
all the stress just build up and then, there you go: crying in your futon” (Penitani, 1998).

By the time Akebono won his first yusho, Musashimaru had made it up to sanyaku with only one losing record to his name. The kind of laid-back, take-whatever-comes tone with which he explained his early bouts with homesickness allowed him to blend into the background in 1992, away from the Konishiki drama and the Ake-Taka-Waka rivalry. Before I first spoke with him in 1998, I came prepared with a thesis that explained Hawai‘i’s rikishi’s ability to make it in sumo which I hoped he would confirm for me—mainly that assimilation had to be a condition for his success as a rikishi. I hoped that like Yamato, he would have much to say on the need to fit in, either by changing or by playing a kind of role, as an integral part of what was required of him in sumo.

“Me, I’m just the same old guy,” he said instead. Just the same old guy. I even pressed him on it a bit—he had to have made some cultural adjustments—but after getting to know him better over the next couple of months, I could see what he meant. Musashimaru managed to act out the sumo performance without acting at all. The way he dealt with the hardships of being a foreigner, of the sempai-kohai system, and all the rest of it, came easily and naturally to him. As it turns out, individual identity was as important as national identity in deciding the success or failure of foreign rikishi like Musashimaru, Akebono, and Konishiki. Akebono and Musashimaru succeeded quietly for political and social reasons. They said the right things, and people liked them. “One time,” Musashimaru told me, “Jesse [Azumazeki] Oyakata told me, ‘Even though you don’t know how to speak the
language, just bow, even you don’t know them, just bow.’ That’s about it. But me, hard-headed, I see somebody, no bowing for me: typical Samoan” (Penitani, 1998). Musashimaru fit in not despite his failure to give much thought to even the most universally accepted of Japanese customs, but because of it, and because of the affable way he went about doing it. Dealing with culture situationally, based on individual encounters, he thought of the Japanese as people rather than as business-card-producing karaoke enthusiasts who bathe en masse and bow at one another all day. And they came to think of him not in gaijin-Japanese terms, but affectionately, as “Maru-chan.”

That Akebono speaks in similar tones about his cultural success suggests that while rikishi like Konishiki and Yamato may have had to work at fitting in, the sumo system was in fact set up to accommodate people like Akebono and Musashimaru—people with a bit more patience regarding the way things are. “You can’t pay attention to that kind of stuff,” Akebono told me of what look like his well-crafted public performances, “cause when you start thinking about stuff like that, that’s when you start getting scared. To me, I feel when you mess up is when you start to think. If you say what you feel and say it in a nice way you should be all right” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98).

“Maru-chan” excels at saying things in a nice way. His four hundred and sixty pounds are seen as cute rather than imposing (unless, I guess, you’re facing him on the dohyo), in part for the way he shrugs off whatever problems come his way, including losses. “What happens, happens,” he explained. “You gotta win some, you gotta lose some; take it as they come. Some guys, when they lose, they go, ‘Ah,
f-n this, f-n that.' Brah, you gotta win some, you gotta lose some. You no can expec’
fo’ go up an’ jus’ win, you know; the guy up there is giving his best shot too, so. You
make some mistakes, you fall down, you lose, dass arright; dass pahta da game”
(Penitani, 1998). While at times he may come off as being much less Japanese than
the Japanese, he has succeeded because he has been able to practice a Japanese idea
like sho-ga-nai to an extreme I’ve never seen among his hosts. What happens
happens.

His take on his role as a rikishi has had surprisingly little to do with in-depth
cultural analysis or interpretation of an Empire of Signs, and everything to do with a
laid-back demeanor which lets him deal with the unknown as a matter of course. In
other words, he made his way into the conservative sumo community by “cruising,” a
loaded local Hawai’i term, and hardly a recipe for success as a cultural worker in
Japan, but a strategy which helped rikishi like Akebono, Musashimaru, and later
Daiki define roles acceptable to their audience. Akebono learned early to concentrate
on himself and his own training. Musashimaru always avoided potential controversy,
as in this answer to my question of whether foreign rikishi were held to a higher
standard of behavior than their Japanese colleagues: “People look at it in different
ways. They think they got it easy and we got it a little bit harder. But I don’t care. It
doesn’t matter in my life” (Penitani, 1998). And I could tell this was no line he gave
me to duck the question; it really didn’t matter to him. Both on and off the dohyo,
whatever happens happens, an attitude he used like a tool for a kind of personal,
individual cultural analysis.
Musashimaru’s laid-back attitude has also helped him because it evokes, for his Japanese audience, an image of Hawai‘i. Japan’s romance with Hawai‘i dates back more than a hundred years, and thrives today in the form of hula halau dance stables (there are more in Japan than Hawai‘i), sold-out performances by great Hawai‘i musicians too obscure to fill a bar in New York, and apartments adorned with local art, lauhala baskets, perhaps an ukulele. People describe themselves as Hawaii-zuki—someone who loves Hawai‘i—and many have traveled to the islands four and five times beyond the requisite honeymoon trip without ever having traveled anywhere else. Perhaps this audience didn’t take to Konishiki at first because, as friendly as he is, he doesn’t enact Hawai‘i’s most widely-held stereotype as well as Takamiyama had, or as well as Musashimaru and Akebono did. He did not, at first, demonstrate what a cultural theorist might call “aloha,” the monopoly on goodwill which people from Hawai‘i are said to possess.

Before actually talking to Akebono, I had an idea that his quiet public demeanor had to have something to do with the heat he watched Konishiki take during the first half of 1992—that he had learned from his sempai’s mistakes to perform a role in this on-going drama. But when I finally discussed Konishiki’s political failures as a yokozuna candidate with Azumazeki Oyakata, and then with Akebono, the explanation for Chad’s exemplary behavior became a lot less complex than I’d made it out to be. “Konishiki, he’s a very frank person,” Oyakata told me. “That’s just his personality, his character” (Kuhaulua, 1998).

Akebono later expanded on this idea: “Konishiki, he tends to speak his mind. And sometimes I envy him for that, but not all the time. And like for me, the way I
was brought up being the oldest, my parents, they didn’t give me a *chance* to speak my mind, so I guess that was one block for me. He also told me once he envies me for not being able to speak my mind” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98). So while much of Akebono’s cultivation of a perfect public persona can be credited to a heightened sensitivity, his success outside the dohyo had more to do with who the man was to begin with. To be sure, he was playing a role, but it was one which suited him more naturally than Konishiki’s initially suited Salevaa Atisanoe. “To me, that’s not something you learn,” Chad told me. “That’s something you’re born with. I mean, you can tell somebody to try and be humble, but you cannot teach them to be humble; they have to be humble from the beginning. All these things in sumo: you can learn how to wrestle, but you cannot learn how to have fighting spirit; you cannot learn how to be humble—that’s all stuff, to me, I feel you’re born with” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98).

You’re also born with or without *hinkaku*, as Japanese writers now forced to define the term amidst international cries of racism were saying, a parallel which suggests that perhaps Chad Rowan was less of an outsider than thousands of miles of ocean would lead one to believe. Or as Azumazeki Oyakata put it, with regard to culture, “I very seldom had to coach him” (Kuhaulua, 1998). Konishiki had awakened the audience to the possibility of a foreign yokozuna. But in many of the most important, immeasurable, ambiguous ways, the man for whom he had paved the way had been ready for the rank all along.
Now all that really remained was for Akebono to step up on the dohyo and produce. His promotion to ozeki after only just over four years in sumo was the fastest in history, but that history is full of great ozeki who never put the necessary consistently dominating performances together to reach the highest rank. Konishiki himself had been ozeki for five years by now. Akebono had a bright future, but at 23 he was still too young for anyone to be sure.

Anyone except for Akebono. He was unbeatable, and he knew it, unstoppable to the point of shrugging off his first significant injury, sustained during training in the weeks following his May victory. He talked about it years later like it was a hangnail.

“My foot? Fuck, I was wrestling with one broken foot and I was still kicking everybody’s ass,” he told me. “That’s how bad I was, you know. I won my first yusho and wen fracture my foot. I got up and I wen practice still yet, you know. And I went ten and oh with one broken foot” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

Azumazeki Oyakata had other plans about protecting his eager investment, and reported Akebono kyūjo for the Nagoya Basho. Kyujo means to take an absence, which rikishi injured during a hon-basho can do without fear of demotion, and which yokozuna, who cannot be demoted and who are expected to compete at or near their peak at all times, can do whenever they are injured. As an ozeki, Akebono could afford to miss one tournament without being demoted, as long as he could come back with a winning record in the next.

But at the top of his game, he wanted no part of being absent—especially for something as minor as a broken bone in his foot.
“I can wrestle,” he pleaded with Boss. “I wanna wrestle.”

“No!” Oyakata told him. “Your feet going fall off!” (qtd. by Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

It should be noted that Chad Rowan is definitely not the kind of person who has to be moving all day long, who needs to keep busy. He is nothing like his comparatively hyperactive brother, and is perfectly content to watch television all afternoon, or nap, or relax and listen to music. But all of this is only after his training is through, and his job is done.

“Even with one broken foot I had confidence I could win the tournament,” he told me. “That’s how good everything was going, that’s how bad I was at that time. He finally wen talk me out of wrestling and I was pissed. They wen put one cast on, I took ‘um off myself. I took ‘um off, next day I wen tape up my feet and I was out there practicing again” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

He sat out July’s Nagoya Basho (won by Mitoizumi), and after limited training, he finished far behind Takahanada in September’s Aki Basho with a 9-6 record. Takahanada’s second championship of the year had people speculating that sumo might soon see its first teenage yokozuna. The young Hanada, however, quieted such talk all by himself by flailing around desperately to open November’s Kyushu Basho with four straight losses, showing no evidence of hinkaku along the way. Akebono convincingly took his own second yusho of the year with a 14-1 record to revive the possibility of a foreign yokozuna.

And Akebono did not concern himself in the least with “asserting a Japanese identity,” or “playing the correct role,” or racism, or even with hinkaku. Following
his devastating 14-1 November yusho, he was concerned privately with only one thing: winning the next tournament. He knew nothing of Shinto or the religious significance of the yokozuna rope, that its zig-zag paper strips denoted a place free from evil, that its use dated back to the mid-19th century. As he told me years after having worn the rope, he still thought of himself as nothing more than a "professional at'lete." To him the rope was more a symbol of respect. It meant that he was the very best, that he would be looked upon as he himself had looked up to Chiyonofuji, surrounded by white-gloved tsukebito. What pressure he felt never reached levels of international political interest; it was merely the pressure any great athlete feels in the heat of competition. Unlike Konishiki, who seemed burdened by the weight of GM, Chrysler, and Ford in his drive towards yokozuna promotion, Akebono tuned out everything except the desire to win, to be the best, and to prove his doubters wrong.

The great foundation for sumo's tests of composure is, again, time. For Akebono, the anticipation had two months to build before he could even begin the test. And then once the first day began with morning practice, he would have all day to wait his turn before going to try to post his first win. If you go and watch a full day of sumo, beginning at 9:00 a.m. and ending around 6:00, you'll wait on at least three levels of time: first, for the low-ranked boys to go through the pre-bout ritual, a brief version of that done by the top rankers, before they charge at one another; then, for the day to unfold, to watch the competitors increase in size and skill throughout the morning and afternoon. And on a less-immediate level, you'll wait for them all to gain weight and strength and skill to match their speed, to work their way up to a paid rank and to stardom, and even past that, to the hallowed positions of the formal,
black-robed oyakata who sit around the dohyo as judges. Akebono had nearly completed this progression, set as he was to fight last on every other day of the tournament. Now his task was to get himself through to 5:45 p.m. every day and remain focused enough, composed enough, to launch himself forward into that frightening explosion of powerful hands, to do his own sumo.

While Akebono and Takahanada cruised through the first week of the 1993 Hatsu Basho undefeated, Konishiki picked up two early losses and Wakahanada three. Musashimaru would finish the tournament with a decent 10-5 record, but was still more than a year from sumo’s elite, with four of the losses coming at the hands of the Hanadas and his two fellow gaijin. On day eight Akebono followed Takahanada’s first loss with one of his own, to Wakahanada. Taka lost again on Day Ten, and then again on Day Eleven to Maegashira 14 Daishoyama—the very type of streaking low-ranker who can come out of nowhere with a surprise yusho. With only one defeat, Daishoyama found himself in sole possession of the lead following Akebono’s loss in that day’s final bout. Taka, Daishoyama, and Akebono combined to send Konishiki completely out of the picture with three more losses before senshuraku. Wakahanada and Musashimaru turned up the heat on what was turning out to be a three-way race with Day Twelve and Day Fourteen wins, respectively, over Daishoyama. And Akebono and Takahanada regained their winning forms on the way to a senshuraku showdown that would decide it all.

Even as Akebono waited in the shitaku-beya that afternoon for his final-day match against Takahanada, the tournament’s overall outcome was still taking shape. Every five or ten minutes a rikishi would walk into the big room bathed in sweat and
head for the bath. Most of their fates had been decided days ago, but some came in with big smiles or looks of relief for having gotten their eighth win just in the nick of time, while others looked sullen, resigned to demotion for picking up their eighth loss. Of consequence to Akebono was Daishoyama. By the time he stood to walk out and wait in the tunnel to enter the arena, Akinoshima—Daishoyama’s opponent for the day—was walking up the hanamichi in defeat. Daishoyama had won to remain one loss behind the Hawaiian at 12-3. Should Takahanada, who now stood at 11-3, topple the foreign giant, he would even all three of their records and send them to an immediate playoff that would no doubt favor the Maegashira, who now had upwards of forty minutes to rest and compose himself.

But as Akebono stood in the tunnel rocking back and forth on his heels, the consequence of a playoff match did not enter his mind. He had only to beat Takahanada, and the rope would be his. When the time came at last he slapped the front of his mawashi with his left hand hard enough that the sound echoed out into the arena, and then he slowly walked forward down the hanamichi, arms and legs in perfect synchronization. On senshuraku the last six men to fight perform a brief ceremony that further hypes what is about to happen, in which the rikishi from the east and west sides take turns with synchronized shiko stomps just before the first pair of them face off. Akebono completed this and then took his place next to the dohyo, seated directly across from Takahanada, arms folded, staring forward. For the next ten minutes he kept out thoughts of 1988, when this guy and his brother were already being talked about as future yokozuna. He kept out thoughts of Konishiki’s ordeal the previous year. He refused to consider that even a loss to Taka followed by a win
in the playoff would not assure his promotion, or that a less-than-dominating win, in light of his 9-6 record back in September, might be enough to forestall promotion. The years of training, the consequence of the moment he was about to face, all of it he kept out.

When he finally stepped up and bowed to Takahanada, Akebono had even tuned out the roaring crowd. The walks back to the corner, the synchronized steps, the throws of salt had little to do with ceremony, with purifying the ring, and everything to do with whipping the crowd into a frenzy, and with giving the rikishi the chance to send a message to one another, to see who might back down, to see who was ready to fight, ready fo’ scrap right now. The Kokugikan crowd had waited all day—many of them since the darkness of morning on long ticket lines—for what would amount to seconds of action. And they shouted for all they were worth, many for their native son to protect the Kokugi’s highest rank, and many for the foreigner who had proven himself. But Akebono could hear nothing but the dull hum inside his head. All he could think about was winning, of beating this fucka. Right now, it was time fo’ scrap.

In the end, the meaning and the beauty of sumo reside in this characteristically Japanese aesthetic: a comparatively simple image represents great underlying complexities. After all of the discussions on cultural significance, ritual, and tradition, and after all the countless daily hours of training, it came down to this. How did Chad Rowan of Waimanalo wind up as Japan’s most important cultural symbol, only one of sixty-four over the course of more than a hundred years of contemporary
sumo, and the first foreigner? An extremely complex question, one with a simple answer.

Akebono and Takahanada each grabbed another handful of salt. They threw the salt across the dohyo and walked towards its center, crouched down, and touched their hands to the ground, a prelude to the actual charge. Evenly matched to this point in their careers, either man could win in a test of skill. Takahanada’s best chance against his taller opponent was to go low to negate Akebono’s reach advantage and get a strong hold on the mawashi, gaining a leverage advantage which would allow him to control the direction of the fight once the men locked up. Akebono had two options. He could stand Takahanada up, grab his mawashi with both hands, and march him forward. Or he could assault him with open-handed tsupari thrusts, keep him away from his own mawashi, and push him out. But by now this match was obviously more than a test of skill. Composure, strength of character, and ability to withstand pressure were now at least as important as strength and speed. These would dictate the outcome of the charge, which would likely shape the rest of the bout.

They rose again, stared again, walked back to their corners. They wiped the sweat from their faces and upper bodies with towels handed to them. They grabbed more salt. Akebono looked out over the crowd, his back towards the center of the dohyo. His pupils turned up inside his head and his eyelids closed as he took a deep breath. He opened his eyes and turned, as Takahanada turned. They each tossed the salt on their way back to the center of the dohyo as the noise level continued to rise. Akebono lowered his head and raised his eyes in a fierce stare. They faced each other
and crouched down as the Kokugikan fell silent, the American against the Japanese. All the training, the hype, the continuation of the tradition, the discussion, rolled up into a single overwhelming moment. They charged.

Akebono immediately shocked Takahanada with a thrust to the face which stood him straight up, vulnerable to the gaijin’s left hand, which came up instantly to send Taka backwards so quickly he had no time to sidestep the on-rushing Akebono, who finished him with a final right-hand thrust to send him sprawling off the dohyo.

As he watched Takahanada tumble to the floor beside the dohyo, for an instant the cold look of concentration changed. For an instant a look of triumph appeared on his face, as though he might raise his arms, having achieved the goal he had worked so hard for, having made history. But instead the gaijin remembered his role, controlled himself, and reached down to help his fellow rikishi back into the ring without so much as a victorious smile. The two walked back to their places of origin on the dohyo. They bowed to one another, and Takahanada stepped down, turned, bowed towards the dohyo, and then walked back up the hanamichi. Akebono squatted, waved his hand across the envelope bearing his and his rival’s names, and accepted the envelope of prize money from the gyoji for winning the bout. He then exited the arena briefly to a shitaku-beya crowded with reporters, blazing with camera
flashes, to towel off and have his chon-mage re-done for the awards ceremony, where he would be presented his second consecutive Emperor’s Cup for winning the tournament with a record of thirteen wins and two losses.

I have always found the amazing restraint Akebono was able to show at this moment of his greatest triumph even more impressive than the triumph itself. Tennis players sink to their knees upon winning big tournaments. Pitchers jump into their catchers’ arms after perfect games; boxers at least raise their arms in triumph. Basketball players strut up and down the court with the “number one” finger raised. Football players make fools of themselves in the end zone after scoring touchdowns. Akebono had been raised on all of this, and yet here he was at his dominant best, winning the most important match of his life, and managing to harness the emotion to fit the occasion, not just in the interviews that followed, but in the very instant it happened.

“I guess after all the years, you learn,” Akebono told me when I asked him about the moment. Sure, he wanted to strut circles around the dohyo, to jump up and down in a wild dance of celebration. But of course he knew better. “I did my jumping, when nobody was watching,” he said, “just me and my boys and the people who count” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98).

The way Akebono actually felt and what a good yokozuna candidate is expected to say once again coincided in the words that came out in the shitaku-beya press conference when the inevitable speculation on his promotion came up. It seemed obvious to anyone watching that Akebono was fully deserving, particularly in light of the way the Konishiki controversy had forced the Sumo Kyokai to come out
and define “two consecutive championships” as the promotion standard. Here was Akebono with his two consecutive championships, but his September 9-6 left him with a three-tournament total of only 36 wins—two fewer than Konishiki’s three-tournament total from November ’91 to March ’92. He could have said something like, “I think I’ve proven myself and that I deserve to be promoted because of my two straight yusho.” One might imagine a younger, frustrated Konishiki saying something like this. But when the question came up, Akebono simply said, “All I can do is work hard on the dohyo. What happens after that is up to other people” (Shapiro 3). The absolute perfect line, and yet it wasn’t a line at all. In a phone call to his mother later than night, Akebono had nothing to say of “deserving.” “I did all I can, Ma,” he told her. “The rest is up to them” (qtd. by Rowan, Janice, 1993).

If there is one place in all of Tokyo that immediately takes you back hundreds of years in time, it is the Meiji Shrine. The ancient temples and shrines that dot the entire city are the subject of many a tour book description of Tokyo. But the Meiji Shrine is a home for the gods set back from the world in acres of forest, in quiet solitude, deep in the past. You reach its wooded gate only after walking about five hundred meters down a wide path through the trees paved with the kind of gravel stones that crunch under your feet to alert the gods of your presence. By the time you enter, all traces of the noisy, rushing, modern city are gone. And from the paved granite courtyard within its walls, you get the sense that as Tokyo and the rest of the world keep hurrying forward, this place, as much for its deep tradition and historic
importance as for the comforting buffer of forest that surrounds it, will be here to keep certain beliefs and values, and rituals that define them, around forever.

One such ritual dating back to the mid-nineteenth century was enacted on January 28, 1993 for only the 64th time in history, when a crowd of more than four thousand watched the Yokozuna walk somberly to the courtyard's center, the last in a line of three other men: sumo’s chief gyoji—a small, older man dressed in a manner resembling a Shinto priest; the Yokozuna’s dew sweeper, the barefooted Mitoizumi, naked at the back and from the waist up to the 34-degree chill; and another rikishi proudly holding in his outstretched right hand a sheathed samurai sword, perpendicular to the ground. The gyoji knelt off to the side as the three rikishi fell into formation facing the shrine’s altar, the colors of their matching kesho-mawashi reflected in the wet granite, their hair styled in the flower-shaped chon-mage reserved for formal occasions. Around the waist of Yokozuna Akebono, tied in a single loop at the back and adorned in front with five strips of folded zig-zag paper, was a thick, brilliant white rope.

Towering over his attendants, who now flanked him in a squatting position, the Yokozuna leaned far forward, bent at the waist, spread his long arms to their full span, and brought his hands together in a mighty crash to alert the gods to his presence. He stood and stepped forward, raised his right leg to the side high above his waist, and stomped his bare foot with another loud slap into the granite, raising drops of water, chasing the evil spirits from the area. And then a light snow began to fall.
He stood again to his full height in the center of the Meji Shrine as if to declare to the gods that from now until he could no longer measure up to the white rope’s ideal of strength, he would stand among them. As he fell back into formation between his attendants and completed the sacred steps, the crowd, at last, began to cheer.

The announcement of the foreigner’s promotion had been formally made two days after the tournament ended and two days before the Meji Shrine ceremony. By just after eight on the morning of January 21st, the big room on the second floor of Azumazeki Beya was packed with a flood of reporters that spilled down the stairs and out onto the narrow street, crowded with hundreds of fans braving the January cold for a glimpse of history. Chad Rowan waited in his room as the tokoyama styled his hair into the formal flower-shaped chon-mage, as Percy readied his formal black haori robe. Everyone else simply waited.

An hour later a car pulled up, and two Sumo Kyokai representatives, also dressed in formal black haori, emerged into the throng to the whiz of madly clicking, winding cameras. They were led inside and down the hall, past the giant portrait of Takamiyama and up the stairs. At the same time Akebono walked down the hall and into the room, where a reception area had been arranged with four places to kneel facing four microphones and the mass of hungry lenses, this time from around the world. Akebono stood next to his boss and greeted the two oyakata as they entered and kneeled, “ZaiMAss.” Lightning filled the room as thousands of flashes burned in succession for nearly a minute. And then it was quiet.
One of the oyakata began as if according to script, congratulating Akebono on the Nihon Sumo Kyokai’s decision to name him the 64th yokozuna in history. Akebono bowed deeply from his kneeling position, nearly touching the ground with his face. Lightning flashed again for a long time, and again it was quiet. Akebono humbly accepted promotion, promising to devote myself to the title of Yokozuna. All according to the script. He took several questions from the press in the same understated voice, and then the four men on the stage rose. The Kyokai representatives exited, and the giant Hawaiian was lifted onto the shoulders of his deshi—the people who count—and brought outside to greet the hundreds of cheering fans packed onto the narrow street. It was here that he finally allowed himself to smile, and to raise his arms in triumph.

The following day the viewing area surrounding Azumazeki Beya’s keikoba was packed with cameras and reporters. The clay was covered with a tarp to ensure cleanliness, and crowded with the Azumazeki Beya deshi and several sekitori from the Takasago family of sumo beya. Azumazeki Oyakata supervised from his usual position at the platform’s center, along with Takasago Oyakata, and Kokonoe Oyakata—the former Chiyonofuji. An equal number of men—about forty in each group—had come to construct and to document the construction of the great white rope which would hang from the waist of the new yokozuna. Those in the keikoba wore white gloves. They worked in unison, tying three lengths of bleached white rope to the teppo pole in the corner and stretching them diagonally all the way across the room. The rikishi stood in two lines the length of the ropes, very close to one another, both to keep it tight, and to make sure there was room for all of them to
participate in what was less work than ceremony. They chanted rhythmically to the beat of a taiko drum so all would move in equal time to braid the long rope. The heya manager in charge stopped them frequently to inspect the growing braid's tightness, so that in all an hour had passed before they made the final twist.

Akebono had retired to the locker room and returned in his kesho-mawashi. He now stood in the keikoba’s center, facing his boss, Takasago Oyakata, and Kokonoe Oyakata, to whom he had looked so reverently that first jungyo tour back in '89 as mean, can kick everybody's ass. Three of the very same Kokonoe Beya tsukebito who had spent years helping the great yokozuna with his own rope now surrounded Akebono. He leaned on one as he had seen Chiyonofuji do, as he had watched Onokuni and Hokutoumi do so in the shitaku-beya, and listened as they instructed his own boys as to exactly how the rope should be tied. Six of them together struggled under the weight of the rope and the awkward position for the proper grip, and then with a final chorus of, “Uh-who uh-who uh-who!” they pulled the knot tight. Another boy affixed the five zig-zag white paper strips—called gohei—to the front of the rope. And another boy marked and cut the excess length of rope behind the knot. Then they stood aside, leaving Akebono alone in the center of the keikoba adorned in all the trappings of a yokozuna, showered by the lighting of camera flashes that filled the room.

Gaijin Yokozuna. That it could happen at all speaks to the dynamic quality of sumo’s Shinto roots, grounded as they are in a collection of folk tales gathered by Oo No Yasumaro in 712 A.D. and called the Kojiki—at first in part to promote the idea of Emperor worship by connecting him to the gods. Rather than a collection of
gospels with definite authors, the Kojiki's tales stem from oral tradition, and attempt more to explain how things came about than how they ought to be, or how we should act. Shinto deities are not looked up to or revered as the Christian God, or emulated as Buddha, but rather live on a kind of equal plane of existence to ours and are merely called upon for assistance for anything from a good harvest to passing a university entrance exam.

The relatively informal relationship with the gods makes the following scene conceivable. During the Edo period when sumo as we know it was taking shape, a group of Shinto priests, gyoji, and oyakata (the Folk in the folk tradition) get together and decide to create this sacred rank, most likely as a selling point for the evolving sport and tradition. To elevate the rank to match their ideals of strength and virtue, they adorn the yokozuna with religious trappings (gohei) and responsibilities (the dohyo-iri), just as they had done with sumo itself after it had degenerated into an undignified form of street fighting and was banned. (The dohyo, the tsuriyane, the gyoji's uniform, and the salt are all remnants of the semi-religious structure given to sumo that permitted its revival.) What gives them the right to do this is the same dynamic quality of Shinto that gave anyone the right to tell or re-tell any of the creation myths in the Kojiki. The creation of the yokozuna rank was just another step in this tradition, as was the acceptance of a non-Japanese by a group of men (the Folk) sitting around a table in a Kokugikan office.

Chad Rowan from Waimanalo stood alone in the center of a keikoba bathed in camera flashes, the latest incarnation of what was until the end of World War II Japan's State Religion. The weight of the rope around him was new and
uncomfortable, but this step of his immersion into the institution of sumo was not so different from all of the others. An unexpected weight had accompanied them all, from the first time he set foot on the same keikoba that cold February morning nearly five years before. Back then he was alone, and people laughed at him for even trying. Mitoizumi had been untouchable back then. But now Mitoizumi was preparing to serve as one of his attendants for the next day’s ceremony. Akebono had absorbed the way of the ancient tradition, passed on to him as it had been passed on to his sempai by those before them, to his boss by those before him. He had gotten used to the feel of the black canvas mawashi; he would get used to the weight of the great rope.

Kokonoe Oyakata had retired to the changing room downstairs and returned in his own mawashi. The great Chiyonofuji still cut an impressive figure with his well-defined chest and shoulders. It was both his privilege and his honor to pass what he knew of the rank on to the next man picked to uphold its virtue, in the same way the former Kokonoe Oyakata—former Yokozuna Kitanofuji—had passed his knowledge down to Chiyonofuji twelve years prior. Half the men in the room had seen the dohyo-iri countless times and could likely have explained it, but these were the reporters, the audience. Few rikishi ever see the yokozuna dohyo-iri, as they are back in the shitaku-beya when the great men are out purifying the dohyo, and so Akebono was indeed in need of a lesson on its simple steps. But in tune with the idea of sumo as something akin to oral tradition, the only man in the room qualified to instruct was the former Chiyonofuji.
The room fell silent as the former yokozuna stepped into the center of the keikoba and clapped his hands loudly, twice. He performed shiko. He squatted deeply with his right hand extended and his left at his side. He slowly brought his legs together until he was standing, and went on to complete the steps he had not performed since his 1992 retirement ceremony as though he were walking through a familiar room.

Akebono copied the steps as Oyakata explained them, a bit awkwardly at first—the rope around his waist did weigh over forty pounds. In no time he was dripping with sweat. So of course you're going to go over here, and the first time I show you, you're gonna mess up. I guarantee you. But the more we do it, you'll get better at it. That's just the way it works in life. Chiyonofuji walked through the steps again, and the gaijin copied them more passably as cameras continued to flash. By the third time, he had it down.

While the notion of a foreigner as the leader of the National Sport in Japan is odd enough, as an isolated achievement it is nearly unbelievable—something that Akebono could not possibly have done on his own. It has been said that in the progression of foreigners in the Kokugi, Takamiyama cleared the land, Konishiki built the stairs, and Akebono walked to the top. The metaphor falls a bit short in that it implies ease in Akebono's accomplishment, but it hits the mark in saying that none of them could have walked in and just gone straight to the top out of nowhere. With their own unprecedented success, first Takamiyama, and then Konishiki, did as much to prepare Japan for a foreign yokozuna as they did to pioneer the sport for followers like Akebono. Takamiyama was the good boy, and then the Kyokai company man.
Konishiki was willing to question, and to address criticism with something more than “I will do my best.” Each, in that order, was a necessary step in expanding the age-old thinking of the Powers That Be in the Kyokai.

The noise surrounding Konishiki’s “racism” quote put sumo in the international spotlight, and the Kyokai’s defense against promoting Konishiki backed them into a corner. When Dewanoumi Rijicho explained to the world that Konishiki had not been promoted because he had not won two consecutive tournaments, it left the Kyokai with little choice but to promote Akebono following his second yusho in a row, despite the fact that he was a foreigner, or that a couple of his wins were so narrowly come-by, or that his three-tournament win total was lower than even Konishiki’s had been, or any number of other excuses. According to what the Chairman had said to the whole world at the Foreign Correspondent’s Club of Japan the year before, Akebono did have “the necessary record.”

That the Chairman’s international press conference was held at all comes down to the New York Times article where Konishiki couldn’t “contain” his “feelings any longer,” where he claimed he was being discriminated against, all in the climate of the early 1990s economic tension existing between the U.S. and Japan. It seemed back then that Japan was almost daily having to explain to the world things like its unfair trading practices, its failure to pay reparations to World War II Korean sex slaves, its continued failure to acknowledge its aggressive role in the war some fifty years after the fact. And now here was this hard-working American guy getting pushed aside. The Sumo Kyokai, indeed, had some explaining to do regarding
Konishiki’s claim, and their explanation set the objective standard for promotion that Akebono reached in January 1993.

The pivotal character in the way this drama ended up turning out, however, was not Konishiki or Akebono, but a Waimanalo rikishi named Eric Gaspar, who competed for Takasago Beya as Koryu and is known to his friends as either “Fats” or “Fattaboo!” (He’s anything but fat, by the way, looking more like an NFL linebacker than a rikishi.) Before a sustaining a freak injury to his neck in a training bout against Yamato, Fats had risen to makushita in only five tournaments. Over the years he became a good friend of Musashimaru’s, and was up visiting just in time to watch Maru win his fifth Emperor’s cup when I met him in the spring of 1999.

He told me his story in a crowded shitaku-beya on senshuraku, tuning out the reporters and rikishi milling about and even forgetting the victorious excitement of the moment to make a big point about what he had said back in ’92, and why he had done it. The speed of his rise to makushita had matched Konishiki’s, and so he had dealt with his share of adjusting, with being “more Japanese” along the way up. And then his us-them sense of justice was piqued to its limit when the Kyokai failed to promote his sempai to yokozuna in March of 1992. Among Konishiki’s friends in the sumo world—Japanese and foreign alike—there was a consensus that he had been slighted. And so Fats, who was Konishiki’s tsukebito at the time and remains loyal enough to take a bullet for the big man, assumed the role of his life and took it upon himself to say something as Konishiki, not to the Japanese press, but to someone bigger. To Fats, the world needed to know what was really going on.
“Lot of people wen tell me I got guts for doing that,” he told me, holding his right fist to his chest, his eyes narrowed in intensity. “But I said that cause somebody had to say 'um. I said it from deep inside me, came from the heart.” Konishiki took untold amounts of heat in the aftermath of the statement, “but he wasn’t even pissed at all,” Fats recalled. “He was happy somebody finally wen say ’um” (Gaspar, 1999). Fattaboo’s words may have helped Konishiki’s cause had he been able to come through with a yusho that May. But they certainly helped Akebono’s cause, both in May with his ozeki promotion despite a just-passable 8-7, 13-2 two-tournament record, and again the following January with his yokozuna promotion. Not only was Akebono Martin Luther King Jr. to Konishiki’s Malcolm X, but the Kyokai was left with little choice but to promote him because Fats finally wen stand up and say something.
CHAPTER 11

If I was Chad back in Hawai‘i I’d be walking around in summer, no shirt, short pants, cruising at the beach. So there’s some stuff that you have to separate. It’s hard, very hard, especially when you get to be where I am. You’re always in the eye of the media. And sometimes you get frustrated because you cannot understand why. Why? That’s just the way it is. . . . I mean, we athletes, we do what we do for a living, but we’re also human at the same time. —Akebono, 6/98 (Rowan, Chad, 6/98).

Midway through the 1998 summer jungyo we were to fly from Haneda airport to Sapporo, on Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido. As I waited at the gate near a woman engrossed in a magazine, a man toying with his cell phone, and several other regular passengers, kimono-clad sekitori began to trickle in and take their places among us. Most of the makunouchi rikishi were there, including guys like Mitoizumi, who had won a yusho back in 1992 and was well-known even among non-sumo aficionados for the huge handfuls of salt he always threw across the dohyo. But despite their size, dress, and in some cases, their fame, the big men may as well have been a high school volleyball team for the attention they got.

And then Akebono entered, flanked by two tsukebito on each side, his eyes clearing the path in front of him. He did not sit at the gate with the rest of us, but instead stood in a roped-off area next to the jetway door, rocking back and forth on
his heels, wiping sweat from his brow, and trying to ignore the growing crowd of
gawkers, picture takers, and autograph hounds.

“Look!” The woman with the magazine turned and said to me. “It’s
Akebono!” As friendly and generally willing to talk as I’ve found Japanese over the
years once I’ve initiated the conversation, this was the first time a stranger had been
swept up enough in the excitement of some important moment to address me first.
Here was Yokozuna Akebono, towering over everyone. His boys had angry looks on
their faces and did their best to discourage people from groping at their yokozuna
without actually hauling off and slapping anyone. Akebono continued to wipe the
sweat that was now pouring off of him, longing, it appeared, for the safety and silence
of the plane. By the time he was actually allowed to board some five minutes after
arriving at the gate, the crowd just outside the gate area—that is, people not actually
waiting to get on the same flight—had grown to a couple of hundred, clogging the
terminal’s hallway.

Akebono’s life had turned immediately into this kind of circus the moment he
first donned the white rope in January 1993. No longer a mere sekitori, or even a
mere yusho winner, or even a mere well-known yusho winner like Mitoizumi, he was
now, in all of his waking hours, a yokozuna. Every one of 120 million people would
not only recognize him on sight; they would point to him, and call out his name like
infatuated 16-year-olds wailing over the latest pop star.

At first, for the most part, Akebono reveled in the attention. “I don’t know
how explain ‘um,” he told me. “Was awesome. I was bad. I had confidence. Cause
you know seriously, being from where I was and what I went through and not having
money all the time and this and that, and then all of a sudden you get Mercedes, girls, hotels, houses, big guys own big companies and they kissing your ass cause you kicking ass out there. Was mean” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

Was mean. Another significant difference between sumo and boxing that Akebono was now enjoying was that rather than being forbidden, sex was encouraged, even as part of training. Already firmly established as a family man when I met him, the Yokozuna asked me not to go into detail on the extent to which he took his yu-geiko as seriously as his asa-geiko. But it is important to note, as will become clear, that at this point in his career, Chad Rowan was well known for making the most of his rock-star status.

“He get style, he classy,” Percy Kipapa said of the Yokozuna. “After he come yokozuna, he like roll up in the Benz limo, sounds, all Bose speakers. He buy one kimono, he buy one colorful kimono. He the pimp daddy of the sumo wrestlers. He buy him something, he going buy him something for make himself look good. He knows the true meaning of Akebono, like the rising sun—that’s why he get that name. When he comes into a room, everybody’s, ‘Woo!’ They see the brightness” (Kipapa, 1998).

But all the brightness came with the price of all of his public freedom. Far worse than the gawking crowds was the fact that people would constantly (and ironically) grab at this foreign example of hinkaku and try to touch him. Everywhere he went, crowds of people would form, hands would grope, cameras would flash. The shameless and sometimes-mean-spirited Japanese media would not be far behind, waiting like vultures for him to lose patience and mess up somehow—all conditions
suggesting that hinkaku had some practical purpose after all. Maybe the Sumo Kyokai knew that it took superhuman amounts of strength, patience, and dignity not to reach out at grab the next groping hand and squeeze it to a throbbing pulp.

Dealing with hordes of people acting like animals is only one part of what is known in sumo as “The Burden of the Tsuna,” or the burden of the rope. As difficult as becoming yokozuna is, measuring up to the ideals of the rank can be much worse. The white rope weighs more than forty pounds and requires six attendants to put on and remove. And yet it is woefully insufficient as a symbol of the weight under which a yokozuna must toil daily—the weight of expectations, the pressure to perform, the spotlight, the position of leadership. Sumo history is dotted with great ozeki who ended up falling apart after promotion to yokozuna, including most recently Wakanohana III (formerly Wakahanada), who appeared to have aged ten years in ten months following his promotion, and who has looked like a man freed from jail since his 2000 retirement. And having been raised in a sumo beya and competed at a high level for five years before his promotion, comparatively little was required of Wakanohana III in the way of behavioral adjustment when he first donned the rope. The First Foreign Yokozuna had a much higher burden of proof. Would he understand and respect the importance of his role as a Japanese would? Would he exhibit hinkaku as Chiyonofuji had? Would he lead with strength, but not arrogance? Had the Sumo Kyokai made a big mistake in promoting him? These questions would be asked daily for the rest of Akebono’s career. If Yamato had to be “more Japanese” than the Japanese to be accepted, the First Foreign Yokozuna had to be ten times that to justify his ground-breaking promotion.

4 See Sharnoff, 173.
The tsuna’s social burden entailed giving up most of one’s life in the service of the rank. During every jungyo I attended, for instance, Akebono was out at least three nights a week in the small towns we passed through, almost always with “one of Boss’s good friends.” On some early mornings he was taken not straight to practice, but to perform his dohyo-iri at a local Shinto shrine. Back in Tokyo he was always “running around like one chicken widdout one head,” attending various dinners and several of the kind of restaurant openings Percy Kipapa described to me in a single night, some for his own appearance money, others organized by Boss or Okamisan to bring in money he would never see. A yokozuna is a huge cash cow for any sumo beya, attracting high-paying patrons and private sponsors to asa-geiko and chanko-nabe lunches, and multiplying the number of paying guests at senshuraku parties. While the world of high-power agents had yet to reach sumo, a good okamisan could use a yokozuna to bring piles of money into her sumo beya, and Akebono’s okamisan took full advantage.

“I know I went through a lot over there,” Percy told me. “Like you said, you gotta keep your mouth shut, put up with a lot. But Chad, he went through more bullshit than I went through, ah? Cause when money comes involved...” He paused and shook his head. “He could’ve been a rich man by now. A real rich man. But like ozeki party, yokozuna party, he neva made one cent offa that. To me that’s not right” (Kipapa, 1998). Envelopes addressed to Akebono would routinely arrive in his room open and with money missing, and all he could do was exactly what Percy said: keep his mouth shut, because as unethical as such treatment might seem to an
American, all of the money he generated was in fact the property of his Oyakata, the head of his household.

“You’ve gotta remember that you belong to the beya,” Azumazeki Oyakata explained it to me, “whether it’s Takasago Beya or Azumazeki Beya. The Kyokai comes first, and then the beya. Not you” (Kuhaulua, 1998).

Yokozuna Akebono’s own burden was compounded by the fact that the one man with whom he wanted to share his triumph was dying. “He supported my decision from the beginning,” Chad told me of his father. “That’s why for me, doing what I doing was for my parents, they could live through my eyes” (Rowan, 10/98). And while Chad’s Yokozuna responsibilities were dragging him from one side of Japan to the other, and ocean away the man who wore his Akebono’s Dad hat as though it were part of a uniform was being eaten up by diabetes.

“When I was locked up from ‘90 until the day that he passed away, he came every day for visit me,” Ola told me, seated at the same prison visiting room table where he would sit with his father. “Every day. And we would sit down and we would have long talks, long talks about life in general, ah? Sometimes I sit in here, sometimes I lay down, I always think about him. I always think about him.” He paused, and departed from the rapid-fire speaking pace that had brought us to this point, and then he smiled and said, “You know the Manapua Man?” The Manapua man drives a van around local neighborhoods selling meat-filled dumplings and candy. “When the Manapua Man came, all the kids used to run out. My Dad would
buy them all kine stuff. He wanted some grandchildren of his own, ah?” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998).

In his “long talks about life in general,” Randy Rowan had revealed himself as a man old beyond his fifty-three years, reflective, contemplative, and perhaps even resigned to die. He longed for grandchildren partly for the reminder of innocent joy they gave him, but also, I suspect, so he could feel like part of him would live on. “That’s why I think Nunu had hard time letting him go,” Ola went on. “Because his son Anthony, he wanted at least for my Dad to see his son before he passed away. He neva get to see none of his grandsons before he passed away. What he had was eating him up. I would tell him, ‘You gotta take care yourself. Look at you!’ But he just gave up” (Rowan, George “Ola,” 1998).

Staving off the effects of his disease was little more than a matter of diet and of taking his insulin at the proper time. But Randy Rowan would not take care of himself, mainly because he was too stubborn to admit to himself the severity of his condition. “I would leave him here with no money and go off to work,” his wife told me, “just so he couldn’t go and buy sweets or whatever. But then he’d sit here with Nunu all day, and the Japanese tour drivers would come by to see Akebono’s house. Well he’d give them a tour of the whole house, and charge them for it! They’d drive up and he’d tell Nunu, ‘Eh, son, we going get paid!’ Then he’d just walk up to the store and buy whatever—sodas, candy, all kine stuff he’s not supposed to be eating” (Rowan, Janice, 1998).

It was only because the Nihon Sumo Kyokai planned a jungyo tour to San Jose and Honolulu following the May 1993 Natsu Basho that Chad ever got the
chance to say goodbye to his ailing father. Much hype surrounded the tonomento, as
sumo was also at its peak of popularity in Hawai‘i at the time. The city threw a
parade for Chad, and he was honored all the way from his arrival at the airport to his
visit to Kaiser High. And when the tournament's final match came down to Akebono
versus Musashimaru to decide the champion, a roar arose in Honolulu’s Blaisdell
Arena equaling any ever heard inside the Kokugikan. Only this time, the cheers were
less for rikishi against rikishi than for Waianae High versus Kaiser High—a far more
important match-up in the eyes of local people. Musashimaru prevailed.

Late that night after midnight Chad did finally come home, alone. And what
he faced was even worse than he had imagined. He had wanted to talk to his father
about buying him his own taxi company, give him something to look forward to, but
the sight overpowered him. His father was really dying, right there in front of him.
They spoke only briefly. There was too much to say in the time they had, and so they
both sat in silent understanding. And then Chad got up to leave. His mother walked
him out to his car, and he told her goodbye.

“You’re not coming back before you fly out?”

“I don’t think I can handle, Mom.” He paused, frustrated and grief-stricken,
and then kissed his mother goodbye. “All the money in the world. I can get all the
money in the world, and I cannot save my Dad” (qtd. by Rowan, Janice, 1998).

Chad returned to Japan more focused than he had ever been in his career. He
was, after all, a professional athlete, and had just been crowned the very best in his
sport. In between the phone calls home to his distraught mother, the various dohyo-
iri assignments, dinners with Azumazeki Beya supporters, and other Sumo Kyokai obligations, he was expected to lead morning practice, train himself to peak condition, and win. While he had been in the running both in March and in May when the Hanada brothers took turns accepting the Emperor’s Cup, he had yet to fully justify his January promotion with a championship. He vowed to do so while his father was still alive, and he knew that July would be his last chance.

The most important burden of the tsuna has to do not with such hidden obligations as courting wealthy sponsors, but with the obvious matter of what happens up on the dohyo. While yokozuna have been known to post occasional 9-6 and 8-7 records, and two in the last twenty years have each put up a losing record, according to Azumazeki Oyakata, “12-3 would be safe” (Kuhaulua, 1998). Ideally, a yokozuna should win the yusho or be in contention straight through to senshuraku—a hard enough task made more difficult by the fact that everyone wants to beat the man with the rope more than anyone else. Everyone certainly guns for the person or team at the top of any sport, but the Nihon Sumo Kyokai sweetens the pot by offering kinboshi—gold stars—to maegashira-level rikishi who upset a yokozuna. Each kinboshi amounts to a career-long pay raise. Veteran rikishi Akinoshima, for instance, had piled up 16 kinboshi by 1999 and was earning more than three thousand extra dollars per hon-basho, just for showing up.

“When you’re the yokozuna everyone comes at you a little harder,” Akebono told me later, “but I never thought about that kine stuff. At that time I’d stand up on the dohyo like I was taking on the whole country, and nobody could beat me” (Rowan, Chad, 5/99). 
His choice of words here was more appropriate than his pride would allow him to admit, for although he was not taking on the whole of Japan, from his first basho as Yokozuna, Akebono faced a schedule that had been stacked against him so obviously it was almost comical. His promotion had not been the only news following the New Year’s tournament. When Takahanada was promoted to ozeki at the same time for his performance as the Hawaiian’s foil, he changed his name to Takanohana—significant in that he would now be expected to measure up to his father’s great career, and to join Akebono as yokozuna as soon as possible. The Sumo Kyokai then paved the way for its two favorite sons by approving the merger of Fujishima Beya and Futagoyama Beya. The new Futagoyama Beya boasted ten sekitori, a fact that ensured strong training bouts on any given day. But more important, the merger effectively diluted the competition Takanohana was to face, since rikishi from the same heya are never paired against one another unless in a yusho-deciding playoff.

The rule stands for a noble reason: the Kyokai fears that rikishi from the same heya may take dives for one another to ensure one of them wins the yusho—a plausible concern in light of the fact that Japanese professional baseball pitchers routinely and shamelessly walk opposing home run hitters to protect the records of the sluggers on their own teams. But the solution to fixed bouts of this nature is simple, and too obvious to be able to dismiss the fact that politics were at work, if not directly against Akebono, at least in favor of the favored brothers. If they pitted

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5 In order to protect his own single-season home run record in 1985, just for one famous example, the then-Yomiuri Giants Manager Sadahara Oh had opposing American slugger Randy Bass intentionally walked four straight times on the last day of the season in a meaningless game for both teams. No one, other than Bass, was the least bit surprised. (See Whiting.)
rikishi from the same heya against one another on the first three days of the basho, when the numbers matter less, people would always see the best, most evenly-matched contests.

Thanks to the rule, Akebono faced nine of his top-ten-ranked opponents in the 1993 Osaka Haru Basho. (Had Akinoshima not dropped out with an injury on day three, he would have faced all ten.) Takanohana and Wakahanada each faced six of the top ten. Akebono’s lowest-ranked opponent was Maegashira-5 Daishoho. Takanohana and Wakahanada each faced Maegashira-13 Kenko. Maegashira-13! Wakahanada came away with his first yusho, and changed his name to Wakanohana, the name under which his uncle had fought as yokozuna.

The first step towards assuring one’s legacy as a “good” yokozuna is winning that first tournament following promotion. To the extent that athletes from different eras can be compared, history has seen varying levels of yokozuna, from those who never won again after donning the rope, all the way up to greats like Taiho, who won a total of 32 yusho. Chad promised himself he would pass this first test in time for his father to see it. In July’s Nagoya Basho he would do all he could to win just one more for his biggest fan. In practice he was mean, throwing his hands up fast and flying forward, imua, regardless of the opponent, regardless of what damage he might do. He carried the focus into Nagoya and was unbeatable the first week in matches lasting only as long as it took to drive his opponents straight out—usually a matter of only a couple of seconds. Akebono threw himself into every match more than recklessly—almost carelessly, relentlessly moving forward. Imua. Even when he did not hit his target directly, as happened on Day Seven against Wakashoyo, he flew
with enough force and speed to blast his opponents out before hitting the dohyo himself, his wins having more to do with will than with technical skill. If he could have stared his opponents out of the ring, he would have.

Back home, however, his father was intent on waxing on about his life as it happened, less willing to listen to his own advice for his son to “imua,” resigned to the condition in which his son had last seen him. Shortly after Chad returned to Japan, his father called his mother from the doctor’s office with the news that they were going to have to take his other leg. Janice Rowan’s efforts to help her husband over the years had always been met with denial, which frustrated her as much as the fact that the man she loved was dying, and it was at least partly his own stubborn fault. Still, she stayed with him throughout, into the hospital and through the successful amputation of his other leg.

Akebono continued to blaze through the competition until the Day Twelve, when he was slated to face Akinoshima, a perennial 8-7-or-7-8 rikishi who had always given the Yokozuna a hard time. While skill-level and strength are obvious functions of rank, some rikishi tend to beat others regardless of the steps separating them on the banzuke. For someone ranked as low as Maegashira-10, Akinoshima was surprisingly evenly-matched against the Yokozuna, having beaten him five of the fourteen times they faced one another. The Kyokai’s decision to pit Akebono against someone so far down in the rankings as late as Day Twelve made it clear that those in charge wanted Akebono to have the most difficult possible schedule and would go out of their way to find people they knew could beat him. They would shamelessly
play favorites in order to keep the rivalry with the Hanadas interesting, even if it meant throwing softballs to the brothers.

Akebono went into Day Twelve unconcerned with scheduling or Kyokai politics or issues of race or nationality. As he had for his first eleven fights, he sat coldly beside the dohyo, glaring without effort into space in front of him. There would be times later in his career when the glare would be forced, as though he were trying to convince himself he could win, but here it came from natural self-assurance. He sat less like a man than a bull holding itself back, waiting for the chance to charge, and to hurt.

But this time when he stepped up and charged, the percentages beat him. Or perhaps the preceding 11 wins had led him across the line separating confidence from overconfidence. It is one of the most improbable and amazing sights in sport to see Akebono launch his six-eight, five hundred pound frame across the narrow bounds of the dohyo—almost as seemingly impossible a move as a gymnast executing back flips on a balance beam. Both moves require a sense of place which can only come from months of daily practice, and both have a similar margin of error. This time Akebono missed just enough to lose control of his forward motion just enough to allow Akinoshima to spin out of the way at the very edge of the ring, and then work with all of the Yokozuna’s momentum to throw him to the clay—a spectacular loss that brought zabuton pillows raining down on the dohyo.

Akebono put the loss behind him and moved forward. The cold confidence remained. He crushed Wakanohana the following day to reclaim sole possession of the lead.
“So from that day he went into ICU and never came out,” Janice Rowan told me of her husband. “And every time I would go see him, he wouldn’t talk to me. He wouldn’t talk to me. According to Nunu he would talk to Nunu, but he wouldn’t talk to me. He’d make like he no can talk or no can hear. So finally one day I asked the nurses if I can just talk to him by myself, so I closed the door and I tried to talk to him but he just didn’t want to talk so I said, ‘You know what Randy. I cannot do nothing more. I cannot do nothing more’” (Rowan, Janice, 1998).

All Randy Rowan could really do was lie in bed and wait, and from there he watched his son on TV build on his devastating win over Wakanohana by beating Konishiki the following day to take the outright lead going into senshuraku, with the brothers tied at one loss behind. Hospital staff crowded around his bed as his son marched towards his first yusho as yokozuna. But Akebono put a scare into everyone by losing the furious, final match against Takanohana, a relatively long fight that saw both of the rivals off-balance and ready to go down at one time or another. Taka was finally able to push the Hawaiian out and leave him with the unenviable task of having to face both brothers in a playoff. Wakanohana had just chalked up his thirteenth win against Konishiki, leaving the three young rivals even. They drew lots to determine the playoff’s order, where the first man to beat the other two consecutively would be declared the winner.

“And you know what was real funny too?” Chad told me of the senshuraku bout. “The night before, my family and them came over, ah? You know Pohai? Well they was up here with my Aunty Gerry, you know her, they all came over, and I would keep asking how my Dad was doing and they would say, ‘all right, all right.’ I
was joking with them and I said, ‘Ho, tomorrow I going lose the first match, make 'um exciting. Then I going lick both of ’em in a row’” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). Lick both of ’em in a row, as if to say, here’s what you can do with your Fujishima-Futagoyama-beya merger, and by the way, my Dad is on his deathbed.

The crowd waited excitedly for the first time the brothers could possibly face each other in a hon-basho. (Another example of where the “same heya” rule hurts the sport: people would love to see the brothers go at it, and they would pay for it.) But as it turned out, Takanohana would sit and take on the first bout’s winner. Akebono spoiled the chance of the historic meeting, first by calmly negating Wakanohana’s push towards his mawashi and shoving him out, and then by convincingly plowing Takanohana into the crowd to stand alone atop the dohyo and accept his first Emperor’s Cup as Yokozuna Akebono. The crowd in the hospital room cheered with as much energy as the one in Nagoya at Akebono’s incredible, decisive, consecutive wins over his fiercest rivals, and the father smiled proudly beneath the huge banner hung over his bed that read, “Congratulations.”

“To me, too, I feel like he was just waiting,” Chad told me, “cause he seen me make yokozuna, he seen me win my first tournament as yokozuna. It’s funny, too, because before that when I used to yusho we used to go out and party. We’d go out party and don’t come home till late the next morning. But this time after I went to the senshuraku party I was so tired I came home and had one small party in my room, sitting down, no alcohol, and we was watching TV, playing video games and eating hamburgers. And that’s when my cousin-them wen pull me on the side and told me that my father wasn’t doing good. So the next day I wen call home, I wen talk to my
maddah. She told me not to come home. She said if you came home and saw him, you wouldn’t like go back” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

The subject of her husband came up the very first time I met Janice Rowan in the fall of 1993, when she talked about Chad’s most recent visit home for the funeral, and the visit before that during the Hawai’i jungyo. Her mood changed considerably for these stories, but the candor she had given the humorous stories remained when she told me of how her son had said goodbye to his father. We have talked about it since, but in our very first meeting the scene was fresh in her mind. The big woman had a long way to go before getting over the loss. And her tears, shed in front of a complete stranger, deepened the meaning of the anger and frustration that came out in later discussions over the years about her husband. She would become angry with him because she felt he should still be around, and with her.

No one would say that Randy Rowan had been the model father, particularly early on in his boys’ lives. But since his passing all three of his sons talk of him openly with nothing but the kind of love and gratitude Ola showed in stories like the one about his dad visiting him in prison every day. And in spite of whatever transgressions his father may have committed when Chad was a boy, and in spite of his own contact with much more “successful” father figures like George Wolfe, Bob Beveridge, Tsunehiro Hagiwara, and his own Oyakata, the Yokozuna only ever spoke to me about his father with great respect, citing the man’s humility, his emotional support for his family, and his extreme generosity.

“At the hospital they had ‘Congratulations’ signs, they had balloons,” he told me. “They was all in his room late that night when I won. That’s all I wanted was
for people know who he was, ah? That’s why I always think to myself, I’m glad. Some people might not wanna hear me say this, but I think to myself that I’m glad, I’m glad he wen die somebody. To me he was always somebody, but to most other the people he was nobody, ah? Now, when he had his funeral, he was the father of the first and only foreign yokozuna!” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

After burying his father at the end of July, Akebono walked away with a clearer idea of what he had yet to accomplish. One of his brothers had attended the funeral with a pregnant girlfriend, due to give birth to his dad’s coveted first grandchild in a matter of months. The other attended under the guard of an uncle who was a corrections officer at the Halawa prison. His mother simply cried at the absurdity of the loss. Death need not hit so close to home in order to trigger self-evaluation, but the death of his father at such an early age created a sudden void for Chad: my father will never answer the phone when I call home. My father never saw me win with a perfect record. My father will never meet my wife, or my children. My father will not be there to cut my chon-mage when I retire.

Chad stepped off the plane resolved to make three of these dreams happen: finding a wife, having children of his own, and collecting the fifteen straight wins on the way to the godly status of Ichidai Toshiyori—meaning that he would be only the fourth rikishi ever offered to retain his fighting name after retirement and be forever known as Akebono Oyakata. (Taiho, Kitanoumi, and Chiyonofuji were the others. Chiyonofuji declined the honor and became Kokonoe Oyakata.) It was not enough that he was 64 out of thousands, that he had already ensured his place in history as the
first gaijin yokozuna, that he was already far-and-above the best of his time.

Akebono did not want to be remembered as the best foreigner, or the best of his time. That part of immortality was already his. Akebono simply wanted to be remembered as the best.

Anyone who saw the 1993 Aki Basho would have bet on the certainty of a future Akebono Oyakata. After shaking off a sprained knee that sent him home from summer jungyo, he flew forward with his usual mean confidence, this time with an important difference. Throughout his career he had been unbeatable when he won the charge and got his hands up quickly. He had lost more or less on his own on occasion by flying out of control after such reckless charges. But he had been beaten when his opponent jumped out of the blocks faster and got to his mawashi before the hands could fly up into that devastating impact zone. Akebono was always too tall to fight on the belt, so top-heavy that when a more compact man managed to get inside he could rock the big Hawaiian back and forth and tumble him easily, like a full, top-heavy wine glass.

But when the conditions called for it in September, Akebono was taking it to the belt on purpose, and winning, regardless of his opponent’s size. The new move required Akebono to keep his hips even lower than before, and to widen his stance to lower himself further and create more stability—an unnatural position he could only pull off by training his quads, lower back, and hips to rock-solid strength. From here he could get on the belt with anyone, secure a grip and wrap the opponent up with both arms, and march forward and out with nearly as much ease as he had violently thrust them out before. He had been strong and fearsome before. Now he was also
versatile, like a power pitcher who had suddenly developed a wicked curve ball. Opponents could no longer predict how Akebono would come out—a twinge of indecision which left them that much more vulnerable to his favored reckless charges forward. The yokozuna mixed it up all the way to clinching the championship early on Day Fourteen, undefeated and three wins ahead of Takanohana.

Zensho yusho. Zero losses. No hits, no runs, no errors. Any makunouchi rikishi could beat any other on any given day, but to beat all fifteen you face across an entire basho? You had to be locked in, locked in like Nolan Ryan. In nearly 200 basho since the six-annual-basho system evolved (1958), only fifteen guys had ever put up the zero—guys like Taiho, Kitanoumi, and Chiyonofuji, the last to do it over four years ago now. Chad, who had never even put up a 7-0 record in the lower ranks, would throw the last pitch of his perfect game on senshuraku, and stand at last next to Chiyonofuji, not just as Yokozuna, but as an unbeatable one. Not a man in either shitaku-beya would be able to say, “I didn’t win, but at least I beat the guy who did.” His opponent, appropriately enough, would be Takanohana.

When the two finally charged, they locked up and then tumbled together into a heap at the dohyo’s edge. Akebono had hit a fraction of a second early, and forever away from perfection.

While zensho yusho would have to wait, in November Akebono cruised to his third straight tournament victory following a playoff with Musashimaru, who had quietly risen to sekiwake. With the strong yusho—his only losses coming against Musashimaru (Day Eight) and Wakanohana—Akebono put himself into the class of great yokozuna, the elite of the elite. Since 1958 only three other yokozuna had won
three or more consecutive yusho. Taiho won a staggering six consecutive yusho twice. Kitanoumi and Chiyonofuji each won five consecutive yusho. While his promotion to yokozuna put Akebono in sumo’s equivalent to the Hall of Fame, his November win put him in the company of the sport’s Babe Ruth, Ted Williams, and Joe DiMaggio. Sumo fans were becoming bored with the predictability of each honbasho, and calling the American yokozuna “too strong.” Burden of the Tsuna? Akebono had just dealt with the death of his father and still completed one of the most dominating years in sumo history.

While the 1993 wins had been good medicine for blocking out all the stress accompanying the Burden of the Tsuna both on and off the dohyo, Chad’s recollection to me of an important moment early in 1994 suggests that something other than stress was beginning to eat at him, even though he may not have realized it at the time, and would certainly never admit it. I’ve seen his dohyo-iri greeted with sparse applause—even silence. I’ve seen the same crowds go wild moments later as Takanohana and Wakanohana preformed their dohyo-iri. I’ve heard thunderous cheers as Akebono fell to the clay, and collective groans of disappointment at Taka and Waka losses. On several occasions I’ve seen the Kokugikan begin to empty following Takanohana’s bout, just as Akebono steps up onto the dohyo for his own, the final bout of the day. All of this had been going on since Chad Rowan first entered sumo, when Akebono was an unknown. But it had persisted through 1993, a year in which he had put on a Chiyonofujian performance both on and off the dohyo. The collective coldness was beginning to hurt.
This kind of pain showed up in my conversations with Chad not in some cry-baby, I-don’t-get-no-respect kind of lament, but rather in the excitement with which he discussed the rare occasions where he actually was showered with the kind of ovations his rivals were greeted with daily. For one such occasion he had to travel more than four thousand miles from the Kokugikan. On the heels of his promotion and the three straight yusho that followed to finish out 1993, Chad Rowan was voted Athlete of the Year by the readers of the Honolulu Advertiser. The readers of the Advertiser were not Japanese who loved him as an exotic distraction or tolerated him as an outsider, or understood well the extent of his athletic achievement. These were the people he had been afraid would laugh at his parents had he quit sumo, the ones whom he thought would say, “their kids are big for nothing.” Chad Rowan had gone over to Japan and kicked ass, had represented their Hawai‘i with strength, and with a humble heart. This kid was big for a reason. He was presented the award in a half-time ceremony during the NFL Pro Bowl at Honolulu’s Aloha Stadium.

“That was the biggest moment for me,” he told me nearly five years after the fact, his face overtaken by a huge smile. “I wen walk into the stadium, out onto the field. The stadium was packed, and everyone was quiet. Most of the football players waited around to see what was going on instead of going into the locker room. And then all of a sudden, everyone started going crazy! They gave me one standing ovation. It lasted for more than five minutes. That was the best feeling I ever had in my life—I couldn’t even feel the ground I was walking on” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

The kind of reception that had become routine for Takanohana and Wakamowahana was, for Yokozuna Akebono, the moment of a lifetime.
Some basketball players say they enjoy playing on the road—that they get motivated by the taunts and boos from the home team’s crowd. But these players play half of their games in an area full of people who shower them with love. Akebono was never booed in the Kokugikan, and he did have his share of die-hard fans. But nearly every time I saw his performances greeted with cheers, those cheers reminded me of the polite acknowledgement the home crowd gives to a talented opposing player. Never were they anything like what Takanohana received. Never were they anything at all like the reception that the Aloha Stadium crowd had given him in 1994.

Back in 1993 and 1994, though, Akebono was winning too much for any of this to really bother him. When he explained this part of his career to me as “awesome,” as “mean,” saying, “I don’t know how explain ’um,” he was referring to a time when the thrill of victory more than compensated for any Burden of the Tsuna, or any hard feelings that may have been developing as a result of his rivalry with the good guys, the Hanadas.

And the wins kept coming in 1994. He rode the wave of confidence swelling up from Aloha Stadium to his seventh yusho in the Osaka Haru Basho, and looked equally unbeatable well into the second week of the Natsu Basho that May. His charges remained strong. He got his hands up faster than anyone in sumo, aiming for his favorite grip on the throat or his round-house smack to the head. And he frightened people. Many of his bouts were already decided before he even stepped up onto the dohyo, his aura of invincibility was so convincing.
Then one of the more fearless characters in sumo—a mobile little man named Takatoriki—managed to dodge the Yokozuna’s charge on Day Eleven, causing him to lunge into empty air all the way to the Kokugikan floor, his knee hitting the rock-hard dohyo on the way down.

Akebono did not get up.
CHAPTER 12

Getting hurt was the best thing that could happen to me, for being one human, you know. Ho, before I got hurt I was kicking everybody's ass, and if I neva get hurt I would still be kicking everybody's ass, but . . . I don't know how explain 'um. Was awesome. And you know, I was starting to expect too much stuff. At that time, I expected everything free. Cause I was bad, I had confidence. I used to walk around like I had confidence. But getting hurt, was the best thing for me, was one sign from God: "You know brah, you bettah slow down cause get the rest of your life ahead of you for live." —Akebono, 10/22/98 (Rowan, Chad, 10/98)

The Yokozuna had been hiding something in the fury of all the power that had won him four out of the last five tournaments and taken him to ten straight convincing wins now in May of 1994. Six years of pounding his bare feet into the rock-hard dohyo had finally taken their toll. The practice dohyo and the dohyo in the Kokugikan are covered with a thin layer of sand which, when combined with the word "clay," of which the dohyo is made, gives the illusion of softness. But the sand does nothing more than allow the rikishi to slide when they are pushed, while the clay is as hard as pavement. And while rikishi are occasionally hurt by falls from the Kokugikan's elevated ring into the crowd, far more knees are taped and wrapped thanks to the simple unforgiving hardness of the dohyo. More than a hundred times a day since his arrival in 1988, Chad had been lifting his right leg as high as he could, and then stomping down on that hard ground, and then repeating the move with his
left leg. The traditional sumo exercise that had turned his leg muscles into rocks over the years had also obliterated the cartilage in his knees.

The damage was exacerbated by the way Akebono had been compensating for his height disadvantage over the years. Recall Bob Beveridge’s advice: “You make sure you keep your feet _wide_, and you keep your ass _low_, and you keep your head _over_ your ass. Those three things especially, do that, and they couldn’t move you if they hit you with _dynamite_ they couldn’t move you.” To get an idea of the tremendous stress these adjustments put on Chad’s knees over the long haul, try walking around for a while following Beveridge’s advice, as though you were trying to make yourself a foot shorter than your actual height. As Beveridge had told Chad, his body was simply not made for sumo. Squatting at the knees and driving forward in bout after bout was the only way for him to compete technically, but physiologically, his knees had to pay a price. At his height and with these adjustments, knee problems were in Akebono’s future the moment he stepped on the dohyo—it was just a question of when.

Time finally ran out just prior to the 1994 Natsu Basho. “I wen hurt my knees before the tournament,” Chad told me. “The right one was bad already from the beginning; the left one I wen hurt. Before the tournament I wen go ask Ozeki what I should do, ah? at that time, cause he went through all that stuff ah, with his knees and stuff like that.” Konishiki had long since dropped from ozeki down into the mid-maegashira level, mainly because his own bad knees did not allow him to train much at all, let alone with the determination he used to bring into his hours in the keikoba. He had come a long way in the eyes of the Japanese and was now finishing out his
career as Takamiyama had, a crowd favorite for having the courage to hang on as long as possible, to gaman until the very end. “He told me, go out and get the wins, one by one, and that’s the best medicine you can have. So I told him okay” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

Akebono’s course of action here speaks volumes about how the local rikishi did not necessarily assimilate, but did, in certain instances, end up acting in complete accordance with their adopted culture anyway. Chad did not go to his Boss for advice, as he should have according to tradition, perhaps because he could predict the man’s reaction: “Gaman!” He did not go to a doctor because his fame made doctors uncomfortable about advising him lest they misdiagnose him. He was not surrounded by an army of Azumazeki Beya doctors, trainers, and physiologists as an American athlete would have been, because in sumo no such armies existed. But he did go to his sempai—his sempai in age, in sumo, and in knee trouble. And ironically, his sempai—a bright man who had heard of things like knee specialists and arthroscopic surgery—advised him just as his oyakata would have, or any oyakata stretching back a hundred years would have. The concept of gaman had been thoroughly drilled into Konishiki. And the respect Akebono showed for the advice even as he told me the story more than four years later told me that the Yokozuna, too, had fully bought into the sense of virtue gaman carries.

“I went in the tournament,” he went on. “I could barely walk up and down the stairs, you know. And I went ten and oh. The last day I was telling my boss, ‘I don’t think I can wrestle already.’” Telling Boss at all was a last resort, a signal that Akebono knew he was already done in and ready to admit that he belonged in bed or
on an operating table. But of course Boss told him to *gaman saigo made*, until the end, which came the following day when Takatoriki, a 5’-10” fireplug with great mobility and no fear of anything, dodged him at the charge and sent him sprawling off the dohyo. “The eleventh day I lost my first bout and I wen kyujo. I was fuckin’ undefeated with two bad knees, couldn’t even walk. That’s how good I was before you know” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

Akebono’s role as yokozuna required that he personify all of sumo’s ideals of strength and dignity, including, and perhaps especially, *gaman*. So *kyujo* ends up only being done in the event of the most debilitating injuries, and is discouraged even by sumo’s rules, which treat absences resulting from injuries not sustained in the actual tournament as losses. When Akebono was kyujo with the foot injury following his ’92 ozeki promotion, for instance, he used up the one allotted losing record ozeki are allowed with the July absence (0-0-15) and absolutely had to come back with a winning record that September to avoid demotion. Years later Yamato gaman-ed through a terrible cold to a 7-8 record in the 1998 Hatsu Basho and then a hospital bed, where he stayed for the next eight weeks with a tube in his side, recovering from pneumonia. *Kyujo* in the March tournament—since he’d only gotten sick rather than suffered injury—sent him to the bottom of juryo; a losing record with his weakened body in May sent him to makushita. An unfortunate car accident had him kyujo again in July, sending him all the way down to Makushita-49 and his decision to retire—all of this just because the rules had discouraged him from taking a couple of days off to get over his cold back in January. More like war than sport, the most martial of the martial arts just goes on and leaves the bodies behind. In light of both sumo’s and
Japan’s view on resting when there’s work to be done, it’s no wonder Konishiki advised Akebono as he had in ’94, and no wonder Akebono followed the advice.

According to sumo tradition, Akebono should have rested in the hospital for a few weeks, and then when his oyakata decided the time was right, put his practice mawashi back on and resumed pounding his feet into the keikoba. As experienced as Jesse Kuhaulua was as a rikishi and oyakata, the man had absolutely no medical training. And yet people were actually calling for this course of action regarding the knees of the very symbol of strength in Japan. The hospital, as the Yokozuna told me, was an even less attractive option: “The Japanese doctors no like take responsibility,” he said. “They’re all scared what will happen if they mess up.” The yokozuna is considered sacred ground, after all. “And no matter how much Japanese I know, it seems like I get hard time communicating with them” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). Much of Akebono’s cultural success to this point, obviously, stemmed from his willingness to do as he was told, to toe the Kyokai line. But while he had put up with much in the role of yokozuna, he was no Yes Man. For his knees, he would push for the best possible treatment, which meant he had to fly to America.

“Oh, you should have seen how hard it was for me to get out of here, get out of Japan,” he told me. “For me it was hard because of my rank, and where I was, who I was” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

Akebono left for Los Angeles in the care of Jeff Libengood, another gaijin who had found Beveridgian status in Tokyo. Libengood, who had first come to Japan with the Air Force, was a body builder who had in fact trained in Beveridge’s gym
before opening one of his own and writing a column entitled “Body By Jeff” in a Tokyo gaijin-zine called the Weekender.

Akebono raised eyebrows again upon his return by forgoing traditional keiko, opting instead for a rehab program at Libengood’s gym. While no noise had come as a result of his decision to train with Bob Beveridge years before, in the yokozuna spotlight he was forced to defend himself. To many, the move was seen as disrespectful to Azumazeki Oyakata, who as oyakata is meant to be in charge of every aspect of his deshi’s training. But it was Libengood’s intention to get the yokozuna back on the dohyo in time for the Nagoya Basho, just over a month away.

But the rehab did not quite go according to plan. In spite of the gallons of sweat Akebono poured in his twice-daily workouts, the knees took longer to heal than expected. Rather than gaman his way into further aggravating the injury, Akebono watched the Nagoya Basho on television. NHK video bios of the Yokozuna highlight the ’94 knee injury as a turning point in his career and catch him sitting sullen and quiet in his Azumazeki Beya room, watching rikishi he could likely beat even in his weakened condition, whom he could have marched right through only weeks before. I’ve come to know Akebono as a man who can only relax when his work is done, someone who works harder and longer than most people I’ve ever met. Missing practice is one thing, but for him to sit and watch a major tournament go by had to be torture, as it had been back in July of ’92 when he sat out the same tournament. But the difference between how he handled the ’92 absence and what was happening in his head this time was profound: back then, young and gunning for the top, he knew he would pick up right where he left off the moment he stepped on the dohyo. But
this time he’d been operated on. He’d worked through weeks of rehab under
constant, expert supervision (or so he thought), and still the knees hadn’t completely
healed. This was no broken foot. For the first time since getting on the plane back in
1988, doubt began to creep into his head.

“At that time I was piss off,” he told me, “cause I couldn’t do the stuff I used
to do. You know when you one athlete and all of a sudden you get hurt, then you lose
certainty” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). Losing confidence for someone like Akebono is
something akin to Wayne Gretzky forgetting how to skate. While his combination of
strength, knowledge, and experience was extensive by this point, he still had the
wrong body for sumo, a condition he had been able to make up for in the past with
hard training and his reckless style. The success of his charge depended on the belief
that he could execute it.

Acquiring confidence is one matter. Re-acquiring it is quite another,
particularly when the body is not responding.

Akebono’s absence still left more than thirty foreigners participating in the
1994 Nagoya Basho—a staggering three-hundred-percent rise since just before he had
joined in 1988. For several months before the 1994 Nagoya Basho there had been
talk among the oyakata about voluntarily stopping their recruitment of foreigners
before the Sumo Kyokai banned it more drastically and effectively. The success of
Hawai’i’s rikishi, Oshima Beya’s importation of six Mongolian rikishi at once, and
the fact that Takanohana and Wakanaohana had both yet to join the gaijin yokozuna at
the top of the banzuke all contributed to rising sentiment that Japan’s National Sport was losing ground to foreigners.

Talk of banning foreigners from the National Sport went back as far as Takamiyama’s 1972 championship. Konishiki had then caused greater concern by barging his way up the banzuke without apology. As early as 1992, around the time Yokozuna Hokutoumi retired leaving American East Ozeki Akebono and West Ozeki Konishiki at the top of a yokozuna-less banzuke, the Sumo Kyokai reportedly considered an overall cap on the number of foreign rikishi, and a two-gaijin-per-beya quota like one used for Japanese baseball teams.

Kyokai Chairman Dewanoumi Rijicho, however, had spun away from any admission of foreign dominance in the National Sport at the time of Konishiki’s non-promotion by inventing a cultural problem having to do with foreign rikishi. “Our biggest concern,” as Dewanoumi had put it in his 1992 Foreign Correspondent’s Club of Japan address, “is about foreigners entering sumo in large numbers and the tendency to form cliques, which prevents them from learning all these important things [culture and language] since they spend all their time with each other and don’t learn Japanese” (Dewanoumi, 7).

Certainly a legitimate concern in a world with sumo beya made up entirely of foreigners, but the Chairman was guilty of oversimplification. With the exception of Ola, every gaijin rikishi I’ve ever met speaks Japanese at a high level, from Akebono down to Glen “Bumbo” Kalima, who was forced home with a knee injury after just two years. Mongolians Kyokushuzan and Kyokutenho have said they find it easier to talk with one another in Japanese rather than in their native language. On the jungyo
I attended, Kyokushuzan delighted in taking part in jinku—a folk performance of songs associated with sumo, sung acapela on the dohyo by a group of five rikishi—and he always bowed with the enthusiasm of a Citadel freshman when and wherever he saw someone above him in rank. If anything, the gaijin knew they were held to a higher standard of behavior than their Japanese counterparts by nit-pickers looking for any excuse to criticize them, while rikishi like Maegashira Asanowaka, who spiked his salt as though scoring a touchdown through most of the 1990’s, were allowed to make a joke of the pre-bout ritual.

The Chairman did correctly point out that gaijin rikishi would end up spending a good deal of time together, but what he failed to see was that even among themselves, they devoutly followed the behavioral codes held dearest by sumo. Foreigners throughout Japan gravitate towards one another, mostly as a refuge from having to deal with the stress of making oneself understood often in very simple circumstances. It is not uncommon to meet foreigners who have been there for five and ten years—and this might be where the Chairman’s concerns come from—who speak no Japanese just because of their gaijin support systems. Like these pockets of foreigners, the gaijin rikishi also shared the unspoken bond of men away from home experiencing similar hardships that only they could really understand, and so it was natural for them to gravitate to each other from time to time. But unlike the other pockets of foreigners in gaijin bars around Tokyo, when Hawai‘i’s rikishi got together the sempai-kohai lines were clear. And one needed look no further than the superficial level of conversations between Akebono, Musashimaru, and Konishiki to understand the long shadow the banzuke continued to cast over how Hawai‘i’s rikishi
all treated one another. Indeed, the Chairman need not have been concerned about
the cultural education of Hawai‘i’s rikishi, for in the few areas where they hadn’t
assimilated exactly, the culture they had come from—one that paid close attention to
who could beat whom in a fight, and one that centered on respect—matched sumo
culture better than he knew or ever would have liked to admit.

One oft-told anecdote—I heard it on separate occasions from David
Meizensahl, Yamato, and Percy—sheds some light on this fortunate mix of local
Hawai‘i and Japanese culture. One drunken evening David challenged Percy to a
sumo bout, and somehow managed to win, by committing 

*henka*, a legal-but-tricky
sumo move looked upon by many as lacking courage and honor. To pull off *henka*
one must jump to the side at the start of a fight instead of forward, with the idea of
having the opponent charge headlong into nothing and lose his balance. Much to
Troy’s Talaimatai’s delight, David pulled off the move perfectly. Percy took endless
amounts of justified teasing for David’s first and only victory, and David earned an
invitation to the following night’s gathering—a sayonara party for Bumbo Kalima.

The occasion brought all of Hawai‘i’s rikishi out to a second-floor bar near
Magaki Beya to see their boy off. And as was the case with most of their gatherings,
standard equipment included at least one ukulele, and at least one liter of tequila. In
local style, they had stuffed a handful of *li-hing-mui*—dried, salted plums—into the
bottle and allowed it to flavor the tequila for the first half of the party before they
began passing it around. The tequila had its own salty, sour pang by then, so no salt
or lime was needed. It went down like water. In the meantime the rikishi sucked up
beers and talked story like they were in the Kalima’s back yard in Waimanalo, or at
the beach on the west side. Konishiki sat at the head of a long table, flanked by
Musashimaru and Fats. Nanfu, Troy, Sunahama, (from Takasago Beya), Percy, John
Feleungga, and Yamato were all there, along with a few Japanese tsukebito. Akebono
was expected to show up later after hitting a number of obligatory dinners. David
Meizensal, who had become something of a sumo nerd over the years, was in heaven
among all the Hawaiians, the big brothers he never had. He paid the deference due to
all of them, and then when the bottle of tequila came out he began to act as his usual
loud and obnoxious self (which I say with affection), in spite of the greatness that
surrounded him. And he was nothing if not entertaining.

“George was like, ‘Ho, you the funniest haole I eva met!’” Percy recalled
Yamato’s reaction, “And David was insulted, but George neva mean it that way.
David started pickin’ on him, pickin’ on him. Fuckin’ George get up: Pow! Pow!
Pow! Was good fun” (Kipapa, 1998). David finally sat back down next to Troy,
largely unaffected by whatever friendly punishment Yamato had dealt him thanks to
the tequila, just as Akebono entered, flanked by two tsukebito.

A hush fell over the room as the yokozuna stood and sized up the situation.
There were no shouts of, “ZaiMAss!” but everyone did nod visibly in deference, and
then waited for the man to speak.

“Troy, who your girl friend?” he said, and the room broke into laughter as he
took his place at the table.

David had two choices. He could either defer to the yokozuna’s authority,
and the big local boy’s authority, or he could continue to be himself.

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“Akebono, fuck him,” he said to Troy. The boys all went on talking story, *all drunk*. At length Akebono got up to go to the rest room. When he returned, he sat down right next to David and put his huge arm around the haole boy.

“I heard you wen lick one of my boys,” he smiled.

“Yeah, that’s right. Daiki.”

“Fucka wen jump outtada way!” Percy shouted.

“So what, you like take me on next?” The Yokozuna asked Kalani High School David, squeezing a bit tighter.

“Shoots! Come on!” David stood up.

Akebono looked at him in disbelief, but there was no turning back now. Tables and chairs were pushed aside and a space created for one of the more bizarre bouts of the Yokozuna’s career. He took off his kimono and tied it around his waist. Whatever ritual would precede this bout was complete when Yamato stood against the wall, about ten paces behind David, arms open in preparation for the catch. The two men stared into each other’s eyes. The five-hundred-pound Kaiser High School graduate and now Yokozuna on one side, the one-hundred-eighty-pound Kalani High School graduate and computer geek on the other. The Yokozuna was relaxed and confident, the computer geek completely red with equal parts alcohol and anticipation. As Percy Kipapa recalled, they charged:

“POW! David flipped over, right inside the bar, Ta-toom! Ta-toom! Ta-toom! Fuckin’ Dave was all upside down. His glasses was li’dis, he was all red. I said, ‘Oh, David. Shut the fuck up and go home already’” (Kipapa, 1998).
But no sooner had Yamato finished peeling the haole boy off of his stomach, than David jumped back to his place of origin on the make-shift dohyo. There would be no bowing, no humble acceptance of defeat. As Akebono turned to put his kimono back on, he was shocked with these words: “Fucka! We go again!”

The room fell silent. The first time was all in good fun, but now this drunk haole boy was calling out the Yokozuna. Yamato moved off to the side, as if to say, “This time you’re on your own.” Akebono turned, this time with his game face: his head bowed and his eyes up, so you could see the whites of his eyes beneath the pupils, mean. He, too, crouched, and then the fastest hands in sumo made an imprint on the Kalani grad’s forehead that would last a week. David slammed free-fall into the wall and then saw nothing but ceiling. And this time he stayed down until the Yokozuna had taken his seat and resumed drinking.

When David finally stood and made his way back to the table, a concerned Konishiki suggested, “Eh, maybe you should go home.”

“No way, man!” David said, bravely taking the bottle from the former ozeki and downing another swig. The festive mood returned soon enough, and David, a bit chastened, stuck it out until the end, saigo made.

Several years later Akebono and I were talking when the subject of tequila came up. He immediately said, “You just watch out for Dave if you drinking tequila. The fucka like scrap with everybody he sees!” (Rowan, Chad, 8/98).
It’s easy to see, as David did, that these were local boys acting like local boys, singing, partying, talking story mostly in Hawai‘i’s pidgin English, showing no obvious evidence of the “more Japanese” Yamato spoke to me of. There was never anything in Akebono’s yokozuna acceptance address, after all, about teaching drunken haole boys a lesson, even half in good fun and well away from public view. But the way the Hawaiian and Samoan gaijin in the scene related with one another—contrasted with the actions of the haole ready to share his true feelings with everyone—is exactly what one would see inside a sumo beya, including much of the light-hearted teasing and the laughter. Konishiki, the sempai, sat at the head of the table, and the hierarchy extended on down. Fats deferred to Yamato, a rikishi from another heya who out-ranked him, but anticipated orders from and served Konishiki, in whose service he worked as a tsukebito. And when Akebono walked in at the end, they all silently deferred to him, including Konishiki. Even the Yokozuna’s little bout with David had come about first as a question of honor. The haole had disrespected his tsukebito, Daiki. What Akebono hadn’t known was that David was drunk enough to accept his challenge, which by itself would have sent enough of a message to another rikishi, or to another non-haole from Hawai‘i, to stand down and apologize.

In light of the important overlaps between sumo culture and local Hawai‘i culture, then, Sumo Kyokai Chairman Dewanoumi’s concern about foreigners’ “tendency to form cliques” preventing them from acting in culturally appropriate ways was clearly unfounded. Hawai‘i’s rikishi arguably succeeded athletically, emotionally, and culturally because of this support system rather than in spite of it.
In May of 2001, for instance, I visited with Musashimaru—the only local Hawai‘i rikishi left at the time—and found him depressed, almost dying of loneliness despite his continued success on the dohyo. The sight led me to wonder if the well-liked “Maru-chan” could have stuck it out over the years without Fats and Konishiki around as much as they were.

The exemplary way Yokozuna Akebono was carrying himself a full year and a half after Chairman Dewanoumi had raised his cultural concerns in his Foreign Correspondent’s Club address, along with the way gaijin down the ranks were taking care of their behavioral obligations, should have been more than enough to prove that foreigners did indeed have a place in sumo. When foreign recruitment stopped in 1994, it was not because of any foreigner’s cultural misstep. The Kyokai had used up its cultural excuses with the Konishiki non-promotion episode, and could not make any this time even if it wanted to. No one had done anything close to culturally inappropriate since Eric “Fats” Gaspar’s 1992 phone call to the New York Times. The recruitment ban—a quiet back-room agreement never actually made official Kyokai policy—was made because foreigners were dominating sumo, a fact Musashimaru had made loud and clear with his perfect yusho.

Takanohana, who had beaten all of his rivals to juryo, and then to makunouchi, and then to the Emperor’s Cup, had been passed first by Akebono on his way to the rope, then by Musashimaru on his way to a perfect record. In September he found himself in the position to be passed by Musashimaru again, this time to yokozuna promotion—a frightening proposition for many followers of the National
Sport. While still only 21 years old, Taka had been being touted as a future yokozuna for quite some time now, but had been stopped first by his own early inconsistent performances, then by Akebono’s dominance, and now, in Akebono’s absence, by Musashimaru. After Akebono went down on Day Eleven back in May, Takanohana walked away with a 14-1 yusho. But Akebono wouldn’t be out forever, and to many fans it looked like Taka had lost a good chance for promotion in July at the hands of another gaijin.

Takanohana’s chances at redemption in September, however, turned out to be much better than he could have hoped for. After working himself back to his old devastating form by the second week of the summer jungyo, Akebono went down again and re-aggravated his injury. Once again, he would be forced to watch his rivals compete on television. At the time of his surgery, Akebono had had a good chance of recovering in time of July’s Nagoya Basho, and here he was in September still watching the world go by. The healing process had already stretched from weeks into months, and now the Yokozuna would fail to complete his third straight tournament.

When Akebono talks of being humanized by his knee injury, he is referring to the lonely hours he spent watching the 1994 Aki Basho. “Getting hurt was the biggest thing that could happen to me in the sense that it brought me back down to earth,” he told me, “you know, made me realize I not going be wrestling for ever. It made me see people who liked me for who I am and not what I am. It made me see plenty things” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). Not only could he not compete, but his phone rang a lot less, the dinner engagements tapered off, the money from fans stopped
coming in—all just in a matter of less than four months since the injury. The complete awe in which people held him had softened. And worst of all, people were already beginning to talk of his retirement. His knee injury was mild compared to the kinds of reconstructions and extended rehabs that routinely go on in other sports, but Yokozuna Akebono was not upholding the ideals of his rank very well by sitting idle. Yokozuna cannot be demoted, but they’re supposed to take it upon themselves to retire once they feel they can no longer compete at their very best. Missing two straight tournaments and part of a third is always cause for concern, even when the athlete involved is only 25 years old. The thought of retiring at that time never occurred to Akebono, but talk of it did put in his mind the reality that one day he would step down; one day the phone would stop ringing for good. For nearly six years he had been Akebono, and for nearly two he had been Yokozuna Akebono, flying at the competition, collecting the spoils, being treated like royalty. As he sat in his room in Azumazeki Beya, it dawned on him that he would just be Chad Rowan again when all of this was over.

From the first time I spoke to Akebono, he has pointed to the ’94 injury as the turning point in his life, a trying time that matured him, taught him to think beyond the next party, the next night out with his boys, the next conquest. “I’m glad I got hurt,” he told me when it came up one night on the ’98 fall jungyo. “I’m the happiest man in the world now. I have my wife. I get my daughter. Stuff starting for look up, you know stuff that going carry me on for the rest of my life. Finally I realized that what I wen work for was my foundation for the rest of my life” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). As much as he had enjoyed the fast-paced rock-star life he’d been living, the
Yokozuna was certain he was in a better place when he talked of being “the happiest man in the world.” By crediting the injury even for his decision to get married—he had yet to even meet Christine at the time—Chad believes that the life of partying would have continued unabated until it was too late to end up with anything at all.

The Hawaiian’s absence was certainly a blessing for the rest of the field in the Aki Basho. In the opportunity it left for either Musashimaru or Takanohana to join him at the top. As Takanohana had done five times and Konishiki three times before him, Musashimaru faltered badly in his first shot at reaching yokozuna. Either he did not want the pressure of sumo’s highest rank, having seen how it completely governed Akebono’s life, or he could not handle the pressure of reaching it. In any case he failed, finishing out of the running with an 11-4 record. Takanohana came back with his own first zensho-yusho in a performance many thought finally put him over the top in his own quest to become yokozuna. While his tournament wins were not consecutive, he had already taken his sixth yusho—a record for non-yokozuna—and strung together a 14-1, 11-4, 15-0 record stretching back to May (compared to Akebono’s 9-6, 14-1, 13-2 record preceding his 1993 promotion). But to the surprise of many in Japan, and to Takanohana’s extreme disappointment, the same precedent used to deny Konishiki’s promotion and insure Akebono’s promotion was invoked. Takanohana failed to earn the two-thirds majority support from the Yokozuna Promotion Council for no other reason than he had yet to win consecutive yusho. The force of Eric “Fats” Gaspar’s comment to the New York Times was still rippling through the sumo world, more than two years after it was made.
By the time Akebono was finally cleared to resume training for November’s Kyushu Basho, he focused not on the image of stopping Takanohana’s charge, or of collecting the spoils that go along with taking a yusho, or even on the idea of upholding the honor of his rank. He thought only of the people who had seemed to love him so much when he was at the top of his game, the ones who all seemed to disappear as his months away from the dohyo passed. He had considered many of them his friends, but their loyalty had gone only as far as his winning ways. These "jackasses" that "were just along for the ride," and all the idiots calling for his retirement—he only wanted to prove them wrong.

He may have brushed away calls for his retirement and other bad press with his usual, "Ah, I no let that kine stuff bother me" line, but often the bad press did get through. The realization that so many "friends" had only cared about him as a celebrity certainly got through. And it all hurt him far more than anything Takanohana ever did to him had, and far more than he would ever admit to me. In fact, it’s fair to say that Chad Rowan built his improbable career on the pain of other people’s low opinions of him—on actually letting that kine stuff bother him. He would come back hard in November ‘94, and when the phone started ringing again, he would remember who was loyal, and who was just another jackass.

The Yokozuna’s comeback, however, was not as quick and dramatic as he would have liked. Six months away from competition had taken their toll on every aspect of his game, from his explosive strength to his sense of the dohyo’s boundaries to the aura that had beaten so many of his opponents before their matches had even
begun. Where he had been almost unfairly strong before, during the first week in Kyushu he was just a bit above average. A couple of matches in the early going slipped away from him not because he was beaten, but because of simple missteps near the dohyo’s edge, which two men totaling some eight hundred pounds find quickly.

But worse than the strength and technical rust was the fact that for the first time since his drive towards yokozuna promotion began back in ’92, Akebono looked beatable. And as expected, the difference between May and September was confidence. He could still rely on his tsupari thrusts to push people out, but his charges were tentative, and his losses came when he got nervous at ring’s edge, sometimes hesitating just enough to allow his opponent to escape. The days of recklessly launching himself at the target were, at least for the time being, over. Akebono’s fierce ringside glare at times looked like a pout, like he was trying to convince himself that he was still tough enough to handle, when he was sure that the faith he had brought to ten straight wins back in May was simply beyond his reach. He lost to two maegashira and all the top-rankers except for the injured Wakanohana, and finished well out of the running at 10-5.

But by senshuraku the pressure was off, and he turned in his best performance of the tournament in a losing effort to Takanohana. Taka had already clinched victory in the tournament, but struggled on the last day for his second straight zensho yusho in a back-and-forth battle that saw both rivals teeter on the edge of the straw boundary before the Hanada brother finally prevailed. That he could do so well
against Taka at his own game did much to convince the Yokozuna and the rest of the sumo world that even if he wasn’t back yet, he was headed in the right direction.

For his part, Takanohana gave the Yokozuna Promotions Council more than it needed to justify his promotion. In the course of equaling Akebono’s yusho total, Taka had not only given them two straight tournament victories; he had given them two consecutive perfect 15-0 yusho—a feat not performed by anyone since Chiyonofuji in September of 1988. In perhaps one of its shortest meetings ever, the council voted unanimously in favor having Takanohana, at last, join the gaijin atop the banzuke as the 65th yokozuna in history.

Takanohana’s promotion effectively cut Akebono’s public yokozuna-related responsibilities in half, allowing him to concentrate on making his comeback complete. In January he shrugged off a mid-basho upset loss to the same Takatoriki who’d finished him off the previous May to head into the stretch tied for the lead with Musashimaru and Wakanohana, and finished a respectable 12-3 after losses to Musashimaru and Takanohana. But more importantly, the aura had begun making appearances again, followed by his familiar hand-to-the-throat, two steps, and one-final-shove pattern of two-second victories. And when Akebono stormed out of his crouch to blast Maegashira-1 Kotobeppu from the dohyo almost instantly in March’s Osaka Haru Basho, the doubting voices that had questioned his ability during the long absence were stomped out for good. Akebono was back, launching his body with the reckless confidence that had earned him the white rope in the first place. He made quick work of everyone he faced before Wakanohana dodged him on Day 14. While
zensho-yusho would elude him once again, he rallied enough to beat Takanohana in a winner-take-all senshuraku bout to ice the long and desperate nine-month comeback bid with his eighth championship.

Akebono followed his yusho solid numbers in his next three tournaments (13-2, 11-4, and 12-3) but was unable to get the Emperor’s Cup back in his hands, thanks again to the merger of Fujishima and Futagoyama Beya, and the rule prohibiting heya-mates from facing one another except in a playoff. Wakahanada took his first Emperor’s Cup in the 1993 Osaka Haru basho after facing only five of his top-nine-ranked rivals, and Takanohana edged Akebono by one win the following tournament after facing only half of his top-eight-ranked rivals. Akebono, ranked at the top in both tournaments, had faced all thirteen of the rikishi ranked directly below him in March, and all ten of those ranked directly below him in May. That Akebono had been able to plow through the new Futagoyama wall with little trouble over the succeeding three 1993 tournaments says much about the wave he was riding at the time. Even with the schedule stacked so obviously against him, he was still nearly unbeatable.

But once Takanohana hit his own stride, as he had towards the end of 1994 while Akebono was either injured or recovering his form, nearly unbeatable was no longer enough for the Hawaiian to keep the pace. In September 1995’s Aki Basho, a typical example, Akebono managed to match zeroes all the way to day twelve, when he lost to Futagoyama Beya’s Ozeki Takanonami, whom Takanohana did not have to face. Takanohana clinched the tournament two days later when his brother Ozeki Wakahanada—whom he also did not have to face—beat Akebono. He then cruised
to victory over a tired Akebono in a meaningless senshuraku bout to another perfect
15-0 record. In the Aki Basho Akebono and Takahonda faced all of the same
opponents except for Wakanohana, Takanonami, and Takatoriki (komusubi at the
time—sumo’s fourth rank), who were all members of Takahonda’s sumo beya.
Akebono’s lowest-ranked opponent was Maegashira-3 Asanowaka. But while
Akebono was dealing with the two ozeki and the komusubi, Takanohana was fighting
Maegashira-5 Konishiki, Maegashira-7 Asahiyutaka, and Maegashira-8 Tosanoumi,
twenty three places down on the banzuke.

In the meantime, Percy made juryo, and Troy dropped further and further
down the banzuke thanks to the effects of diabetes. He spent much of his last two
years in Japan knowing he had no hope of making sekitori, but still enjoying life as
the yokozuna’s tsukebito, propping up a few pillows in his futon, partying until first
train in Roppongi, and sneaking back into Azumazeki Beya in time for asa-geiko.
Life wasn’t bad for Troy, and it was certainly preferable to having to stand before
Boss and explain that he wanted to retire.

“That’s what we always used to talk about,” Percy told me, “me, Chad, Troy,
John. ‘Fuck, I like quit, but I no like quit.’ That’s why John wen run away: he was
scared for tell Boss he like quit” (Kipapa, 1998). One wonders why quitting the
sumo world would pose any kind of problem, especially for someone like Troy, who
no longer showed any promise of making it, and who had a good physical excuse for
wanting to return to Hawai‘i. Before Yamato retired in mid-1998, he had to devise a
strategy to explain his decision to his boss, and went as far as flying his parents up to
Tokyo just so they could back him up at the meeting.
“When I was getting ready for retire,” Yamato told me, “was plenty guys wen raise their hand and said, ‘Ho, I like go too!’ But they cannot. See, they would just walk into Boss’s office and tell him, and then he’d turn around and say, ‘Just give it one more year. Gaman.’ So they neva like even ask him. That’s why I had my parents up here when I was ready for tell him” (Kalima, 9/98). The reason why certain oyakata make it so difficult for rikishi to retire has to do with money. Each sumo beya is given a monthly allowance from the Nihon Sumo Kyokai to help pay for the upkeep of its rikishi. Since the allowance depends on a heya’s number of rikishi, and since recruiting boys to a life as demanding as sumo can be difficult, oyakata do all they can to hold on to what they have. And the “gaman” argument works particularly well here, since no one wishes to return home a failure. Rikishi are certainly free to go at any time. But either through fear, intimidation, an unwillingness to disappoint such a powerful father figure, or a sense of loyalty or honor ingrained into them over the years, for many low-rankers sumo becomes an indenture lasting well into their thirties.

Troy did not worry himself with schemes to retire, or with the thought of staying at Azumazeki Beya any longer than he absolutely wanted to. He knew he wanted to leave soon, and his decision was spurred on by what he found at the end of his walk home from the station one morning after getting off of first train. Out on the street waiting to be collected with the morning’s trash he found a futon, and the pillows he had used to create his own image. Troy had gotten caught.

But this time there would be no one-hour push-ups, no extra butskari-geiko. This time Troy found the front door uncharacteristically locked. This time, it was
over. With the resourcefulness he had used to find the best and cheapest hole-in-the-wall restaurants around Asakusa, or to show up at David’s apartment with ten-pound bags of rice over his shoulders, Troy sized up his current situation. He figured he had two options—to face Boss, or to run—and decided it was time to take the second. He went straight to David’s and laid low for three weeks, the time it took to raise the money for a plane ticket and to recover his passport. Without ceremony, the career of Ozora was officially over.

Before his injury Akebono would surely have been disappointed with the shameful exit of another local boy who had given up, who couldn’t handle, couldn’t party every night and still do his job. But by the time I met the Yokozuna, his having become “more human” showed up nowhere more clearly than in his discussion of Troy, the big kid who had blasted him against the wall during his very first day of sumo training. “With Troy I feel that we succeeded,” he told me. “Because not everybody can come here and become like what we’ve become—Musashimaru, me, Konishiki.” When Troy and I worked together as tour guides for Japanese visitors at Aloha Tower just after his return in the fall of ’95, diabetes had already dropped him from a high of 396 pounds to well under three hundred, and has since dropped him below two hundred pounds. Three years later Akebono looked back at Troy’s career with the same sense of satisfaction he derived from Daiki’s promotion to juryo.

“But now he went home,” he went on, “he has a good job, he’s using his Japanese. He has a family. Out of all the people I thought would be doing that, I neva thought Troy would be the one. Stuff like that makes the fire keep burning. If you can help one person, then you can move on to the next person” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98).
Winning, the banzuke, kicking ass up on the dohyo, going out and partying until dawn and then getting up and doing it again were all that mattered before the knees gave out. But now it was this: using what you’ve learned. Getting a good job.

“He has a family.” The Yokozuna said it with the same fatherly pride as if he’d said, “He won the yusho.”
CHAPTER 13

You know how I said when I was growing up I always thought my parents expected things from me? It was the same way when I came here. It was just like I was the oldest kid in the stable. I was the only sekitori—I was the only one that made rank. It was like being the oldest. They expected me for do this; they expected me for do that. That’s what they always told me: ‘Ah, you gotta make us money.’ You know when I finally wen draw the line is when I got hurt.—Akebono, 10/21/98 (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

Akebono had been one of the country’s most eligible bachelors for some time by 1995, and his own okamisan had several prospects in mind—any of whom would have come with a yokozuna-sized dowry. “There was one woman,” his mother told me, “if he married her, he would have been set for life. For life.”

Being set up might have been enough for him had he never been injured and forced as he was to reflect on his life. But now money could not be a good enough reason for him to end up in a life-long relationship.

“Look at my Uncle Freddy and Aunty Maydel,” he told me weeks before he finally did get married, “or Bob and Kim Beveridge. They always do everything together. That’s the kine people that should get married” (Rowan, Chad, 8/98). His rock star status had certainly given him his pick of women over the years, but Okamisan’s pressure—I can imagine her relentlessly asking him about this prospect
or that, whether or not he’d decided—combined with his own thoughts to convince him that maybe it was time to settle down.

On a visit to Hawai’i in mid-1995—around the same time he submitted his application for Japanese citizenship—Akebono was introduced to Japanese television talento Yu Aihara. In the several hours of television the yokozuna watches daily, he had no doubt seen her perform hundreds of times over the years, and was charmed when he met her. She was beautiful, and they had something important in common: she was already famous, which meant she knew what he had to put up with, and that she’d be able to handle the craziness he experienced whenever he went out in public. And Okamisan would certainly approve of the match-up, both because Aihara would make a good okamisan, and because her own star appeal would bring more money to the wedding and thus into Azumazeki Beya. He began dating her privately after returning to Japan, and for the most part felt as though he’d made the right choice—that he was headed in the right direction towards meeting another expectation.

On the dohyo, the burden of the tsuna had finally become all too real for Akebono thanks both to the strength of Futagoyama Beya, and, again, to the toll the hard clay continued to take on his body. The schedule of constant entertainment hurt him further by putting on actual weight—some forty pounds since the year of his promotion, all of it around his waist. In addition to the added stress the weight put on his tender knees, it made his already-awkward body more top-heavy and harder to balance. He sandwiched a poor 11-4 basho between two more disappointing runner-up performances to Takanohana and was then forced to drop out in November 1995.
with a torn thigh muscle after picking up his second loss against seven strong wins. (For an idea as to how particularly important the muscle was to Akebono, try standing and then following Bob Beveridge’s advice to “keep your ass low.”) He had to wait until his body was ready to handle the stress of a hon-basho, and yet every day away from the spotlight and everything that went along with it drained him, little by little, of his confidence. As an ozeki, he would have been able to fight through some poor showings, escape with his eight wins or even his one allotted losing record, and regain the confidence to send him back to his winning ways. As a yokozuna he had to be at his best, or not compete—an awkward position which put mountains of pressure on each successive comeback bid.

The following January he opened the tournament with another embarrassing face plant against Futagoyama Beya’s mobile Takatoriki, followed by another loss to Tosanoumi. A confident Akebono will beat Takatoriki or Tosanoumi—or anyone else—every time. Instead he dropped out of the New Year’s tournament altogether, citing physical problems when in fact the greater problem was between his ears. Akebono was lost in one of the more protracted slumps of any athletic career.

Akebono went down to Osaka at the end of February 1996 with the rest of Azumazeki Beya, with good intentions of beginning his latest comeback, of once again proving everyone wrong. In addition to the 1992 foot injury and the 1994 knee surgery, there had been countless other less-serious stings he had gaman-ed his way through to the ripping sound of white athletic tape being unrolled in the dressing room. But here at the low point of his tenure as Yokozuna, indeed at the low point of his career, he again began to hear the calls for retirement, and this time they hurt him.
badly. Hadn’t he come back from knee surgery? Hadn’t he missed parts of four straight tournaments, only to come back and take the yusho again less than six months after his return? Where was the respect? What more could he do for them?

As the tournament neared, he intensified his training in hope of stomping out the doubting voices for good, going hard in more than twenty training bouts per session, pushing other rikishi back and forth in butsukari-geiko, and then stomping his feet into the clay time after time. And then it happened: in all his angry enthusiasm he aggravated the muscle tear, leaving himself with the same tough decision he’d faced in the New Year’s tournament. Should he gaman, or should he sit out? If he competed now, they would say he wasn’t strong enough and that he should have sat out. If he sat out, they would say he was not upholding the ideals of gaman. As difficult as it was, this time the Yokozuna did his best to tune out the voices and listen to his body, withdraw, and come back at full strength in May.

And then the criticism really hit him: Akebono was going to sit out another tournament, it was thought, because he wasn’t trying hard enough.

If there had ever been any doubt that the first gaijin yokozuna would, in the end, always be more gaijin than yokozuna, it was erased for Chad Rowan during this, the most difficult and painful period of his career. His record rise to ozeki, his perfect embodiment of hinkaku, the incredible year he’d had in 1993 to justify his yokozuna promotion beyond any doubt, the character he showed in his long comeback following the knee injury, the high regard in which he was held by nearly everyone in the sumo community—none of this, he was beginning to realize, would ever amount to anything. All young Chad Rowan had ever wanted to do upon arriving in Japan
was “fit in” as best he could, to be accepted. Even now, with his application for Japanese citizenship under consideration, and with the real possibility of a Japanese wife, it was becoming clear to Yokozuna Akebono that he would always be on the outside.

The point would be driven home for him after one of the more dramatic evenings of his career, just before his Haru Basho withdrawal was formally announced. Overcome by feelings of failure, self-doubt, and frustration, the Yokozuna was still expected to fulfill his normal social obligations as though he were still standing tall on the dohyo. That night he met with his koen kai at an Osaka hostess bar popular among many oyakata and other rikishi. While in no mood to entertain or even be out among people, Akebono felt he should attend for the sake of the support and money these men had given him. He would try to have a good time. And maybe it would do his over-worked mind some good to escape for a while, to wash away some of the disappointment from the recent decision. The rikishi already seated at tables around the room greeted him as usual, “ZaiMass!” He spotted Kokonoe Oyakata at a table in the corner, and bowed respectfully. The great Chiyonofuji was in the house. Mean. Can kick everybody’s ass. Chad still remembered the very first time he saw the man put on the white rope. Of all the men in the room, only he and Chiyonofuji really knew—knew how to win, how to lead, how to kick ass. Little had changed in the years since his chon-mage had been cut in a moving Kokugikan ceremony, where a young sekitori named Akebono had been honored to take a turn with the golden scissors. The room was full of men who looked up to Akebono on the dohyo as he looked up to Chiyonofuji, full of
supporters, friends, and a selection of beautiful women whose job was simply to pour drinks, act amused, and agree with everything—indeed it seemed the perfect atmosphere for the Yokozuna to forget his troubles.

For the first couple of hours, that is exactly what happened. Other rikishi entered throughout the night with their own parties, and made sure to greet the Yokozuna with a bow and a stern, “ZaiMAss!” before settling elsewhere in the bar—deferential treatment they gave only to him, and to Chiyonofuji. His koen kai doted on him as usual. Some of his boys, including Percy, were there. The low, black lacquered table around which they all sat was packed with all the ingredients for a party, including small plates of food, ceramic ice buckets, bottles of whiskey and several bottles of water among the tens of glasses surrounding a beautiful crystal centerpiece. Akebono did his best to rise to the occasion, joking as usual with the hostesses, making an effort to include everyone at the table rather than have them feel as though they should defer to him, and throwing down all the whiskey they poured for him.

So there was Akebono, all drunk, enjoying himself in the moment of escape for the first time in weeks, fulfilling the all-important social obligation to his koen kai, when Kokonoe Oyakata sized up the room with his piercing eyes, stood, and headed for the door. On the way he stopped at Akebono’s table, where the Yokozuna greeted the man who had inspired him as a young deshi, who had taught him the dohyo-iri upon his promotion. Chiyonofuji was considered by many to be dripping with hinkaku, the walking definition of the way a yokozuna was to carry himself, and certainly someone on whom Yokozuna Akebono modeled his own behavior.
Honored at the personal attention, Akebono smiled as the Oyakata bent to speak into his ear. And then the smile disappeared. The Oyakata turned to walk away. He uttered two more words. And Akebono stood.

The table and all of its contents fell to the ground in the deafening crash of broken glass. The Oyakata whirled in his tracks with a look that had surely not crossed his face since he stepped off the dohyo for good five years before. Akebono turned his head down, his eyes up, showing the whites of his eyes below the pupils, mean. The seconds stretched as the two men stared one another down. No one in the room dared move, until finally Akebono turned with a frustrated grunt and stormed out the door.

The great mystery is what Kokonoe Oyakata could have said to trigger the explosion. Under the circumstances of Akebono’s career at the time, any number of things could have set him off. In one report it was said that the former great yokozuna had explained to Akebono that it did not look right for him to be seen drinking since he had withdrawn from the tournament (although he had yet to formally withdraw). That a man he had looked up to for so long and who had been the exemplary yokozuna for so many years felt the need to mention this to Akebono—plagued at the time with self-doubt about his own worthiness to wear the white rope, but also feeling obligated to entertain his koen kai—would only have been enough to start the Hawaiian’s blood rushing. According to his hero, Akebono’s social and athletic obligations in this instance were at odds. Should he protect the
honor of his rank, as Oyakata was suddenly suggesting? Or should he bow to the requests of his supporters, as he felt he was now doing? What did they want from him, anyway? In any case, he was too drunk to figure it out then and there, but not so drunk that he could not control himself. That is, until he heard the two words Kokonoe Oyakata uttered as he turned to walk away.

“As he was walking away,” Percy recalled, “he was mumbling, ‘Gaijin yaro!’ and Chad went ‘Hmph!’ [stood up suddenly with his meanest face] Mad Dog, we was drinking, whiskey. Oyakata was [staring]. Oyakata got in his face first. But he no can hit the Oyakata; he’d get fired. So he just burst out. Was nuts. Oyakata came up first and talked to him. I heard ‘gaijin,’ and that’s when he stood up. Stared at Oyakata long time, and just walked out. Everybody’s going, ‘Yokozuna! Yokozuna!’ I was, ‘Goddamn! I ain’t gonna stop you’” (Kipapa, 1998).

Reports of the story went through the rumor mill at tachi-ai speed, and expanded like some terrible urban myth, and Akebono’s worst nightmare. It was a bar brawl. Akebono had hit one of the hostesses, smashed the table, plunged the place into darkness, and destroyed a lighted sign on his way out, leaving the bar owner with no choice but to call the police, who arrived too late to apprehend the yokozuna.

However exaggerated the rumors may have been, Akebono awoke the next morning knowing he had messed up in a big way. The events were fuzzy from the liter of whiskey he had consumed on his own, but he remembered enough to be overcome with a feeling of dread. His problems before the ill-fated night had been his own—problems he should have dealt with on his own. Now it was public. And
now both components of his identity as yokozuna were tarnished, and perhaps equally. First, he was failing to uphold the rank’s ideal of strength. And now, he had very publicly and embarrassingly failed to uphold its ideals of virtue and dignity.

Chad still does not like to talk about the incident, the only time in his entire career when there was nothing he could do about the mountains of stress piled one upon the other until he reached a point where he lost his cool at the exact wrong time. “Look around before you say anything,” is how he likes to sum up his cultural success, “and don’t be ignorant.” He had built a career on dealing with frustration, on keeping his mouth shut, but this time it had been more than he could handle. And now there would be consequences to deal with. Akebono’s intolerance for imperfection fell most heavily upon himself, and this was the case where it fell heaviest of all. More than anything, Akebono was ashamed.

He awaited, along with his Oyakata and much of the rest of Japan, the Nihon Sumo Kyokai’s reaction to what had happened. Seven years prior they had expelled Takasago Beya’s promising Samoan Maegashira Nankairyu for assaulting a hotel owner while out on a drinking binge. And their reaction to Futahaguro’s behavior—the rikishi said to have shoved his okamisan to the floor before stormsing out of his heya for good—proved that yokozuna were not above reprimand. Indeed, the men who had won the right to wear the rope were watched the closest of all, expected to behave according to the country’s most exaggerated version of the unwritten “rules.” According to Kokonoe Oyakata, who wielded no small amount of power and influence within the Kyokai, the injured Yokozuna Akebono should not even have
been seen in public at the time, let alone have found himself the instrument of such noise.

As it turned out, the real consequences did not extend beyond Akebono’s own palpable feelings of remorse, which he expressed in a tearful statement of apology the following day. The Nihon Sumo Kyokai only issued its equivalent of a verbal warning, asking that Akebono be more careful next time. It had clearly been an aberration of character in Akebono’s otherwise spotless career. He was drunk, after all, which is not that uncommon in Japan as an excuse for improper behavior. (This excuse does not always fly with repeat offenders, which is why it had done Nankairyu no good.) And most important, in reality no one had been hurt, and neither the bar owner nor the police thought it necessary to take the matter any further. The hostess in question had been bumped when the giant yokozuna stood. The fiasco with the table had also been an accident, as had the broken sign, which Akebono had stumbled into during his ungraceful exit.

“Oh, they said he lift the table up, he threw the table,” Percy told me. “But when he got up, he whacked ’um with his legs. He stood up real fast, and the thing just, everything fell, everything that was on the table, and he walked out” (Kipapa, 1998).

When the tournament ended and spring jungyo began, Akebono had to walk into the shitaku-beya, and go past everyone to the far end of the room, like he belonged there. And he had to stand before crowds of thousands every day and perform the dohyo-iri, adorned in the brilliant, white rope and flanked by loyal attendants. And he had to do all of this now with the label of the yokozuna who,
depending on whom people chose to believe, had smacked an Osaka hostess and maliciously caused hundreds of dollars worth of damage, in public.

Instead of standing sheepishly in shame, Akebono performed in such difficult circumstances in a way overflowing with hinkaku, like a great leader who digs down in times of great loss to somewhere find reserves of resolve and self respect. Rather than act defensively in the face of wildly exaggerated reports, he moved on without even dignifying the tabloid rumors with a response. I asked him years later about what was true and what was not. The moment I said the word “Osaka,” he said, “Oh, shit! Brah, you know me. I’m different because I know the truth, and other kine guys... Long as I know the truth I don’t give a shit what the press write about me. I mean, that might be bad for my image and my stuff like that, but like I told you, the people who know, they know. The people who don’t know, they neva going understand us guys” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). Percy is one of the people who knows, and it’s worth noting that I got the details of the story from him and not from Akebono, who was above making excuses and trying to justify anything he may or may not have done.

“If I was Chad back in Hawai‘i,” the Yokozuna told me on a separate occasion, “I’d be walking around in summer, no shirt, short pants, cruising at the beach. There’s some stuff you have to separate. It’s hard, very hard, especially when you get to where I am. You’re always in the eye of the media. And sometimes you get frustrated because you can’t understand why. ‘Why?!’ That’s just the way it is” (Rowan, Chad, 6/98). One can only imagine how many other times in his career
Chad from Hawai‘i became frustrated enough to want to take on the likes of Chiyonofuji in public, but managed to keep it inside.

As far as Japan was concerned, Chad Rowan from Hawai‘i officially ceased to exist on April 22nd, 1996. His application for Japanese citizenship, made nearly a year before, had been approved, and from that day forward he would be known on all official documents—whether related to the Nihon Sumo Kyokai or not—as Akebono Taro. Even for the leader of the National Sport, obtaining a Japanese passport had not been as simple as filling out a form and waiting. Akebono’s career in Japan, his potential of becoming dependent on the state, his potential contributions to the state, his identity as a Japanese were all called into question in the thorough review process. Just as Yoomi Park, the Korean woman I sat next to on the plane from Narita, had been denied a Japanese spelling of her Japanese first name on her Korean passport, Akebono had to deny his American identity before being accepted as Japanese.

Ever since his father died Akebono had begun thinking about the future, eyeing the prospect of life as Akebono Oyakata. He already excelled directing the action in the keikoba, taking charge of training at Azumazeki Beya or wherever he happened to be doing de-geiko. Daiki’s promotion to juryo and Troy’s success upon his return to Hawai‘i are just two examples of Akebono’s direct influence as a leader. To anyone who watched practice, the step to oyakata would mean little more than a change of clothes and a soft cushion for Akebono—that, and finding the right okamisan.
Talk of the happier of these aspects of Akebono’s future took off following his decent 10-5 comeback finish in the May 1996 tournament, when Yu Aihara showed up at Azumazeki Beya’s senshuraku party—a bold public move that painted her as a potential okamisan. To come out this way was a huge step in a life as public as Akebono’s—or as public as Yu Aihara’s, for that matter. And so the next steps followed quickly. By year’s end the couple were engaged. Okamisan was already hard at work at the administrative aspects of a gathering likely to exceed a thousand guests and bring well over a million dollars into Azumazeki Beya through gifts and television rights. Okamisan and the Yokozuna awarded Akebono’s long-standing Koen Kai President and his wife with the honored positions of nakoudo—the nuptial couple’s symbolic go-betweens. It seemed a match made for television: the nation’s favored actress and a star of the National Sport. Everyone loved her, and she would make the perfect okamisan.

But the more all these plans fell into place, the more Akebono felt like he was along for the ride, like he was, yet again, doing what he was supposed to, doing what someone else expected of him. He cared for Yu Aihara, of course, but when he’d met her, he had thought he was Japanese, that he had proved himself worthy of his host country and that he had been accepted on the highest level. Back then he’d thought it only natural that Yokozuna Akebono should have a Japanese wife, even one as well-known as Yu Aihara. Now that it was happening, he wasn’t so sure he wanted to go through with it.
Akebono’s misgivings turned out to go much deeper than the normal fears of commitment and loss of freedom that accompany many engagement periods. Specifically, since talk of marrying Aihara had begun to turn into reality, he could not stop thinking about that night in the Osaka hostess bar—particularly whenever professional obligations brought him into the presence of Kokonoe Oyakata. “He was always my bradda’s hero,” is what Nunu Rowan had told me during our first meeting back in 1993, long before the Osaka trouble. “My bradda always looks up to Chiyonofuji” (Rowan, Randy “Nunu,” 1993). Any attention Chad had ever gotten from the great yokozuna had done more to make him feel accepted—to feel Japanese—than anything else. He’d cut Chiyonofuji’s chon-mage. He’d learned the dohyo-iri from Chiyonofuji.

But now here was his hero disdainfully uttering the words, “Gaijin yaro!”—words Akebono had not heard since the day he wound up wielding his two-by-four in the big room at Azumazeki Beya more than eight years earlier, before he was even worthy of having his name written on the banzuke. He had swallowed so much pride over the years, keeping his mouth shut in the interests of proper behavior. He had studied the form of hinkaku and behaved according to its principles while everyone grabbed at him and ogled him like an animal in the zoo. He had taken smacks to the head and beatings from Oyakata’s shinai, and molded himself into a model yokozuna. Had he come all this way only to be dismissed with the same insults that had greeted him upon his arrival?

The word gaijin translates not into the benign “foreigner,” but into the more suspicious “outside person,” and is taken in various ways by all of us, from a simple
descriptor on down to an epithet as strong as the word *nigger*. Percy Kipapa explained to me that there was no room for interpreting the speaker’s intention, either for himself, or for Chad: “*Gaijin,*” he said, “is one *bad word*” (Kipapa, 1998).

Adding the *yaro* to *gaijin* empowers the word further, removing all ambiguity. And here was the great former Yokozuna Chiyonofuji, the standard bearer for yokozuna behavior, simply dismissing Yokozuna Akebono as just another foreign piece of trash.

I brought up the man once in an entirely different context, when we were talking about Chad’s early days down at the bottom of the banzuke. “Your brother told me that when you started,” I said, “you used to look up to Chiyonofuji.”

“The only person I ever look up to in this sport was Ozeki,” he said quickly, his voice rising. “Konishiki-zeki.” After I pressed him further he just said, “Once you become one boss, you become one boss,” indicating the subject closed (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

Chad’s emotional response here is deepened by a look at Chiyonofuji’s reactions to the performances of two subsequent yokozuna—the hugely popular Wakamuno III, and Asashoryu, a foreigner. When Kokonoe Oyakata addressed the Foreign Correspondent’s Club of Japan just after Waka became only the second yokozuna ever to post a losing record, he did not hide his disgust for the pitiful performance. A couple of years later he spoke glowingly of prospective yokozuna Asashoryu, comparing the Mongolian rikishi’s furious and powerful sumo style to *his own*. The point is that Kokonoe Oyakata is less of an outright racist than a John McEnroian perfectionist. *Gaijin yaro!*, mumbled, and not even to Akebono’s face,
may have been nothing more than a vent of frustration aimed at Akebono’s continued absences.

But not, of course, to the most sensitive man in sumo. If the most popular and respected figure in his sport still thought of him as nothing more than gaijin after all he had done, he had to know that he would never be fully accepted in Japan—a fact more underscored than alleviated by the newly-won Japanese citizenship that refused to acknowledge the name he was born with. Perhaps it was an unfortunate coincidence that citizenship had been granted so soon after the Osaka incident, but the documents had done nothing to make Chad from Hawai‘i feel Japanese. They had in fact erased Chad Rowan entirely: Chad Rowan did not officially exist; only Akebono Taro did. Chad Rowan would not officially marry Yu Aihara; Akebono Taro would. But the disdain Chiyonofuji had shown not just Chad from Hawai‘i nor Akebono Taro, but Yokozuna Akebono, had told him that even in marriage, even years down the road as the father of Japanese children, he would always be gaijin. He would always be an outside person. For this reason, more than anything having to do with Yu Aihara herself or even the way his life seemed to be flying forward without much of his own input, he had begun to draw the line, to re-think the idea of marriage. By the start of 1997, he had all but ruled it out.

Brunch with Bob Beveridge, as one might imagine, is an all-day affair. As fit as he is, the man loves to eat, and to drink, to make an event of lounging around a table in the Sanno Hotel’s banquet room and letting the conversation linger long after
the other patrons have left and the wait staff has begun to re-set the room for dinner.

One Sunday early in 1997 the banquet manager was forced to politely ask the Doctor, his wife, and Chad to retire to the bar—he needed the room for the Maryland University Graduation party. Caught up in reminiscing about how Chad used to choke on Japanese stew-shit, how hard he had trained, how far he had come since meeting the couple back nine years before, there was no question that they would continue drinking in the bar. Since his promotion Chad had hardly had time to see them, so when he did there was always much to talk about.

The graduates all filed past them as they made their way through the lobby, commenting to each other on the yokozuna’s presence. He ducked into the rest room on the way to the bar and when he exited he stopped dead in his tracks. By now he had spent enough years at the top to enjoy his share of incredible looking women more or less at will. But there was something unique and amazing about this woman waiting in the lobby, something about her eyes—Asian, but light brown and wide like you could dive right into them. And something about the way her face lit up when those eyes met his, a big, confident smile. Nothing tatamæ about it; he could see honesty in the woman’s face. And then she approached him, her light brown hair spilling over her shoulders in curls.

“Would you mind if I took a picture with you?” She asked him in perfect English, perfect American English.

“That’s the way it always is with the prettiest girls,” he said, motioning for her to pose next to him. She handed her camera to a friend and did so.

“What do you mean?”
“They just want to take pictures with you and that’s it,” he told her, and the camera flashed, “then you never see them again.”

She laughed at his line.

“We’re in the bar if you like come and join us,” he told her. She thanked him and left him standing there and returned to the banquet room (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

Akebono returned to the bar, unable to concentrate. His obligations to Boss, his obligations to his koen kai, suddenly none of that mattered to him. She had left him standing there. No one had ever left him standing there. But she had, and it bothered him more than he ever could have expected. Shoots, he could walk outside right now and pick up any girl he wanted to, but she had left him standing in the lobby.

Bob Beveridge had ordered a round of drinks and was well on his way into another story about something or other, but the yokozuna had trouble following. She must not have seen that he was serious, he thought as Beveridge went on. He looked on intently, as though he were paying close attention to the story when his mind was still back in the lobby. Maybe, he thought, maybe now it was time to take matters into his own hands. He didn’t want to be rude to Beveridge. But what if he just stood up and went into that big room to find her, to let her know that yes, he had meant what he’d said? Suddenly it all seemed beyond his control, so he excused himself right in the middle of his old friend’s story and headed straight for the banquet room.

When he entered, the crowded banquet room fell silent. He spotted her immediately and walked straight up to her. Yokozuna Akebono, all alone, on his way into this big party, for no other reason than to talk to her.
“You know what, we’re waiting for you in the bar,” he told her.

“I’m sorry,” she managed. “I thought you were just kidding.”

“Ho, I don’t just go and ask anybody to come join me. So you coming?”

She got up and followed him out.

Chad told me the story of meeting his wife with love in his eyes, like he’d gotten away with something in marrying the perfect woman. Talk of Christine came up in the conversation in part because their wedding ceremony had happened only a couple of weeks before.

“I thought you’d met her just after you came to Japan,” I said. The television special on their wedding, interspersed with bios of Chad, and of Christine growing up on a Japanese military base with her sister, her Japanese mom, and her American dad, had said as much.

“That was just some bullshit we had to make up,” he told me. “I had to tell everybody I met her since I came here, because of the tabloids, ah? They start talking shit again. It’s so funny cause those guys Bob and Kim Beveridge, they knew Christine’s parents from long time ago. I brought her over to the bar and introduced her to Bob and Kim Beveridge. We was over there drinking, partying. The next day she went home, she told her parents, ‘Oh, guess who I met? Akebono. He was with these people, Bob and Kim Beveridge.’ Her mother wen turn around and told her, ‘What, you don’t remember Bob and Kim Beveridge?’

“I feel relaxed when I’m with her,” he went on. “She can understand me, in English, in Japanese. But English—I can say whateva and she knows what I talking
about” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). To someone who lives in a second language, the chance to speak English can be like coming home. Of the several reasons why Akebono was attracted to a life with Christine, this was among the most important. Had he married a Japanese woman, she could only really have been a part of half of his life—the Japanese half. Had he married another American, she would largely have been left out of his Japanese life, and would in no way have been able to fulfill the responsibilities of an okamisan should his life continue to unfold according to the normal progression of the sumo timetable. But Christine could be a part of it all.

“That’s why I think Chad can relate with Chris,” Percy told me. “Cause in English. Cause when he get mad, he have outburst, always in English. When he used to talk to Aihara Yu and all the other girls: ‘What the fuck you talking about?’ And they talk back in Japanese. But when he met Chris he used to tell me, ‘Ho, English is the stuff’” (Kipapa, 1998).

As Percy explained to me later, “Just the attitude. Him and her, they grumble with each other so good. They love each other so good. They love each other more after they grumble. So I was happy he married her” (Kipapa, 1998).

The “grumbling” Percy described was the kind that comes from the early power struggles of a passionate relationship. Her willingness to stand up for herself surely upset the yokozuna, but it was also the best way to earn the man’s respect. She cared enough to speak up, to be honest with him, to be herself. No, Christine was no star-struck sumo groupie. As someone who grew up on the military base, she too had a unique, withdrawn perspective from where she observed the life of Akebono, and came to know better than most what Chad Rowan had to put up with on a daily basis.
"Do you know what atarimae is?" She asked me once. It translates into "right" or "proper" behavior that should be obvious to everyone in a common-sense way. "When he's around, people just forget all about atarimae. They don't know how to act around him, like he isn't even a person. We tried to go to a funeral once, and as soon as we got out of the car people started to crowd around the entrance to the cemetery, pointing and smiling, waving at him. We walked in and they all started to follow him, some of them came up to touch him. I mean, of all the places where they should leave him alone, and no one even cares. We had to leave" (Rowan, Christine, 1998). The irony is almost laughable: the man held to the highest standard of behavior in the country must deal constantly with people who forget how to behave properly in his presence. And with only the one exception in the Osaka bar, he had done so flawlessly from the beginning. Christine was someone who could see clearly what was expected of Chad, and she was far enough removed to see how he was treated, both by strangers, and by people close to him.

The prolonged intimate contact with a woman who could see even better than himself who really cared for Chad Rowan and who was just along for the ride spun Akebono's head in several different directions. Just as the knee injury had forced him to look towards life outside sumo, his budding relationship with someone coming from such a distant, objective place—not Hawaiian, not exactly Japanese—forced him to look at all he had been doing in the name of assimilation inside the sumo world. The time he spent with Christine, the thrice-daily phone calls when he could not be with her, and the time he spent thinking about her made him realize, for the first time, his true worth. Rather than simply stand in awe of his fame, she began to
point out ways in which he was being used or taken advantage of. She helped him
better understand the extent to which he had to put up with things for people who
needed the Yokozuna more than he needed them—everyone from people who called
him “friend,” to his own boss, whose pockets he’d been lining for more than six years
now.

Towards the end of asa-geiko on Day Five of 1997 Natsu Basho, Akebono’s
20th as yokozuna, the Azumazeki Beya deshi all stood in lines before Oyakata,
pounding their feet into the clay, squatting deeply. In one of the most athletically
questionable sumo traditions since gaman, rikishi all over Tokyo were completing
hard practices on game day. “Athletic-wise, me and Chad used to talk,” Daiki
explained. “He used to be into basketball, and I used to be into football. We used to
train hard before the games in high school. And the day before the game we rest.
Come game day, we don’t practice; we warm up, play ball, and we always do good
because our bodies are in shape already. All we gotta do is prepare for the game. In
sumo we fuckin’ practice all the way up to the tournament. The tournament start, we
practice for the fuckin’ tournament. You should go to your peak and just stay there”
(Kipapa, 1998). If rikishi were not stepping up in major tournaments with injuries of
some sort, they were at least doing so with some level of fatigue.

While Akebono had known from the beginning that he would have been better
off resting, he had always done what was expected. So the Yokozuna pounded his
bare feet into the ground and considered the condition of his body, the level of his
strength, the competition for the day. He was to face Kotonowaka—an easy match
for him, since Koto was too tall to get underneath on him and too big to move around
much. The windows along the wall just behind him were open to no avail—the morning air heated with each passing minute. The following day he would face a tougher match, and Taka and Waka waited further on. Sweat poured off of him as he labored on. His eyes stung as much as they ever did after a hard series of training bouts. And Boss was sternly counting off each shiko with as much power as his raspy voice could manage: “Ich! Nii! San!” He yelled at slackers, some of whom may have needed the push, and some of whom likely had their minds on the afternoon’s bout and its consequences, as the Yokozuna did.

Since he stood behind the rest of his deshi and out of their line of sight, Akebono took the luxury of stopping altogether, counting on Boss to trust his judgment as a veteran yokozuna. Far from slacking, he was making a thoughtful competitive decision.

But the decision earned the kind of wrath Troy would run into for missing curfew: “Baka-yaro!” Oyakata yelled at his yokozuna as if he were just out of maezumo, “Shiko, moto! Moto!” (More, more.) Akebono had always lowered his head and answered, “Hai!” to such treatment and then continued as Boss had indicated. Not so, this time. Boss had called him a fucking idiot in front of everyone like he was some kid.

Akebono stood straight up, and in the deep, forceful baritone he used to order the boys around, he yelled at Boss: “Mo ii!” Enough!

Everyone froze in fear of the Oyakata’s reaction.

After his own moment of bewildered surprise, the Oyakata stood up and marched over to his yokozuna wielding the shinai until less than an inch separated...
their faces. "Nani!" he yelled with such force that even his diminished voice could have shaken the walls. What! The rest of the deshi were certain the two men would come to blows, or that Akebono would back down, look to the floor, and whisper, "Sumimasen."

But Akebono did not look down. He continued to stare defiantly into Oyakata's eyes, until at last Boss threw the shinai to the ground, turned away, and stormed off, yelling, "Chk-sha!! Do whateva you like!"

"You da MAN!!" Percy shouted the moment Oyakata was upstairs and safely out of range. No one could believe what they had just witnessed, what all of them had been longing to do for years, every time they were called, "Baka-yaro" or told to do more shiko on aching legs. "Ho, you going get fired now, brah."

"Fuck, I don't care already. I don't care. I had enough of this shit already. I'm tired of this" (qtd. by Kipapa, 1998).

Akebono easily beat Kotonowaka later that afternoon on the way to his 9th Emperor's Cup, worth thousands of dollars to Azumazeki Beya in goods and cash and sponsorship opportunities, as well as publicity for future recruitment and praise to Oyakata for the excellent way he had trained his yokozuna. Akebono was not fired for the outburst. He was never even reprimanded.

Through the rest of the year the Olympic torch circled the globe, from Athens, across Europe and North America, down through South America, across the Great Wall, down through the Korean peninsula, from Kyushu up through the mountains of Hokkaido, and finally back to Nagoya, Japan, where on February 7th it waited in a
room deep within a huge stadium for the Yokozuna to purify the grounds for its entrance, signaling the start of competition for the twenty-third Olympiad.

More televisions world wide were tuned into the 1998 opening ceremony than ever before, while another eighty thousand people looked on live, bundled against the thirty-eight-degree chill, as kimono-clad sumo wrestlers led the parade of nations into the stadium, escorting each to their respective places in the cherry-blossom-shaped infield. Austria, Belgium, Canada, on down through Russia and the United States of America—a record 72 delegations, all welcomed into the heart of the Land of the Rising Sun, all honored by the presence of the Emperor himself.

With the athletes all assembled, the crowd was quieted by the rhythmic ringing of the polished wooden sticks struck together at Shito shrines across Japan. From the stadium’s highest reaches one could see a line of four men emerge from the tunnel far below: an older, small man holding a fan-like wooden paddle out before him in both hands, dressed in a colorful robe, tabi socks, zori slippers, and a hat resembling that worn by a Shinto priest. A much larger, muscled man, naked to the waist and barefoot, dressed only in an elaborate apron-like garment reaching just below his knees, his topknot sculpted into a flower shape which faced forward from the center of his head. An even larger man, dressed identically, a sheathed samurai sword thrust out proudly before him in his right hand, perpendicular to the ground.

These men cleared the way for the Yokozuna—the living embodiment to the Japanese of all that is virtuous, strong, and dignified. He was dressed as they were, but for the thick, brilliant white rope he wore around his waist, adorned at the front with five zig-zag strips of folded white paper that swayed from side to side as he took
his powerful strides. Upon reaching the stadium’s center, the four men fell into formation facing the Emperor’s box, the smaller man kneeling off to the side, the two attendants flanking the Yokozuna in a squatting position, the Yokozuna towering above everyone with a somber, powerful look on his face, oblivious to the crowd, the television cameras, the collection of world-renowned athletes.

The Yokozuna then raised his arms above his head before bringing them down into a powerful clap that echoed in the highest reaches of the stadium and beyond: the gods were now certainly at attention. He clapped again just as strongly, a look of deep determination on his face, and then lifted his right leg in the air and brought it crashing down to the ground with even greater force, scaring away any evil spirits bold enough to intrude on this important day. The stomp brought him into a low crouch, his left hand to his side, his right arm extended to its full length, his massive body compacted and bent forward, his head tilted slightly, eyes straight ahead so you could see the whites of them below their upturned pupils. With a dancer’s grace he slowly rose to his towering height, slightly twisting his feet from side to side until his legs came together and he was standing again, defiant, arms at his sides.

The gods alerted, the grounds now purified in the most culturally, spiritually, and visually Japanese way for the world’s most important sporting competition, the Yokozuna fell in behind his attendants and walked off. Only then could the Olympic torch emerge, carried by 1992 silver-medaling Japanese skater Midori Ito, who waved it over the stadium’s cauldron to begin the final Olympics of the millennium.
When Nagano Olympic organizers began planning the central role rikishi would play in the opening ceremonies, the natural choice was not Akebono, but favored son Takanohana. After taking July’s Nagoya yusho for the fourth straight time, he stood with Akebono that September for what had become a poignant ceremony—the Day One affair when the yusho portraits of the two previous champions are unveiled. From the Kokugikan rafters hang giant portraits of yusho winners stretching back for the previous 32 tournaments—a bit over five years. (The number has no symbolic meaning—it is just the number of portraits that fit along the building’s four sides.) The rikishi stand triumphantly against a sky-blue background, dressed in their kesho-mawashi and, if they are yokozuna, their yokozuna ropes. Gaudy, gold frames more befitting a museum than a sports arena indicate the rikishi’s names and details about the tournaments. As the months pass, these visual symbols of recent sumo history fade into the possession of the rikishi depicted and are replaced by the most recent winners. The giant portrait of Takamiyama which Chad Rowan saw every day in the hallway at Azumazeki Beya once hung in the Kokugikan.

When the curtain came off of Akebono’s portrait in September 1997 one could count all nine of his likenesses looking down from the edges of the building—all the way back to his initial May 1992 triumph, where he is depicted without the white rope. Takanohana’s portrait was unveiled immediately after, a reminder of a rivalry that had begun more than nine years before, one that had given sumo fans a number of unforgettable senshuraku moments. Seeing the rivals side-by-side again was what sumo fans had been anticipating since as far back as 1991, when the two
showed such promise as the sport’s future. But anyone looking up into the Kokugikan rafters that day would have been able to count seventeen portraits of Takanohana, going back to his historic January 1992 yusho as Takahanada. According to this measure, theirs had not been the rivalry everyone had hoped for.

There are a number of reasons why life did not turn out like the movie everyone would have liked to have seen, the one where Takanohana and Akebono pass the Emperor’s Cup back and forth after dramatic senshuraku showdowns. Akebono’s 1994 knee injury was an obvious reason, both in how it stopped the Hawaiian’s dominance and how it allowed Takanohana to finally get on track. The soft schedule Takanohana enjoyed basho after basho also helped temper the flames of rivalry, because it was physically easier for Takanohana to make it to senshuraku and mentally more difficult for Akebono to keep the pace. And of course Takanohana’s talent was an obvious reason for the wins he continued to pile up.

The sad part about Taka’s not having had to face nearly as many high-ranking opponents as Akebono faced is that we will never know how truly great he was on the dohyo. Suppose he had faced the same opponents as Akebono had and still reached this point in their careers with an eight-yusho advantage? He might have gotten the full credit he deserves. Instead, I sit here and speculate that if the deck hadn’t been so obviously stacked in Taka’s favor, the six tournaments where Akebono finished runner-up to Taka would have gone the other way, leaving the gaijin with a 15-12 yusho advantage by September of 1997. It’s unfair to Takanohana that I make this speculation, because he didn’t make the rules and he didn’t call for the merger of two of sumo’s most powerful heya so that his competition would be diluted. But in
approving the merger and in doing nothing to address the obvious disparity in the quality of opponents the yokozuna rivals faced, the Nihon Sumo Kyokai tainted whatever legacy Takanohana ended up carving for himself by creating ample room for this kind of speculation.

Proof for the Olympic organizers—if they needed any—was easily found in the image of seventeen Takanohana portraits hanging from the Kokugikan rafters. He was clearly the dominant yokozuna of his time, and already one of the greatest of all time, ranking fourth in career yusho at the tender age of 25. With his Nagoya win he had reclaimed the top spot on the banzuke, which he held through November's Kyushu Basho, and so there was no question about placing him at the center of the opening ceremonies. But a mysterious liver ailment Taka had been battling on and off for the past four years re-surfaced during the New Year's tournament preceding the Olympics, forcing him to withdraw following his Day Twelve loss to Maegashira-5 Aogiyama. Ozeki Musashimaru ended up winning his third yusho. Akebono finished at 10-5, and Takanohana ended up with eight wins and a hospital bed, forcing the Olympic organizers to change their plans.

With Takanohana's withdrawal, Akebono would be ranked as the top yokozuna for the following tournament. And since Takanohana was kyujo, his public duties as yokozuna were suspended, leaving the Nagano organizers with no choice but to give the honor of opening their Olympics to a gaijin.

Two days after his historic Nagano performance, Akebono stunned his Japanese audience with the public announcement of his engagement to half-American
Christine Reiko Kalina, who had dyed her hair black for her coming out as an effort to look more Japanese than American. The couple fielded questions from the crowd of reporters in a room filled with as much flash-bulb lightning as the big room at Azumazeki Beya had been following the man’s yokozuna promotion five years prior. An old hand at facing a roomful of questions and cameras, this time the Yokozuna dripped with sweat and smiled bashfully. Discussing his game was one matter. Publicly revealing his feelings was quite another for the now-gentle giant. His bride-to-be sat adoringly overwhelmed in the spotlight’s glare, looking every bit the normal woman suddenly confronted with untold fame. They sat together and braved the questions, a couple alone in a storm of curiosity.

The sight of Akebono facing a Japanese public with a new fiancé less than a year after officially calling off his engagement with someone as universally loved as Yu Aihara says much about the strength of his feelings for Christine. That he loved Christine is perfectly obvious considering the lengths he had to go to so she would be by his side at the February press conference, and at the wedding that would follow. He loved her so much that he had no choice but to forget all about expectations—those of Boss, Okamisan, his kōen kai, the Nihon Sumo Kyokai—and follow his heart. One of Okamisan’s choices would have made a better okamisan. She would have had more money. She would have had better connections. She may have been better prepared for public life. Sticking to his decision to marry Yu Aihara, for instance, would have been quite easy, and would have saved the Yokozuna a world of trouble.
An Akebono who had not been given the lonely hours of reflection that had come with his injuries and then deepened with the fallout from his Osaka confrontation with Chiyonofuji would have married Yu Aihara without question, not because he loved her, but because she was, for these practical reasons, the right choice—and because it was expected.

“What if you hadn’t gotten hurt?” I asked him once during a long conversation on the ’98 fall jungyo.

“I wouldda either got married to somebody they wanted me to get married to, or nobody at all. I’m glad I got hurt. I’m the happiest man in the world now” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

After the press conference Akebono—then 28 years old and fully capable of making his own life-defining decisions—had to face his oyakata, his okamisan, and his koen kai president, and explain himself. He would marry Christine Reiko Kalina, a woman who had nothing to offer any of them in materialistic terms or in hype value or in connections of any importance to them. He was supposed to get Oyakata’s permission before getting engaged, but since he knew it would never have been granted, he wen draw the line.

“Freak what they care,” Percy had told him. “You love the girl, you marry ‘er” (Kipapa, 1998). And so he called the press conference without asking anyone’s permission at all.

But despite the brave face the couple put on in February and their attempts at damage control—dying her hair black, claiming that they had known each other since just after Akebono’s arrival in Japan ten years prior—the fallout from the
announcement was at least as bad as could be expected. Akebono’s resolve left Azumazeki Oyakata and Okamisan with little choice but to play along. But his koen kai dissolved—a huge potential source of income turned off like a faucet.

“‘They just like ac’” Akebono told me when I asked him about the koen kai president’s reaction, brushing it off as he had the Osaka incident, until I pressed him further. “See, he the kine guy like see his name in the paper, no matter what.” When I asked Akebono what his koen kai had done for him, he just shook his head and said, “They collect all kine money from people. Most of them are just regular people paying money they cannot afford for be in the koen kai, thinking the koen kai taking care of this guy, when actually they’re not. So basically it’s one fan club that’s supposed to help you out with stuff: buying your oyakata stock, helping you build your stable, stuff like that. But see, you get some jack-asses out there who say they doing this and they doing something else. These guys, they all out there with their hands open. Up until now I was working for feed these guys, but not anymore” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). According to the Yokozuna, hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised in his name, and he wound up with none of it.

The general negative reaction to the engagement, spun and then fueled by tabloids like the Shukan Post, did little to hurt Akebono once he and Christine were legally married in a Tokyo ward office that April. Like his injury down times, he used the negative press to filter out who really cared for him, and who was along for the ride. As for the money and his treatment at the hands of people he’d considered loyal to him, the Yokozuna told me this: “What I realized in my eleven years here is that what goes around really does come around. Everybody going get it. Mark my
words. Like you said, you just gotta be cool, calm, and collect, watch the situation. Might not happen today, might not happen next month, but going come around” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

In the end, none of it mattered anyway: Chad Rowan had ended up with the woman he loved. Several months after the engagement press conference, a group of us were celebrating the end of the 1998 Aki Basho in a private Asakusa karaoke room when the Yokozuna held his new-born daughter high in the air and lost himself in her eyes, his huge smile a mirror of hers.

“Man, she owns you,” I told him.

“They both do,” he said.
CHAPTER 14

The person that’s going to give the answer is Akebono himself. So the longer he hangs on, the more they’re gonna write bad things about him.—Azumazeki Oyakata on the question of retirement, 6/98. (Kuhaulua, 1998).

Day Two, May 1999 Natsu Basho. Well past seven p.m. the narrow street outside of Azumazeki Beya was packed with waiting reporters and cameramen, abuzz with the same sort of suspense and excitement reseved for a promotion announcement or a yusho—not the start of a basho. More than thirty of them swarmed about, alive with the energy that comes with covering the story. Maybe it was only Day Two, but this was news. The Yokozuna’s comeback from another injury that had kept him off the dohyo for three straight basho had so far amounted to a pathetic Day One loss to Tosanoumi, and now a devastating launch into the second row courtesy of Dejima. Any moment now a car would drive up. Akebono and his oyakata would get out. They would walk through the crowd and into the heya. A few minutes later everyone would be summoned upstairs for a press conference, where the yokozuna would at last announce his retirement.

I asked one of them what the big deal was, since I had half-expected Akebono to lose to Dejima anyway and assumed anyone who knew much about current sumo would not have been surprised at his 0-2 start.
“Akebono-zeki lost again today,” he told me. “We don’t know what’s going to happen!”

“What’s the match-up for tomorrow?” I asked him.

“Akebono’s?”

“Of course.”

“Kotonowaka.” Kotonowaka, one of sumo’s taller, slower rikishi, is among Akebono’s easiest opponents. Akebono never has to worry about him getting inside and getting leverage for a throw or running around and getting him off balance, so he has little trouble bulling Kotonowaka out, either with thrusts or on the belt.

“Oh, no problem,” I said to the reporter. “Besides, he lost to Dejima last time on Day Two,” eight months ago, back in September. “And that time it was worse. There’s nothing at all to worry about.”

He bowed slightly and walked away from me, uninterested in such talk. I went over to David’s for dinner and returned two hours later to the same scene: a hoard of media waiting, waiting for a story that would never come.

The real story—one that stretches back through a year of frustration compounded by immense pain and loud criticism he was only allowed to answer with silence—was that the fact that Akebono was competing at all. And as if the pain and the voices of doubt were not enough to endure, Akebono was also caught in doubts of his own stemming from his failure to take the Emperor’s Cup even once in two years, and his own deepening funk about the monotony of the sumo routine and his role as a slave to the system. I like quit, but I no like quit—the I like quit part had clearly been
winning at least since I had become a part of the Yokozuna’s life only a year before—
when he had been stepping up with a relatively injury-free body. Now, there was no
way the Yokozuna should have been lawn bowling, let alone charging four-hundred-
pound men on the rock-hard dohyo.

The I no like quit part of sumo had to do, as far as I could see it, with two
things: the respect Chad was given as Yokozuna—whether in the keikoba, the
Kokugikan, or walking into a shitaku-beya full of bowing sekitori on jungyo—and
the existence of Percy Kipapa and George Kalima as gaijin partners in the sumo
world. Now Percy was gone, and George had been missing from jungyo since the
end of 1997, on the way to his own retirement. Chad may have complained to me
daily on the jungyo about things like how poorly he thought the travel schedule had
been planned, or how ineffective the public asa-geiko was for getting him tournament
ready. But more often his deep respect for sumo shone through—in his daily sincere
bow to the head referee, his passionate explanation to me of special rituals like the
End of the War Day prayer preceding the bouts one August afternoon. These things
were important to him. His own place as a leader in this world was important to him.
What adulation he got from the crowds during his dohyo-iri was important to him.

I found out just how important one October afternoon in the small western
Japan town of Onomichi, where I met up with the fall ’98 jungyo as it made its way
from Tokyo to Kyushu for the November tournament. Chad spoke excitedly to me
about that afternoon’s dohyo-iri—something he’d never bothered to talk about with
me at any other time during the weeks of daily dohyo-iri I saw before or since.

“Ho, you should have heard how loud everybody was cheering,” he told me
with a smile. "It was louder for me than for both those other fuckas put together!"
(Rowan, Chad, 10/98). Both those other fuckas, of course, were Takanohana and
Wakanohana, who had been the Good Guys to Akebono's Bad Guy during every
dohyo-iri and every exhibition bout and the two actual bouts I'd seen since the end of
July. I'd always taken it for granted that the Chosen Sons were simply more popular
than Akebono, as they had been as teenage heartthrobs back in 1992 when the high-
pitched squeals of sumo groupies would blare from my television.

But until this moment it hadn't occurred to me that the presence of the
brothers, the cheers they always got compared to the relative silence that greeted his
own wins and his own dohyo-iri, that it all hurt his feelings. I recalled that a month
earlier he'd pointed out proudly that his wedding guest list was longer than those of
both of the brothers had been. The image of the one picture in his apartment—his last
win over Taka—flashed back to me. And now in the fall of 1998, more than ten
years into his time in Japan, nothing was more important to him than a couple of
thousand people in a small-town municipal gymnasium cheering more loudly for him
than for the Hanadas, giving him, for once in the four months I'd been with him, the
kind of respect he thought he deserved daily.

Such cheers didn't come once during the 1998 summer jungyo, where I like
quit may as well have been tattooed on the Yokozuna's forehead. He was mentally
drained, if not bored with the whole routine of a sumo life. As the August weeks
wore on, he became more and more irritable, quick to snap at his tsukebito, and was
often in no mood to talk. He missed Christine and the baby. The mess with his Koen
Kai President kept showing up in the paper. His yokozuna-sized October wedding

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celebration was quickly turning into weeks of obligations, mostly to settle Fuji TV’s wishes to film every last aspect of the preparation, right down to the choosing and fitting of what he and Christine would wear. (When the docu-footage aired in the midst of FTV’s live coverage of the reception you could see a totally wiped-out Akebono going through the motions of tasting the various courses that would be served.) And he knew that while his mind was occupied by all of this, he was not focusing as much as he should have on the upcoming Aki Basho. When I passionately spoke of my book and he said, “Ho, you get the fire!” he did so with envy, because in August of 1998, Akebono did not have the fire. When he looked back on his ’93 peak and said, “I used to walk around like I had confidence,” it was because in August 1998, he no longer did—despite the fact that he had maxed out to unheard-of power numbers in a return to Bob Beveridge’s Lab only a few months before. At the end of yet another long stretch of stops along the jungyo, he was just tired already.

And what he did up on the dohyo that September would do nothing to quiet any critic. His wins were shaky, and his losses were either overwhelming, or as embarrassing as Day Fourteen, when he stepped on Wakanohana’s foot at the charge and fell on his back. I’ve written much so far about the man’s reckless style, the charges where he launches his big body forward, his hands a blur of devastating power before him, his opponents rocked into fearful, quick retreats in matches that last less than three seconds. But in the fall of 1998, I saw no such power or speed from Akebono. Throughout the hon-basho, he looked just as he had on the jungyo:
distracted, sometimes bored, sometimes nervously un-confident, his arms folded in front of him as he sat beside the dohyo awaiting his match.

Facing unheralded Tamakasuga on Day Ten, the Yokozuna controlled the tachi-ai by standing his opponent up with two strong tsupari hand-thrusts. He continued to thrust two, three, four more times, moving forward, slowly building momentum as he approached the ring's edge. Tamakasuga reeled from the pushes, but there was no look of fear on his face. He absorbed blow after blow as he moved back, and then just as the Yokozuna wound up for one final push, Tamakasuga spun easily to his left and out of harm's way. And Akebono, his five hundred and twenty pounds already in full stride, kept on walking, right out of the ring on his way to an eventual 10-5 finish.

I've spent many a night lying awake pondering the possible reasons for this improbable finish, beginning with the enormous stress of the impending wedding under which Chad was laboring, moving on to things like the pressure I saw him putting on himself to reach the one goal that had eluded him so far: the perfect 15-0 tournament. In the end, there could be no single reason for the clear fact that in September of 1998 Akebono belonged anywhere but up on the dohyo—it winds up being a combination of factors physical, social, cultural, and psychological.

One reason for Chad's lack of the fire at this time which stands out for me goes back to a party in his Uncle Sam's carport a month after I met Chad, a couple of months before this disastrous tournament. The bottle of tequila stuffed with li hing mui made its way around the table; a uke was passed around; stories were told among old friends, all drunk. At the time I thought Chad was reveling in the local scene
because he hadn’t experienced it in the years since his promotion, that he was enjoying himself because he was home. But looking back, I believe he was more full of nostalgia for a scene he’d experienced time and again with da boyz up in Japan, like the sayonara party for Bumbo of which Percy and David so happily re-told. Chad finished off one of his stories to the boys in Uncle Sam’s carport wistfully, with this: “At one time had more than twenty guys up there, but now jus’ get me, George, and Fia,” or, Musashimaru.

Less important in this fact of Chad’s longing for the local boy support system was that he really missed people like Percy and Troy and Taylor. What stands out is that without them, even after ten years in Japan, there was no one else. The Gaijin Yokozuna, a sensitive man who had spent a lifetime trying to “fit in as best I could,” a kind man one would think could make friends easily, had never accumulated a group of Japanese friends as loyal as Percy and Taylor and George.

And now George was on his way out. Yamato’s will to dominate had been doused over the course of 1998 by a cruel combination of Fate and sumo’s treatment of absences as losses. Between January and when I returned to Tokyo from the ’98 summer jungyo he had fallen from Maegashira-12 and the sekitori good life all the way down to Makushita-49, thanks to his bouts with pneumonia and an out-of-control car that hit him on a rainy night in Nagoya. The 1998 Aki Basho was to be his last, and if you watched him in practice at the time, only two words would come to mind: mottai nai, which translate roughly into “what a waste,” but convey a much greater
sense of regret. It was, to say the least, a shame that someone in such good form was about to step off the dohyo for good.

"I want to get married," he told me one afternoon just before the start of the Aki Basho. "I want to go into business for myself. There's plenty things I want to do. My boss doesn't want me to get married until I'm back in juryo. But if I stay in sumo, I can't make it back to juryo for at least another three tournaments. He like me stay in sumo for another two years. But two years from now, my business could be booming." Six more months back in sumo's slave ranks did not appeal to the former sekitori, who is nothing if not overflowing in pride. "I'm twenty-eight years old," he went on, "and I have to ask my boss when I can get married. Twenty-eight years old, and every time I leave the stable my okamisan asks me, 'Doko e iku no?' Where you going? It's time I went out and did something for myself" (Kalima, 9/98).

I talked often with Yamato in the weeks leading up to his final tournament. After the excitement of jungyo I had settled into a routine of getting up early to watch asa-geiko somewhere, coming home to read the morning paper and eat lunch, and then writing well into the night—exhausting work that was, above all, lonely. Since I'd devoted myself entirely to what had become an overwhelming project and was financing it with my credit card and loans from friends, I didn't go out much. When I did, the loneliness was underscored by the fact that I didn't have the language skills at the time to talk in much depth to anyone, and beyond the constantly-busy Yokozuna I didn't know anyone. Yamato seemed to understand my own difficulties dealing with the transition to life in Japan, and he checked up on me from time to time like a big brother, talking usually for over an hour whenever he called.
Much later I had the chance to begin repaying Yamato's kindness and understanding (I'll never be able to fully repay him) in what turned out to be among my best lessons in the realities of everything to do with sumo. Towards the end of 1999 he fulfilled the dream he'd first shared with me in one of those long 1998 phone calls—that of opening his own restaurant. From its opening until my return to Hawai'i to begin a doctoral program at UH, I contributed my several years of waitering experience every weekend at Kama'aina's, his gourmet Pacific Rim Cuisine eatery in Tokyo's Roppongi district. We spent hours talking about sumo, particularly whenever Chad was competing in a tournament.

"See, they gotta go for his right arm," he told me once, referring to Takanohana. It was a slow night and we were standing in the kitchen waiting around for the first rush of customers.

"David told me you beat him eight straight times in practice once," I said.

When a yokozuna steps up during the de-geiko challenge bouts, he's entitled by his rank to stay in the ring as long as he likes, win or lose, while his challengers must exit upon losing to him unless he picks them again for the next bout. At the top of his own game only a couple of months before his encounter with pneumonia, George had had Takanohana pouting in frustration, and everyone else standing around in awe as he calmly marched the Yokozuna out not once or twice, but repeatedly until Taka gave up altogether.

George smiled bashfully at the mention of the performance and made some excuse about how the Yokozuna had been coming down with his liver ailment at the
time and was not at full strength, but you could tell the feat ranked as one of his proudest moments.

“Musashimaru and Hawaiian were standing right behind him,” he said, finally allowing himself to get excited. “They were yelling at me: ‘Go right through ’im, Hawaiian! Kick his fuckin’ ass! Come straight through to us!’”

“How did you do it?”

“Like I said: the right arm. You just gotta get your left under his right before he can grab the belt, and then lift up, and he cannot do not’ing” (Kalima, 1/2000).

I didn’t quite get it, so he had me charge him right there in the kitchen like I was Takanohana and I wanted an inside right-hand grip. I certainly don’t pretend to be a rikishi, but the walk-through was instructive. I had always known George to be strong, and I’d seen his leg speed during charges in practice, but not until this moment did I appreciate the big man’s quickness and grace. Before I knew what was happening, my right arm was dangling in the air above my head. He had instantly, and without any violence, jabbed his left hand between my arm and my side while sliding forward, rendering me helpless. Then he had me try the move, but before I could execute it, he was gone, having jumped completely to my side in one swift and silent movement. Then he showed me how to counter the move he’d just made and still leave the opponent’s right arm dangling. Though twice my size, George was Barishnikov to my Herman Munster. All I could think was that in any other sport, he would still be out there competing.

The main difference between his job behind a grill—albeit, his own grill—and his best friend’s job atop the National Sport, had been the string of hard-luck events
leading up to his 1998 retirement. Akebono was lucky to trade wins and losses with his fellow yokozuna. But Yamato had beaten Takahama eight straight times.

When Naoko brought me into the empty banquet room where Yamato was waiting with his father and a couple of friends to be escorted into Magaki Beya’s 1998 Aki Basho senshuraku party, I could see even as it was about to happen that Yamato himself was not completely sure about his decision to retire. Weeks later when Percy told me his “I like quit, but I no like quit” anecdote I would reflect right back to this moment: Yamato dressed in his formal black haori robe, his hair styled for the last time in the formal flower chon-mage reserved for sekitori during competition, a look of resignation on his face. A weird feeling of angst hung over everyone in the room except Mr. Kalima, who beamed with pride at what his son had already accomplished. Naoko smiled broadly even as she wiped away tears, an image that captured the atmosphere of the big empty room better than the best, most poetic description could.

I’ve been to many senshuraku parties and the rikishi are always announced with an exaggerated kind of the otsukare-sama-deshita feeling of celebration that accompanies the end of a long day’s work throughout the rest of Japan: you must be tired, and although it would have been better if you’d all posted winning records, at least you worked long and hard and made yourselves tired and tried your best, and for that we will all celebrate.

But this time the mood was far less celebratory, and this Gambarimasu! ritual served more as a distraction, a welcome pause before the very conclusive ceremony
we’d all come to be a part of. At last a chair and a small table were set up at the center of the stage, and a man walked up carrying a slim box a bit less than a foot long. He placed it on the table, and Okamisan led Yamato up to the stage as the announcer explained what we all knew was happening. Yamato bowed as we all clapped for him, and then sat heavily in the chair. He had a handkerchief in his right hand. The man next to him opened the box on the table and took out a pair of gold-plated scissors and handed them to Gojoro with great ceremony, and pointed to a place at the back of the fancy hairstyle for Yamato’s sempai to make the first cut. Gojoro then handed the scissors back and exited the stage, and was followed by each of the other Magaki rikishi, who were followed by Haywood Kalima. The only rikishi’s father ever to have taught his son to hunt for octopus among the reefs off Waimanalo and Makapu’u took his turn at cutting one more strand of the younger Hawaiian’s Japanese identity, and at last the tears began to fall.

I was honored to have a chance to participate, and a bit nervous myself. The man handed me the scissors and pointed to where I should snip along the overall cut, which was proceeding strand by strand in a circle about three inches in diameter around the top-knot, a strand for every leg-lift, for every Japanese word learned, for every time he’d had to fight to keep his mouth shut in the performance of outward assimilation, for every “I will try my best.” I made my cut to the familiar sweet smell of the oil used to create such a hairstyle and the brittle hair snapped easily between the gold blades, and very permanently.

A few more people followed—all men, of course, although many women were present—and finally Magaki Oyakata himself stepped onto the stage to make
the final cut. He lifted the chon-mage with his left hand to where we could all see the
final strands holding it to the head of Yamato, who had now given up in his very last
sumo struggle—that of fighting off a flood of tears. Oyakata then ran the blades
across the last strand and closed them, ending the eight year career of Yamato.

Soon after, the party ended and several of us took taxis to meet Chad and
Christine and the baby at a private Asakusa karaoke room to celebrate the end of the
basho, as Chad and George often did on senshuraku, and to celebrate George’s
retirement with “the people who count,” which this time amounted to Chad,
Christine, and the baby, a friend who had taken care of Chad on the Canada jungyo,
George’s father and a visiting friend of his from Hawai‘i, Naoko, and me.

When George walked in, the Yokozuna took one look at his best friend’s head
and said, “You fucking prick.” Then he looked down at the floor and shook his head,
and then looked at George again. “You fucking prick, leave me up here all on my
own,” he said, with envy in his voice. Then he smiled and the two big men hugged.
“You fucking prick.”

A few weeks later I caught up with the fall 1998 jungyo, but when I walked
into the shitaku-beya Yokozuna Akebono was not in his usual ten a.m. quiet don’t­
even-think-about-talking-to-me mood, shut off in the world of his headphones. To
my surprise, he was relaxed and happy, about twenty pounds lighter, and banging
away on an ukulele.

“What’s up, cuz?” He greeted me.
"Ho, don't stop for me," I told him. "How come you neva play at the wedding with Kurt and Kimo?"

"See, that's why I started practicing now," he said. "Was all shame I couldn't play at the wedding, and at the party at Uncle Sam's back in Hawai'i. Kanikapila, you supposed to be able to pass the ukulele around to everybody, but I could not play. I wen call Kurt up the other night fo' get the chords for 'Waimanalo Blues.'" Kurt Kipapa, Percy's brother, had become Chad's good friend over the years. His ukulele had helped create the afterparty in the hotel bar following Chad and Christine's massive wedding reception the week before. "We was playing 'um over the phone," he said. "When my daughter has her first birthday party, I wanna be able fo' play in front of everybody." He went back to strumming, and to put it politely, he was a long way from playing in front of anybody.

"You look good," I told him. "How much weight you lose?"

"Almost eight kilos so far," he said with a smile. "Had to cut almost twenty centimeters off my practice mawashi, was too long. I quit smoking, too. Every time I like one cigarette, I pick this up and start practicing instead." Then he sang, "Where will I go, the wind only knows, good times around the bend. Get in my car, I'm goin' too far and neva coming back again."

"After that party last night I thought you'd be all hungover." The tokoyama from Takasago Beya was about to retire, and since this would be his last jungyo, several rikishi had taken him out to celebrate the night before. During the summer jungyo Akebono had often sat in the shitaku-beya with the lethargy of someone whose head had hit the pillow with the weight of a bottle of sake, and had slept most
of the day. From the looks of some of the other rikishi in the Takasago family of heya, it had been quite a party. Maegashira Toki was passed out in his space on the floor. Mitoizumi was stumbling around with a smile plastered on his still-drunken face.

Then the Yokozuna knocked me over with this: “I quit drinking, too. These fuckahs, they all alcoholics. I had my boys take care of my pitcher of sho-chu last night and told them fo’ just put water inside” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98). Smoking was one thing, but this was a revelation. Within these few minutes it was clear that while all around was as it had been back in August, the man with the ukulele in his hands was not the same Akebono who had plodded through the steps of his ninth summer jungyo only two months before. To have the wedding and all of its surrounding stress and nonsense behind him was the equivalent of having Konishiki lifted from his back.

Over the course of the next few days I learned that this incredible rediscovery of the fire stemmed from far more than having the wedding over with. Akebono had re-doubled his efforts in part to atone for his mediocre Aki Basho performance. He also wanted to win following the wedding, as if to prove marriage had not sapped his manhood. But above all, he had reason to think about his future, and for once, a tangible reason for doing well.

“You ever heard of IMG?” He asked me. The International Management Group. A solid week of back-and-forth had followed his wedding, and at the end he had made himself part of a stable that included the likes of Tiger Woods, Andre Agassi, and Derek Jeter. Akebono became the first rikishi to have an agent, and a contract stipulating exactly how much the agent was entitled to for whatever business
he organized. At least in this part of his life, there would be no opened envelopes, no
more huge banquets where all the money went to Boss.

The notion that pay could be negotiated professionally and work justly
rewarded came up in many of our following conversations, even when I was just
looking for stories about his past. “Oh, the shit he used to make us do,” was how he
began the story of his tenure at Glenn’s Flowers and Plants. “He never buy one
tractor for his nursery until after I wen quit and left. Then he finally bought one
tractor. You see his house? Try go over there next time, just drive by and look,
everything all concrete. That concrete was all on skiffs, and I had to unload that
fuckah one by one, by hand. I mix all that cement that you see on the ground, all by
hand.” He reflected for a moment, and then said, “Shit, I been building shit for
people for long time. That’s why now, time for me turn around and start building for
myself” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

The building began in practice, where he worked much harder than I’d
previously seen, not a single day passing where he simply stood beside the dohyo to
“show face” as he often had during the summer jungyo. And then it continued in his
hotel room, every day. The fact that the fall jungyo’s daily schedule was identical to
the exhausting trek we’d taken in August—asa-geiko, lunch, a lazy afternoon, the
dohyo-iri and exhibition matches, on the bus by three and arriving at the hotel in the
next town sometime after six—did nothing to tire or stop him. Immediately upon
arrival at the hotel, his tsukebito would push the bed aside and help their yokozuna
train for two-to-three more hours, resting on his back as he did deep knee bends,
providing resistance for upper-body exercises, charging into his chest. It became as much a part of Akebono’s routine as the dohyo-iri itself.

At the time I’d thought that the wedding had had everything to do with the hundred-and-eighty-degree change I witnessed in the Yokozuna’s approach to his sport. But years later it’s clear that Akebono was suddenly training with the focus of a jonokuchi kid fighting his way out of the slave’s life not simply because he wanted to win again, but because he wanted to get out altogether, and his association with IMG had finally given him that way out. He just had to make some noise and give them something to work with. “You know I like quit,” he said, “I like go one zensho yusho and then at my yusho stuff I going tell them, ‘Oh, thank you guys for everything you guys did for me,’ and then outta here” (Rowan, Chad, 10/98).

Hanging on for a few more years as Yokozuna, or putting together a new koen kai to raise the money to open his own sumo beya, or becoming an oyakata alongside his boss in Azumazeki Beya—all of that meant a lifetime commitment to the sumo world. Anyone who had seen him in asa-geiko knew Akebono as a natural teacher who would have made a great oyakata. But anyone who’d seen how exhausted he was with sumo life’s routine by mid-1998—despite real efforts to want to care, and real moments when he certainly did care enough to be appreciative and even grateful for his place in the sport—could also tell that he had had enough. There had to be some other way to secure his future besides surrendering the rest of it to the Sumo Kyokai, and he had found it with IMG.

When the tour reached Izumo, that small town on the farthest western shore of Honshu where the gods Takemikazuchi and Takeminakata were said to have wrestled
for control of Japan around the beginning of time, I left Akebono to return to Hawai‘i. I had used up completely my ninety-day tourist permit, and back on Oahu I had several interviews to complete as I pieced together his story. We spoke for an hour or so after practice that morning, mostly about how he envied my chance to go home. He told me how to get in touch with him upon my return in time for the second half of the Kyushu Basho.

Back in Hawai‘i I started into the first draft of this book at the UH’s Center for Biographical Research. I wrote a children’s version of Chad Rowan’s life and reached a tentative agreement with a local publisher. And I interviewed most of the major characters in the Hawai‘i side of the story. I kept up with my sumo news from the daily reports on the email list-serve I’d joined while up in Japan. The list’s more active members provided constant updates of sumo news they got from television or the Japan Times or any number of Japanese publications they translated for the rest of us.

Late one evening at the Center I took a break from transcribing interview tapes to check the list-serve. It was late afternoon in Japan, where many of those who frequently posted to the list lived, two days before the Kyushu Basho was to begin. Among the subject headings that popped up in my in-box was this one: “Akebono Kyujo.” The brief text indicated that the Yokozuna would miss the entire November tournament after injuring his lower back.

I’d fully expected to fly up to Kyushu to watch Akebono take the Emperor’s Cup. At the time I was admittedly wrapped up in his performance as a fan, fully rooting for him. But even looking back now years later, particularly regarding how
low-ranking Kotonishiki surprised everyone by winning in November, I can say I have no doubt Akebono would have dominated. And I will speculate that he may have gone on to string together a few more championships, particularly in light of injuries both the Hanada brothers went on to suffer. When I left him in Izumo back at the end of October, he was in the best physical and mental condition I’ve ever seen him in, before or since.

When I saw him a bit over a month after the injury, that beautiful synchronized walk that had captured Larry Aweau’s eye eleven years earlier had become a painful shuffle, accompanied at times by a wince the big man tried to hide. Still, he brushed off the pain and put a brave face on the whole thing. He had herniated a disc in his lower back, and done some ligament damage. Doctors had prescribed more than a month of complete inactivity before they would reevaluate whether or not he could come back at all, and he’d come back to Hawai‘i for another opinion.

A look at the way he struggled to move around, combined with the obvious peace he felt at being home, suggested the move might come sooner than anyone other than his mother hoped. He had gained back all the weight he’d worked so hard to take off before the injury, and even put on a further ten-or-more pounds. He was smoking again. At the time, I was rooting as hard as anyone for him to get back up on the dohyo as soon as possible, but looking back on how content he was that afternoon and evening, I can imagine him being perfectly happy to have ended it all right there without ever going back to Japan.
Not until some five weeks later—a total of three months since sustaining the injury—was the Yokozuna back in the keikoba, having gone kyujo again for the New Year’s tournament and now looking ahead for a possible March return. There is little doubt that among the last things a person trying to recover from a herniated disc should do are sumo and shiko leg lifts, as the bulging disc first needs time to become un-swelled, and then can only be coaxed back to its original position through isolated stretching exercises, traction, strengthening of certain lower back muscles, and, above all, hope. The slightest jarring or wrong bend can send a recovering herniated disc right back to its most painful herniation point, sending jolts of pain all the way down to the feet, and sumo is nothing if not jarring. Not long after returning from Hawai’i Akebono had been cleared to hit the weight room and the pool on the military base where he now lived with Christine, and now, in mid-January, he was back to pounding on hard clay.

After three weeks of nothing more than shiko, teppo, and pushups, he tentatively began to ease his way back into the ring. But his first charge against one of Azumazeki Beya’s makushita boys told him that this was no muscle tear or ligament strain or joint inflammation, as the impact from the charge erased his several weeks of rest and his two-plus weeks of careful, isolated weight work. Just meeting the boy at the tachi-ai sent electric shocks down his legs, tightening his back to the point where it was difficult to stand up straight. When combined with the lifting motion of a double-handed grip on either side of an opponent’s mawashi, the stance he’d been using his whole career to compensate for his height turns out to be among the very best ways to pop herniated lower-lumbar discs, and with that one charge, the
Yokozuna was as good as right back where he’d been following his last de-geiko bout with Musashimaru. And this was supposed to be ten weeks into his comeback.

Amid the kind of pain and uncertainty one can only imagine, Yokozuna Akebono appeared publicly only once: at the Azumazeki Beya senshuraku party following the New Year’s tournament. The first Japanese friend he had ever made—and the only true Japanese friend he had made in sumo—was now retiring, leaving the Yokozuna in a sumo beya of primarily 15-18-year-old kids. Imura, the deshi who had taken young Chad Rowan home following the 1988 Nagoya Basho, had never made sumo’s big time, but he had hung on in Azumazeki Beya very much out of loyalty to Akebono. Now, however, approaching thirty and still hovering in the lower ranks more out of respect for the sport and tradition than with any intention of climbing the banzuke, it was finally time to leave. Percy had left; Taylor, Bumbo, and George had all left, and now it was Imura’s turn. Yokozuna Akebono was in attendance to take part in the haircutting ceremony.

He sat off to the side of the crowded banquet room’s stage pondering sumo’s most moving ceremony, reflecting on the initial kindness he had received from Imura and his family so long ago when he was trying to fit in to Japan as best he could. They had made him feel like he belonged in Japan, like he wasn’t strange, or weird, or bad, just because he was a foreigner. He then thought ahead, determined to get back up on the dohyo at least once more before his own retirement. He was a yokozuna, after all, and he had come back from injury before. He would have his own chon-mage cut someday in a ceremony just like the one unfolding before him.
But he would go out as a yokozuna should, a living example of strength and dignity for the rest of Japan, a figure commanding the highest levels of respect.

Imura was seated in a chair at the center of the room’s stage, and guests had begun taking turns with the gold-plated scissors. Chad was moved at the presence of people from Imura’s family who had come all the way to Tokyo for this special night. Imura had never made it to sekitori, but Chad gave him credit for hanging on as long as he did, for the loyalty he had shown as one of his deshi. It’s easy, he thought, to have respect for the sumo lifestyle when one is receiving the royal treatment of a sekitori. But Imura had embodied the lifestyle as much as any sekitori Chad had ever known, and he had done so quietly and without complaint, away from the spotlight. But after today, Chad would no longer walk into the kitchen at Azumazeki Beya and find Imura preparing a meal that would rival that of any great chef. No, he would be gone, and Chad would miss him—his Japanese brother.

Just then a middle-aged Japanese woman walked directly towards him through the sea of guests and addressed Yokozuna Akebono with a remark completely belying her pleasant smile and tone of voice: “You are a disgrace to the Japanese flag,” she said. “You should be the one retiring here” (qtd. by Rowan, Chad, 4/99). Just as quickly, she disappeared back into the crowd, and would certainly have been pleased to know that her words had stung the proud yokozuna as badly as Chiyonofuji’s gaijin yaro had.

The following day the *Daily Yomiuri* prominently featured an article in which Yokozuna Promotion Council Member Giichi Hirai made a motion to consider recommending Akebono’s retirement. And then a wave of hate mail followed,
directed at Akebono for tarnishing his rank.

As the hate mail and the *Shukan Post* garbage stretched into February and his body continued its refusal to respond, the big question for the man who had been really ready to retire for months now was, *Is it worth all this?* For the past two years sumo had also kept him away from Christine for more than 250 days a year. They would call each other up to three or four times a day, but a phone call is little consolation in an empty hotel room. The phone did little to bring him closer to Caitlynn, who was growing by the minute. And he had been through enough comebacks to know what lay ahead over the next few months: a lot of uncertainty, a lot of faith, a lot of patience, a lot of pain, and a complete lack of faith and patience from his vocal detractors. A successful comeback would be almost as difficult as making it in the first place, and it would be rewarded with what? 250 days a year away from his wife and daughter, and with *gaijin yaro*.

*I like quit.* There was no need to look into the mirror for this decision. At the end of February just before he and the rest of Azumazeki Beya were to head for Osaka, Yokozuna Akebono filled out his retirement papers, stamped them with his official signature stamp, and carried them to the Kokugikan offices to present them to Tokitsukaze Rijicho, Sumo Association Chairman.

About an hour later, Akebono emerged from the office holding the same papers.

The Yokozuna told me of the meeting a few weeks later when I met up with him on the spring 1999 jungyo. “The Rijicho wen back me up, so I decided to go for one more tournament,” he said (Rowan, Chad, 4/99). Chairman Tokitsukaze had
spent the entire meeting explaining to Akebono how valuable he was to the Kyokai, how he was a great yokozuna, and that he could take as much time as he needed to recover from his latest injury, even if it meant missing the March tournament—his third in a row. Akebono had been stunned by these, the first words of encouragement from anyone of importance in sumo.

Apparently, knowledge of sumo history had not been much of a consideration when the vocal Giichi Hirai was named to the Yokozuna Promotion Council, for had the man known the basic facts Tokitsukaze Rijicho imparted to Akebono during their meeting, he would likely have never said a word. Of the 66 yokozuna in sumo history at the time, seven had been absent as many as three consecutive tournaments, while one was absent five consecutive times. The list includes the great Yokozuna Taiho, one of whose record 32 yusho came in his comeback appearance. It would come to include Takanohana, who missed seven consecutive tournaments three years later, cruising all the way through his sixth absence without generating a single mention of retirement.

But from Akebono’s November injury until the mid-February day in the Chairman’s office, the Yokozuna had gotten nothing but hate mail, bad press, public scolding from the YPC, and in his only public appearance at his good friend’s retirement ceremony, You are a disgrace to the Japanese flag—all of which amounts to the complete opposite of what mattered most to Yokozuna Akebono, to Chad Rowan from Waimanalo: respect. I hate to rush to the conclusion that in spite of the dignified way Akebono had handled everything to do with his position as yokozuna, he was getting picked on because he was a foreigner. But in light of the comparative
silence that would surround Takanohana’s seven-basho kyujo, there can be no other answer: no matter what he did, Yokozuna Akebono would always be a gaijin—an outside person—and when even the slightest opportunity came to criticize him, people would pounce.

*The Rijicho wen back me up.* Chad said these words to me with the same kind of pride that had accompanied the story of the ovation he’d been given following his dohyo-iri back in the small town of Onomichi. It was almost as if he’d started believing the hate mail and the *Shukan Post*, that he’d been deeply hurt by the words of some idiot guest at the senshuraku party, and that he had needed the Rijicho’s approval to cancel it all out. I wasn’t at the meeting, and Chad told me little of the details of what was said, but that is no matter. I doubt it mattered to Chad exactly what Tokitsukaze Rijicho told him. What mattered most was that, from the very top of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai, Yokozuna Akebono had been shown respect.

By mid-April, as far as I could tell from what I saw during the jungyo’s morning practices, Akebono was back. Despite the shocks of sciatic pain that continued to shoot down his legs, he dominated every match. He was certainly much more cautious in his training than he’d been back in October, and far more moderate, taking full days off and doing no extra work in his hotel room. He would later go on to cause a stir among the jumpy sumo beat writers by skipping two days during the notoriously hard de-geiko week preceding the tournament, telling me, “I no like force ’um.” But the biggest difference was in the ways he’d adjusted his sumo to be able to compete in what has to be called this disabled condition: instead of bending so much
at the knees and lower back to keep his center of gravity low, he had widened his 
stance at the tachi-ai and worked to keep his feet further apart throughout his bouts.

“One of these old newspaper writers, da guy been following sumo for long 
time, he told me to look at Takanonami’s tachi-ai,” he told me one afternoon, “cause 
he tall, ah? So I look, and he keep his feet far apart. I asked Takanonami to show me 
how fo’ do ’um one day and he said it was gonna hurt, and ho, he was right about 
that! Get one mean burn on the insides of my legs. But can balance a lot better, too. 
Da guy was right” (Rowan, Chad, 4/99).

The more noticeable change was that the Yokozuna had altogether abandoned 
yotzu-zumo—the style of going for a strong grip on the belt rather than pushing.
After more than five years of shifting his style from near-complete reliance on his 
quick hands and powerful tsupari thrusts to a more mixed game, and then on to an 
almost lethargic reliance on wrapping up his opponents rather than flying at them as 
he had done in his youth, Akebono was back to his old, powerful, frightening ways, 
assaulting all comers, pushing the likes of Tosanoumi and Dejima aside like rag dolls.
For the whole jungyo, and on into every day of de-geiko leading up to the Natsu 
Basho, not once did I see Akebono go to the belt.

One reason for reverting to the old strategy was that powerful tsupari had been 
the weapon of choice Akebono had started with and used almost exclusively in his 
climb to yokozuna. He still had the fastest hands in sumo, and he knew that after 
such a long layoff he would be lacking in the kind of ring sense yotzu-zumo demands. 
It only made sense, then, to concentrate on his strength, and to use it to its full effect.

The hidden reason for abandoning yotzu-zumo, though, was the fact that in his
current condition, he didn’t have the strength to do it correctly. Further, the strain the
style put directly on his lower back just about guaranteed a re-herniation of the disc,
what with the way it required him to bend forward and then lift up with his arms
extended in front of him. In the days before and then later throughout the May
tournament I watched him wince in pain just by shifting himself on his futon. I saw
the horse-pill painkillers and anti-inflammatories he ingested, prescribed by his
doctor on the military base. I watched him undergo daily treatments from an old man
performing a kind of magnetic pressure-point-related massage therapy. In the pre-
tournament de-geiko he avoided heavy rikishi like Musashimaru, who had been his
favorite training partner during the same period back in September, to take on
smaller, faster guys like Chiyotenzan, in part to practice his own lateral movement,
but more to avoid aggravating the back. The biggest rikishi I saw him face between
mid-April and the end of de-geiko was Tosanoumi, but his devastating pushes had
easily kept the Maegashira off his belt every time.

So when I saw that he was to face this very same Tosanoumi on Day One of
the 1999 Natsu Basho, it looked like Akebono might be able to make good on his
comeback predictions. “I’m just gonna go out there and do the best I can,” he’d told
me back in April, not with the happy confidence he’d had back in October, but with a
stubborn sense that he’d been wronged by people who believed the Shukan Post and
those who’d bothered to send him hate mail. Ha‘aheo means pride, after all, and as
Ola might put it, he da kine guy like prove people wrong. Ten years after enduring
his oyakata’s laughter at his long legs, Chad Ha‘aheo Rowan was still out to prove
people wrong. “Nobody going be able say I didn’t try,” he went on. “I like go out
and win the whole thing, 15 and Oh, but even if something goes wrong, even if I get
hurt again, I can walk away knowing I did all I could” (Rowan, Chad, 4/99).

Back in September 1998 I’d been surprised to see that Chad was nervous the
night before his Day-One bout against Kaio—admittedly in part because I had yet to
learn of Kaio’s devastating right-hand throws, but also because he’d man-handled
Kaio every day of jungyo. “You’ll see tomorrow,” he had told me. “Practice is
practice and jungyo is jungyo, but tomorrow, that’s one whole different thing.”

He may have been nervous then, but now, after eight months away from “one
whole different thing,” he was a complete wreck. You couldn’t talk to him following
morning practice, and he puffed on one cigarette after the next awaiting his match in
the shitaku-beya. And when he finally walked down the hanamichi, he had already
lost. It must have started from the dohyo-iri, his first real one since September, which
was greeted with pensive uncertainty rather than welcome-back excitement. And
then when he walked out to fight, it was like the weight of a six-thousand-strong
collective wonder rested on his shoulders: Does he still have it? A palpable sense of
doubt hovered above the dohyo like smog, and somehow we all knew that no, he was
not going to pull it off, not after eight months away from the spotlight.

He came up fast like he was supposed to, but right where he had been
throwing Tosanoumi into the asa-geiko crowd only days before, he just froze. And
then for some reason it became anyone’s fight, and then it was over in a shower of red
zabuton pillows. The very next day against Dejima, he froze at the tachi-ai long
enough to be plowed into the second row.
Which brings us back to Day Two, 1999 Natsu Basho, and the story—the swarm of press outside Azumazeki Beya poised to write the headline, Akebono Announces Retirement. I reminded one of the waiting reporters that this was Akebono’s third straight loss to Dejima, and that he usually had an easy time of it against the taller, slower Kotonowaka, whom, as I was told, he was set to face the following day.

Perhaps to the reporter’s dismay, Akebono did easily beat Kotonowaka on Day Three, and after his overwhelming Day Four win, the street outside Azumazeki Beya remained empty. End of story. The Yokozuna went on to record only one more loss—to that point his only yotzu-zumo bout of the tournament—as he contended right down to senshuraku. Kaio had gained his famous right-hand grip and pulled the trigger on Day Eight, but Akebono went on to dominate—assisted, admittedly, by injuries to both Hanada brothers—all the way to the last day, where a win against Musashimaru would force a playoff between the two foreigners.

Musashimaru had set a record for 51 straight majority-win records without an absence on the way to his fourth career yusho the previous tournament, and now stood on the verge of promotion as sumo’s 67th yokozuna. Partly thanks to the lovable image “Maru-chan” had projected over the years, but more because of the exemplary way Akebono had proven that a foreigner could indeed uphold the dignity of the rank, the big Samoan-American heard nothing of the kind of opposition Konishiki had faced in his own bids for the white rope. Indeed, both gaijin had immersed themselves so deeply in sumo by now that when they got up to face one another in this historic match, their real ethnicity was, for once, an afterthought: the
drama of the sporting moment fully overpowered cultural drama of any kind in what turned out to be one of the greatest epic senshuraku struggles ever.

Unlike Akebono’s overwhelming win over Taka leading to his own promotion back in ’93, this match saw the two big men lock up in a battle of pure power that could have gone either way, Musashimaru pushing Akebono all the way to the edge, Akebono pushing all the way back to the center, the two struggling at the center, their chests heaving with effort. Some thirty seconds into what would turn out to be the sixth-longest bout of the tournament—an eternity in sumo—Musashimaru took one last gulp of air and pushed the Yokozuna to the edge, and then, at last, after another brief struggle, out and onto his injured back.

In this one match alone, if not the solid 11-4 record he wound up with, Yokozuna Akebono stuffed *gaman* down the throats of all his detractors, not only living up to the dignity demanded by the white rope, but by surpassing it. He had lost, but it had been an incredible struggle against the man who had, in the course of the battle, proven himself Akebono’s peer. Akebono’s chances for the yusho had come down to the tournament’s final match, and he had certainly made Musashimaru earn his right to promotion. Under any circumstances Akebono’s performance in the 1999 Natsu Basho would have been impressive. Taken in its full context, it is an achievement in sport, in determination, and in the cultural appropriateness of his silence in the face of criticism, beyond any measurable standard.

Taken in the context of Chad Rowan’s life, though, the performance was exactly what any of us would expect from the man who’d spent a lifetime proving people wrong. Big body, but too soft. Too big to handle the basketball. Too dumb to

At the senshuraku party following the spectacular struggle against Musashimaru, I wondered what they would have told him back on the October jungyo when he was pounding away on that ukulele. I wondered that as he directed his tsukebito to clear the stage and set up a chair and a microphone, and then as he sat before a room of more than two hundred people and began flawlessly strumming chords with his big hands. The room fell silent, and then the man began to sing in a voice as high and sweet as that of Israel Kamakawi'ole, (of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” fame) who’d composed a song called “Akebono, Musashimaru, and Konishiki. When Akebono finished playing the song the room erupted in applause. Back in October they would have told him to keep his day job. And he would have been hurt by their words. And he would have waited until this moment to give his response, without ever saying anything about how wrong they’d been.

Although Akebono would fail to take the yusho for more than another year, it was clear from Day Four of the ’99 Natsu Basho when he easily blasted strong, tough, and very mobile Tochiazuma from the dohyo that his critics had been dead wrong, and that he was still the most dominant individual force in sumo, herniated disc and all. After Dejima spoiled his yusho chances in the following tournament by jumping out of the way at their playoff bout’s tachi-ai—a legal but cowardly move called henka that disgusts people like Chiyonofuji—Akebono came back from a September thigh injury that sidelined him through November to post 11-4, 12-3, and
13-2 records, with his fourth loss in the '00 New Year’s tournament coming in a meaningless match after the yusho had already been decided.

“It’s like Tiger Woods says,” he told me after the 13-2 runner-up performance. “I just gotta keep going out there and doing what I’m doing. The yusho will come” (Rowan, Chad, 5/00).

And come it did, at long last, and so easily that July’s 2000 Nagoya Basho was almost boring. Akebono’s thirteenth win clinched the Emperor’s Cup for him with two full days of competition still to go. Succeeding losses to Ozeki Chiyotaikai and Yokozuna Musashimaru kept him from his coveted zensho-yusho, but his tenth championship, coming more than a year after his improbable rise from the dead, solidified Akebono as one of the great yokozuna of all time. He went on to a 13-2 runner-up finish in September, and then re-grouped in Kyushu after a day-three loss to rock Musashimaru with a powerful senshuraku charge, closing out 2000 with a second championship to add to his three ’00 runner-up performances—good enough for Rikishi of the Year honors.

Cradling the Emperor’s cup in the traditional shitaku-beya yusho photo that graces the front pages of newspapers across Japan, Akebono is unaffected by the glow of supporters surrounding him, almost as though he expects their adulation after what he’s shown the sumo world. He has the expression of a man with everything he ever wanted: victory, no small amount of redemption, respect. But what completes the scene are the three people nearest him. His daughter Caitlynn stands just in front of him, wide-eyed in a moment that, to his ultimate joy, she will not forget. And Christine sits next to him. In her arms she holds their son.
The last time I went to the Kokugikan I was in a bit of a daze, still jet-lagged from a flight two days earlier from Hawai‘i, still trying to believe this was all finally coming to an end. I’d just started the second semester of my doctoral program at UH when the holding pattern I’d put the book into came to a sudden halt with Akebono’s tearful January news conference, forcing me to put the story into some kind of final shape now that it had a natural place to end. Eight months before the autumn morning I stood there before the hallowed building Akebono had again taken his official retirement papers to Tokitsukaze Rijicho’s Kokugikan office. But this time he hobbled on wounded knees, and this time he was supported, both physically and professionally, by Azumazeki Oyakata. A news conference had been called, and in tears the Yokozuna had at last explained his final decision, with nothing but the highest respect for the institution he was about to leave.

Right down to the end, Akebono found the perfect, deferential words to suit the situation. And again, rather than reciting a company line, in this emotional instance, the *honne* surely matched the *tatemae*. Despite the many frustrations over the things he’d had to put up with as a foreigner that he’d shared with me, with Percy Kipapa, with Yamato, with his mother, in the end, the sumo institution was one that he loved. *I like quit, but I no like quit.* It had made him, and although he did not leave it with regret, he did leave it with sadness.

The crowd began building at the gate around 10:30, with a few hundred people straining for glimpses of arriving sekitori and other celebrities. Azumazeki
Oyakata stood a bit nervously near the building’s entrance, dressed in his formal black haori robe. Photographers and cameramen milled about, and then Akebono Oyakata appeared from inside, towering above everyone else, larger than life, also dressed in the haori.

“Subarashii,” a man next to me said. “The very first foreign yokozuna. Incredible.” People anxiously recalled the moments of his surprising rise to juryo despite the tall frame; his rivalry with the Hanada brothers and the course of the great ’93 senshuraku bout with Taka; the promotion ceremony at the Meji Shrine—the guy next to me had attended, waiting for two hours out in the cold just to be a part of it. And now this strange sensation of celebrating the end of something great. On a much larger scale, it reminded me of Yamato’s retirement ceremony three years earlier: we all had a hard time knowing just how to feel.

Janice Rowan appeared inside the gate, pushed in her wheelchair by Nunu’s wife Lei and smiling proudly. Back home she’d always said how Chad was just Chad and that she couldn’t wait for him to come home and that she loved all her sons the same. But here she couldn’t hide the fact that she was loving all the attention he was getting. She was followed by Nunu and Uncle Freddy and Aunty Maydel, the Kalimas, her sister Aunty Gerry, Chad’s good friend from Kyushu, Jean. Christine and the children stood for pictures with the Yokozuna as her own family stood by.

Akebono looked as troubled as the rest of us, wiping the sweat from his face with a small towel as he rocked back and forth on his heels. Over the course of his own career these photo opportunities had gone from being special moments of attention—of stardom—to recognition he felt he deserved, to simply business as
usual—another obligation, as standing for photos at his wedding had been. But here he looked full of conflicting emotions, all of which had been boiling beneath the surface since way back at his promotion. *I like quit, but I no like quit. I like win one fifteen-and-oh and tell these guys, “Thank you very much for everything.” I like cut this thing off right now. Ho, when I read what you wen write, I like go home already.*

*I didn’t do it for the money; it’s for the respect. I owe everything to sumo for making me who I am. I’m not American, not Japanese, but a rikishi for the Nihon Sumo Kyokai.* This was not business as usual or just another obligation—it would be the last time he stood before the glitter of flashing cameras as Yokozuna Akebono. He stood in front of a tall, bright sign painted with the Chinese characters, “Akebono Retirement Ceremony” long after the gates were opened, standing for pictures with fans for as long as time allowed.

The first of the day’s two meaningful events was announced by the familiar ringing sound of polished wooden sticks rhythmically clapped together, and the words over the arena’s public address, for the last time ever: “Attention: from the east side, we present the dohyo-iri of Yokozuna Akebono,” and then, “Yokozuna Musashimaru is the sword bearer. Ozeki Musoyama is the dew sweeper.” And then a one-time amendment of the familiar announcement—a first in the long history of sumo: “Yokozuna Akebono is carrying his son, Cody,” who was done up in his own kesho-mawashi and, unofficially, his own bright white tsuna affixed with its own zig-zag paper strips.

Akebono mounted the dohyo flanked by his kohai gaijin yokozuna and that man’s own understudy, and the three men squatted as one, Musashimaru holding the
sword out powerfully, Akebono bearing his son with the same strong pride. At this point in the ceremony he was supposed to attract the gods by clapping twice, but by now word had surely spread among them that something special was happening in the Kokugikan.

He rose and stepped towards the dohyo’s center and turned back to hand his son to the waiting gyoji. He then faced north, in the direction of the Emperor’s box, and raised his arms above his head before bringing them down into a powerful clap that reached the deepest recesses of the building and beyond: the gods were now certainly at attention. He clapped again just as strongly, a look of deep determination on his face, and then lifted his right leg in the air and brought it crashing down to the clay with even greater force, scaring away whatever evil spirits were bold enough to intrude on this important day. The stomp brought him into a low crouch, his left hand to his side, his right arm extended to its full length, his massive body compacted and bent forward, his head tilted slightly, eyes straight ahead so you could see the whites of them below their upturned pupils. With a dancer’s grace he slowly rose to his towering height, slightly twisting his feet from side to side until his legs came together and he was standing again, defiant, arms at his sides.

The majestic image of Yokozuna Akebono standing god-like atop the dohyo for the final time reminded me of Kumu Frank Kawaikapuokalani Hewett, the cousin who had babysat young Chad before going on to become one of Hawai‘i’s most regarded kumu hula. First it was his powerful presence at the massive October ’98 wedding reception—a made-for-television extravaganza whose only real moving moment had come half-way through, when the bride and groom exited and returned
some thirty minutes later after changing from their traditional Shinto wedding kimono into the all-white outfits traditionally worn by Hawaiian royalty, marked by the bride’s crown of flowers and the red sash tied around the groom’s waist. The arena-like room had been darkened and Hewett led the spot-lit couple from its edge to their table at its center, chanting in deep guttural Hawaiian tones that must have alerted the gods as powerfully as the Yokozuna’s dohyo-iri ever did: “Aloha mai ke akua. Ka kao mai ke akua mai ke ala me o mau mai. O mai ka lima o ke akua ola ka ‘aina ola na pua na ali‘i.”

As I watched Yokozuna Akebono up on the dohyo I recalled talking story with Hewett in Waimanalo a few weeks after the wedding, when the highly respected genealogist translated the chant for me. “Aloha mai ke akua,” he began, “Love comes from God. Ka kao mai ke akua—God’s support comes from—mai ke ala me o mau mai—which is that it comes from such a distance we are not familiar with. O mai ka lima o ke akua—that when He brings His hands down to us—ola ka ‘aina—that the land is blessed—ola na pua—that the flowers, or the descendants of this creation are blessed, and—na ali‘i—that the chiefly lineages are blessed” (Hewett, 1998). The chiefly lineages. According to Hawaiian tradition, the ali‘i—Hawai‘i’s royalty—had descended, just like the Japanese royalty were said before 1945 to have descended, from the gods.

“You’re saying Chad is ali‘i?” I asked him.

“I did that specific chant,” he said, “because our great, great grandmother was named ‘Wahine Ali‘i’ which translates as ‘chief-ess.’ And because of the names in our family, we know that we came from a royal lineage. We don’t go around and
brag about things like that, but we understand it. And it is proper that we honor the lineage of our ancestors as one is being joined in marriage, for it blesses the continuity of that lineage through the birth of Nanikohalaka‘ainakupuna” (Hewett, 1998). Frank had given the long middle name to Chad and Christine’s daughter, in part to pay homage to the family’s roots in Kohala on the Big Island—roots that, as I was now learning, stretched all the way back to the gods.

Royal blood flowed through the veins of Chad Ha‘aheo Rowan as he stood atop the dohyo for the last time, summoning the gods to purify the sacred place just once more. He is ali‘i, I thought, as he raised his right leg again, as he stomped powerfully again, as he rose again, and as he lifted his left leg and brought it crashing down on the clay before rising again for the last time.

The dohyo was now pure, free from evil spirits, from bad luck. But this time he had not prepared it for the day’s sumo matches. Neither had he performed simply as some sort of show to display the Yokozuna to an adoring public. And neither had he blessed a new building or an ancient Shinto shrine. Today, Yokozuna Akebono had purified the dohyo because within the hour he would be seated in a chair at its center to wait for the symbol of his strength and his identity as a rikishi of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai to be removed forever.

The Yokozuna turned and took his son from the gyoji and resumed his place between Musashimaru and Musoyama. Akebono had insisted on including Cody in the ceremony, and now as he squatted between his sword bearer and dew sweeper for
the final time, he held the boy out in front of him and touched his bare feet to the
now-pure clay surface—an act performed to guarantee the boy good luck.

The three men stood, stepped off the dohyo, and filed up the hanamichi to a
roar from the crowd. Once back in the shitaku-beya, the Yokozuna’s tsukebito
removed the big heavy rope for the last time and put it away for good.

As Akebono changed back into his formal black robe, the crowd was kept
busy with the same tokoyama’s chon-mage-styling demonstration as the one done on
jungyo, again as a way to fill the time, but in a way which further underscored the
symbolic value of the hair Akebono was about to lose. When the tokoyama combed
out Komusubi Asashoryu’s hair to its full length down past the rikishi’s shoulders, the
crowd could see not only the attention and care with which the hair is treated, but also
its length. To have it cut off would, in the life of an athlete, signify something very
permanent, since it would take years to grow it back.

Akebono mounted the dohyo for the very last time with newly-appointed
United States Ambassador to Japan Howard Baker, who read a prepared speech
naming the Yokozuna one of America’s and Japan’s “true ambassadors.” A
conversation from earlier in the day I’d had with Chad’s good friend Jean came back
to me as the man spoke. She remarked that Chad had never been invited to the White
House. Everyone from Super Bowl winners to Little League champs had made the
Rose Garden photo, and here was America’s “true ambassador” having a long list of
his accomplishments read to him in what sounded like a speech directly lifted from
former Ambassador Tom Foley, who’d spoken at Chad’s October 1998 wedding. It
was nice of Ambassador Baker to have made the effort, but something of a shame that
Chad’s singular accomplishment hadn’t rated higher on the scale of achievement
America chooses to recognize.

At last, a chair was brought out and placed at the dohyo’s center, facing north,
and Akebono took his place, his usual stoic face determined not to cry. The gyoji
stepped up from behind, holding a kind of platter out in front of him. He stood to the
Yokozuna’s right and waited as Ambassador Baker walked over to make the first cut.
He presented the scissors, extra-long and gold-plated for theatrical effect, to the
Ambassador and pointed to a spot towards the front of Akebono’s head and a couple
of inches to the right of his chon-mage. The Ambassador steadied the long scissors
with his left hand and made the cut, solemnly replaced the scissors on the gyoji’s tray,
and stepped down from the dohyo. The French Ambassador, an avid sumo fan who’d
given a speech more befitting Akebono’s accomplishment (in Japanese) followed,
and time began to fly by in a flood of memory and emotion.

In tune with the rest of sumo drama, the highest places of honor are those
towards the end of the line, but the very first cuts are as important as the last, and so
after the obligatory nods to the ambassadors, Tsunehiro Hagiwara stepped up onto the
dohyo, the first and most important of Akebono’s supporters, a guy who wen help me
from the beginning, from when I had my short hair, the guy who’d given Chad the
name Akebono. Hagiwara had earned an entire page to himself in the program being
handed out at the Kokugikan that day—a short photo-bio of the Yokozuna that very
clearly had the small man at the very top of Akebono’s personal banzuke. I thought
he would never stop rising. Here was Akebono, about to have his short hair once
again, and here was Hagiwara-san, just as he’d been through all of the Yokozuna’s
injuries, just as he’d been after the Osaka hostess bar debacle, just as he was right through the hectic months preceding the retirement. The man steadied the scissors and made his cut with all the gravity and depth of the moment etched in his face. He placed the scissors back on the tray, his eyes already glistening with water, bowed solemnly, and stepped off the dohyo.

Hagiwara’s initial cut of honor was followed by a parade of sponsors, Azumazeki Beya Koen Kai members, interested fans willing to pay for the chance to step up and cut a strand of the Yokozuna’s topknot. More than three hundred of these men—women would, according to sumo tradition, defile the dohyo were they to stand on it—followed over the next two hours, a long line of unknowns interspersed from time to time with a celebrity taking advantage of the face time the opportunity afforded.

Watching a parade of ancient Japanese businessmen step up onto the dohyo to cut a strand of hair would seem on the surface to hold all the dramatic appeal of, well, watching hair grow. And yet, sitting there, I couldn’t help but hope that the parade might go on forever, just to prolong the inevitable final cut. Something great was ending all too quickly—something you want to go on forever, like James Bond or Batman or some hero in a book: why couldn’t he just go on being Yokozuna Akebono forever? I’d ended up seated about twenty rows up from the dohyo on a zabuton pillow thanks to three of Christine’s coworkers who, interested and respectful as they were, were new to sumo, and saw this whole thing, rightly so, as a kind of culture-defining festival. Their questions kept me busy as the parade went by, and then it seemed like the next time I looked up, the next old suit was making his cut at
the back of Akebono’s head. Recalling the image of the brittle hair snapping between the gold scissors I’d held at Yamato’s retirement ceremony, the position of the man’s cut told me they were already halfway around.

And then they were three-quarters of the way around, and our conversation turned to my simply telling Christine’s friends who everyone was, as wrapped up as I’d become in the significance of each cut: Musashigawa Beya’s Wakanoyama. Mongolian rikishi Asashoryu: Akebono’s latest understudy both as a rikishi and a gaijin, and from the looks of his last several tournaments, as a yokozuna candidate.

Musashimaru. His epic May 1999 senshuraku win over Akebono had won him promotion as the 67th yokozuna, and the second gaijin yokozuna ever. I’d been lucky enough to attend the formal promotion announcement up in Musashigawa Beya’s big second-floor room, where he’d bowed, from his knees, all the way to the floor, and delivered his prepared acceptance pledge, before answering several questions from the press—none of which made much of his status as a foreigner. I’d attended the rope-making ceremony, and his initial attempts at “the dance,” and his formal promotion ceremony at the Meji Shrine. Musashimaru’s story is for another book, but the timing of his promotion had been fortunate in that it allowed me to see right up close the rituals Akebono had performed in the days surrounding his own promotion. And that these rituals were all completed with much less hype in 1999 said much about the success of Akebono’s tenure as gaijin yokozuna: he had more than proved that a foreigner could uphold all the requirements of the sacred rank.

Takanohana. Near tears myself already, I was amazed at how Akebono was holding up. You could see the effort on his face, but so far he was winning the battle
against the urge to weep. Even now their portraits made up more than a third of those hanging from the Kokugikan rafters above. DiMaggio/Williams, Ali/Frazier—none of that came close. These two had grown up together fighting against one another.

George Kalima followed Yokozuna Takanohana. Done up handsome in a fine black suit, Yamato’s own short hair neatly gelled back, Chad Rowan’s best friend solemnly took the scissors from the gyoji. His face told us he was the only cutter so far who’d been through the clash of opposing emotions that went with giving up the chon-mage. Professional a’tlete. We could do ’um together! Wherever you see one, you find the other, since we was little kids. I like quit, I no like quit. You fucking prick. You fucking prick, leave me up here all alone. He made his cut and replaced the scissors. Akebono had been close to crying for some time now, and until Yamato made his cut, he looked as though he might be able to tough it out at least until Boss took the final turn. But then George put his hands on his best friend’s shoulders, leaned down, and spoke into Chad’s ears. And the tears came.

Konishiki followed Yamato, and despite whatever differences the two men may have, Akebono leaned back to thank the man whose existence had made all of this possible. No, Konishiki had not been able to reach the white rope, but one might say he was lucky, in the end, not to have been promoted. After his 1992 run, he had never been able to put up numbers expected of a yokozuna. Without a yokozuna’s kyujo luxury, Konishiki dropped quickly to the lower-maegashira level to become a crowd favorite, hanging on as long as possible until he finally had his own chon-mage cut following the 1998 Natsu Basho. He’d parlayed his celebrity into a huge endorsement career after leaving the Sumo Kyokai entirely a few months later, and
for the next couple of years you'd see his face at least ten times a day smiling down from Tokyo billboards or on your own TV. *The only person in this sport I ever even look up to in this sport was Ozeki, was Konishiki-zeki.* Ozeki, as all the local rikishi still called him, made his cut, replaced the scissors, bowed, and stepped down off the dohyo.

Bumbo Kalima followed the big man, and still looked strong enough to be able to dominate in sumo. He had risen to Makushita faster than the man whose hair he was now cutting, only to be sent back to Hawai‘i with an injured knee, another casualty of the hardness of the dohyo that underscored the amount of luck that had led to this unprecedented day. The scene might just as easily have been played out in reverse, with Chad flying up from Hawai‘i to cut Bumbo’s hair.

Haywood Kalima followed his son.

Nunu Rowan was next. *Dass my braddah!* He’d said it so proudly that first night I’d gone to talk story with Nunu and his mother on Humuniki Street back in 1993. Family albums, video tapes, stories of this phone call or that trip up to Japan to see his *braddah*—Nunu loved to talk, and he was always proud to talk about what Chad had done. He had followed in the footsteps of his father, driving bus for a tour company back in Hawai‘i, and based on the way he’d had us laughing all week in the private busses that had taken us from place to place in Tokyo, the tourists lucky enough to ride in his bus got their money’s worth. His presence up on the dohyo brought home the fact that Ola was home in jail and not ending his own spectacular sumo career, but then I thought of Chad’s own explanation. If it was just one sport
and not one lifestyle, he would’ve made ‘um. And then I thought, could there be any question that this was all much, much more than sport?

Then Kurt Kipapa stepped up, a huge man about the same age as Konishiki who might have cut his own impressive career on the dohyo if only Larry Aweau had run into him. Standing there with the scissors in his big hands, his image reminded me that his brother Percy was still back in Hawai‘i, having been unable to attend the ceremony himself. I couldn’t help but think further that if not for the ideal of *gaman*, Percy might still be dressed in his mawashi. Through his relationship with Percy, Kurt had become one of Chad’s best friends over the past few years, for two very basic but important reasons as far as I could see. The first was that Kurt always exhibited the kind of respect that had originally impressed Chad about Percy. The second had to do with an anecdote the Yokozuna shared with me during the ’98 jungyo.

“You know how they always expect the yokozuna for pay for everything?” he had asked me. Chad had been picking up bar tabs and dinner tabs for his entire heya for more than five years. “Well the same thing happens when you go home, cause they know you get money. Well one time we went out with Kurt and his wife, and they neva let us pay. They said, ‘You folks is on vacation. Let us take care of it.’ And you know Kurt, them, they not rich. He has one big family for take care of, but he wen insist on paying anyway. That’s the first time anyone ever did that” (Rowan, Chad, 8/98). The hair snapped between the blades in Kurt Kipapa’s hands, and then he raised his arms in triumph.
Uncle Freddy. Alfred Torrez, Janice Rowan’s brother, the man who had stood in for Randy Rowan at Chad and Christine’s wedding would now stand in for the man at his son’s retirement ceremony. I thought briefly of Chad’s father. He was my da kine, was always there for support me, the one to push me into sports. I thought of Mrs. Rowan: forbidden, as a woman, from climbing the dohyo to take her turn with the scissors, she had actually taken the first cut herself months ago when her son was back in Waimanalo for his last visit. Neither tough like Mr. Kalima nor uncompromising like Uncle Sam Spencer, Uncle Freddy was simply humble and kind, endeared, one might say, with the spirit of aloha. We’d spent much of the two-hour wait in Honolulu International Airport exchanging stories about jungyo, which he had followed a couple of years before I did. He was excited to have had the experience, and above all, full of deep respect, both for his nephew, and for what Japan had given his nephew.

Now with the scissors in his hands and tears in his eyes, Uncle Freddy allowed a glimmer of pride to show through, not just as a relative from home, but as someone who’d seen it all up close. Mr. Kalina. For providing his first real home away from Humuniki Street, and for having helped create and raise the woman he loved, the Yokozuna awarded the final and most prestigious spot in line—the last to cut before Azumazeki Oyakata—to Christine’s father.

Then the Kokugikan lights dimmed, leaving Akebono spot-lighted on the dohyo alone with his tears and his thoughts—the pride for what he’d done, the sadness for having to leave, the joy of moving on, or even of leaving the sumo world altogether, the pain of being unable to do what he came to do better than anyone,
what he could still do better than most. It was all punctuated by a ten-minute bio of his career read out by an NHK announcer which managed to hit most of his struggles as a gaijin rikishi and then stretch his January '93 senshuraku bout with Takanohana even beyond the time it actually took, re-enacting the radio broadcast and ending in shouts of “Akebono-no-yusho! Akebono-no-yusho! Akebono-no-yusho!”

Watching a full day of sumo involves waiting on at least four levels of time. First you wait for the boys to complete their pre-bout rituals before charging at one another. You wait over the course of a day for the competition to increase in size and skill as the matches make their way up the banzuke. Depending on the day of the tournament, you wait for the numbers to accumulate and the yusho race to take shape. And on a deeper level, you wait for these boys before you in the early morning of the empty Kokugikan to reach higher levels of strength and skill, to work their way over the years up the banzuke to stardom, perhaps even to the sport’s pinnacle of fighting in the day’s final bout, and even beyond, to the honored positions of one of the black haori-clad oyakata who sit around the dohyo as judges.

Watching Akebono now, this last long-term deep measure of time had suddenly sped up to the pace of the brief pre-bout ritual the boys perform before charging at one another. No longer on a deeper level, it was in real time, right before our eyes. This three-plus-hour ceremony seemed on fast-forward, like the whole career had gone by in less time than it takes to watch a single day of sumo: Chad Rowan comes from Hawai‘i. He has a hard time adjusting. He faces the highly regarded Takahanada just after nine a.m. before ten thousand empty seats. He works
hard and reaches juryo—the eleventh foreigner to do so. Less than three years later he and Takahanada are fighting in the last bout of the day on the last day of the tournament to decided the winner or force a playoff. They charge. Akebono takes the yusho. He becomes the first foreigner promoted to yokozuna, and continues fighting in the last bout of the day for the next eight years, collecting his eleventh yusho in his final tournament to go out on top. The pre-bout ritual of a pair of boys down in jonokuchi lasts about a minute—the same amount of time it takes to recall an entire career.

The lights came up as Azumazeki Oyakata was announced. His own chonmage had been the first to be cut in this building when it opened in 1985, marking the end of a career perhaps more remarkable than even Akebono’s. The image of the Hawaiian Oyakata preparing to make the final cut on the chon-mage of the Hawaiian Yokozuna on the altar of Japan’s National Sport summed up the accomplishments of both men with a look: triumphs in strength, durability, determination, patience, perception, intelligence, and the luck to have stepped through a window in time. No Hawaiian had been recruited since Percy Kipapa, nearly ten years before. No, the sight before us, this was something the likes of which no one would ever see again.

Azumazeki Oyakata took the scissors from the gyoji. The tears that had been dripping down Akebono’s face for some time now were falling in a steady stream. His mother was also crying now. And his wife, his best friend George, his good friend Kurt, his Uncle Freddy, most of the people sitting around me, many more at home watching on television. Through the blur and the fog of my own tears I could
see Azumazeki Oyakata make the final cut, and place the chon-mage and the golden scissors on the gyoji's platter, and then wipe away tears of his own.

Akebono Oyakata then stood at the center of the dohyo next to Azumazeki Oyakata on nearly equal terms. Facing north, the two men bowed as one. They turned east as one and then bowed again. They bowed to the south, and then to the west. A microphone was brought to the dohyo, and Akebono Oyakata thanked his fans for their support over the years, and for being a part of his retirement ceremony.

The chon-mage—the most cherished and visible symbol of inclusion in the brotherhood of the sumo world—was now almost strangely missing from the top of Akebono's head, where it had been since his thick, curly hair had finally grown out long enough to be combed and styled. As he stood there thanking us through sobs and more tears, that was all you could really focus on: it was gone. There would be no "coming out of retirement," no Jordanesque comebacks. Akebono's career on the dohyo was, in the most visually permanent way, over.
Epilogue

A few months after instructing newly promoted Yokozuna Asashoryu—sumo’s third gaijin yokozuna—in the dohyo-iri’s sacred steps, Akebono Oyakata shocked the sumo world by clearing out his Azumazeki Beya room, piercing his ears, getting a tattoo, and signing a multi-million-dollar contract to fight in a sport called K-1. Instead of following in the footsteps of Azumazeki Oyakata by passing the ancient tradition down to the next generation of sumotori as an honored Nihon Sumo Kyokai elder, he would don boxing gloves and take on Bob Sapp, and African-American ex-NFL linebacker who headlined the brutal sport. Instead of competing with the recently-retired Takanohana Oyakata as a coach and teacher of sumodō, he would trade punches and kicks with a man who had no qualms with making ape noises and enacting other negative stereotypes, as long as the price was right. From a sport of Emperors and gods, he would move to a sport invented by marketing geniuses.

What was he thinking?

The he-did-it-for-the-money answer was the first and most popular guess at the reason, and to some, a disappointing one. Akebono had no koen kai. He did not own toshiyori kabu—the Sumo Kyokai stock needed for a permanent Oyakata position. After a few failed investments, he had little money in the bank. He had a wife and three children to support on a salary that had recently dropped from the yokozuna level of around $250k annually to about $100k. The K-1 contract was
widely reported to be worth over four million dollars for three fights. And so he signed.

Deeply immersed as I was in my fourth rewrite of the final third of this book, I did not share the shock rippling through the sumo world. Sure, Akebono did it for the money. But there was far more involved in this seemingly incredible turn of events than money. For years now Chad Rowan had known that he would never entirely shed the “gaijin” from Gaijin Yokozuna, and then Gaijin Oyakata. Despite his impeccable cultural performance, his acceptance and whatever respect he earned in the sumo world would always be qualified—a fact now underscored by the adulation that continued to be heaped upon his rival Takanohana despite Akebono’s much greater success as an oyakata. (In addition to training Yokozuna Asashoryu, Akebono had also overseen the promotions of Ushiomaru to juryo, and of Takamisakari to the sanyaku level, all less than a year after assuming primary training responsibilities at Azumazeki Beya.) This lack of, shall we say, *aloha*, extended to the oyakata hierarchy, who did nothing to help Akebono cut a deal for Toshiyori kabu, or to smooth the way for his takeover of Azumazeki Beya upon the eventual retirement of his boss.

In a poignant *Time* magazine interview not long after the announcement, Akebono explained that, upon hearing the news of his intention to leave sumo, many oyakata called to wish him well. Not one tried to talk him out of it. (Cite)

After less than two months of training, Akebono charged Bob Sapp at the bell, forcing him into a corner, landing a few solid punches along the way with his famously fast hands.
And then it was Sapp's turn. Nearly four hundred pounds of chiseled muscle unleashed itself on Akebono, who took several of some of the hardest punches ever thrown before dropping hard. The former yokozuna could not have been more clearly out of his element as he lay on the canvas, bathed in sweat and breathing heavily, Christine looking on in horror from her ringside seat.

But then something happened that had never happened in his thirteen years as a rikishi, in his eight years as a yokozuna. The crowd began to cheer, to cheer for Akebono, all seventy thousand of them. He struggled to his knees, and the cheering got louder. And when he finally stood on the eight count, the place roared as if someone had just hit a walk-off home run to win the World Series. It would be harder to imagine a more vivid example of gaman than the sight of the obviously overmatched Akebono lifting his big body to its feet to go back for more, and the crowd loved him for it. Not one of them would have been looking to see that his gloves were on correctly, or that he bowed at the right time, or that he made the correct gesture. Not one of them would have been waiting to cheer louder for Takanohana, who also sat ringside doing TV commentary. As one, the huge crowd gave Akebono more love, more encouragement, more respect than he'd ever been given in the Kokugikan.

That this wave of positive energy could do nothing to help Akebono against Sapp was far beside the point. After another hard right, Akebono was out cold before he even hit the ground, the referee stopping his count at three to wave on the medics. Another fighter would have made excuses, been embarrassed, run out of the stadium as quickly as possible. Akebono had just gotten his ass kicked in front of seventy
thousand people and a national television audience, and yet he stood in the ring like a winner. He took his time exiting the arena, and he did so with his arms raised in triumph.
A Biographer’s Note

Telling this story has been an act as complex as the story itself, as I found out after several failed attempts at what wound up looking like the novelized version of the adventures of Chad Rowan. My straight narrative, in a third-person voice faithful to Rowan’s point of view, worked well for the first couple of chapters in its concrete representation of the cultural challenges Rowan faced upon arrival in Tokyo. But that voice left me little room for analysis, often lacked immediacy, and obscured my sources. In a word, it came off as “definitive”—a narrative stance at odds with my own understanding of the very personal nature of my research quest and what it yielded, as well as my awareness of vexed issues of representation and commodification.

I worked to overcome the limits of the pure-biography voice of my earlier drafts by adding the frame which grounds the telling of Rowan’s life as an autobiographical exercise—a tangible experience itself that is certainly not “definitive.” Narrative remains my primary mode of expression as I work to show how Rowan dealt with such troubling cultural adjustments as sumo’s seniority system, but the companion narrative of the autobiographical frame underscores such dramatic renderings as my version of what happened, based upon my research. Further, the foregrounded “I” frees me to step in and expand upon such concrete representations with more detailed analyses; it allows me to prominently acknowledge the sources for those representations (including my own first-hand observations); it allows me to comment on how I’m using such sources; and it allows
me to flash forward and backward more easily to deepen the historical and cultural
context of moments such as Rowan’s perfectly delivered “I will try my best” initial
press conference, which I soon compare to Konishiki’s initial cultural failures made
four years earlier.

This particular narrative voice is grounded in the lifewriting theories and
practices of Dorrine Kondo, Janet Malcolm, Art Spiegelman, Nancy Miller, and
James Olney, and influenced by James Walter’s commentary regarding biography’s
recent evolution. I model the voice on the actual presentations of auto/ethnographer
Kondo and auto/biographers Malcolm and Spiegleman. Kondo’s notion of the
“Eye/I” as an observer/participant and as a narrative voice which challenges the
notion of a distinction between the “personal” and the “political,” Miller’s call in a
similar vein for a more personal kind of academic voice in criticism, Malcolm’s take
on Edelian imposition of narrative as “arrogant,” and Olney’s invention of the term
“auto/biography” all inform the repeated declaration of subjectivity my method
requires for both cultural reasons, dealing with the potential problems of a haole
writing about a Hawaiian’s construction of a Japanese identity, and for more general
reasons, which resonate with the recent biographical theory Walter examines that
suggests the biographer should come out of hiding. Malcolm’s Silent Woman and
Spiegelman’s Maus are just two examples of the value of “the story of the story” as a
companion narrative—if not the more important narrative—within the covers of a
biography.

This particular use of the “I” has also allowed me to address the major
dilemma of any biography, and most clearly of one with cultural concerns as
foregrounded as those with which I’m dealing here: the fact that the complexity of anyone’s life contains several narratives that occur simultaneously. In this case, we have the obvious sports success story, deepened by Rowan’s succession of injuries and comebacks and the championship in his final tournament. We also have the foreigner in Japan success story, the Hawaiian in Japan success story, the Hawaiian constructing a Japanese identity, the “same old Chad from Waimanalo” story, the local Samoan/local Hawaiian conflict, the Windward/Leeward conflict, the Country Mouse/City Mouse adjustment story, the triumph of the son from the disadvantaged local family, the clear change in Japan’s willingness to accept outsiders, the haole biographer on a research quest, and the story of Mark Panek making friends in Waimanalo. These narratives certainly still compete, and I highlight some more than others, but the autoethnographic “I” has allowed me to acknowledge them all more effectively, and even to move from one to another when appropriate.

The result has been as much a study in local Hawai‘i and Japanese cultures as it is a biography of Chad Rowan. It has been my hope here not just to avoid convenient generalizations about both cultures, but to address some such existing generalizations, and also to see where such assumptions about both cultures were at work in Japan’s acceptance of Chad Rowan, and in Rowan’s own on-going constructions of Japanese identities. Japan Scholar Patrick Smith quotes novelist Kenzaburo Oe as claiming the real Japanese exist somewhere between the West’s romantic notions of feudal samurai and what it considers Japan’s modern fascination with the latest electronic gadget. From the start of his immersion, Rowan accepted the Japanese on Oe’s “middle ground,” treating his own cultural performance as
situational—an act whose requirements he would gauge in the moment according to his audience, and then execute—rather than as something dictated by complex readings of chrysanthemums and swords and other "signs." At the same time, his audience saw someone with what they knew as "the aloha spirit," and reacted differently than they likely would have had this foreigner come from New York. While I rely heavily on concrete representations to make most of my points about this cultural contact zone, the narrative voice I've chosen has allowed me to step back and inject more analytical commentary when appropriate, and to nod directly to the scholarship on both cultures that informs the rest of what I'm doing.

Finally, my choice of narrative voice has made sense from a creative standpoint. As a writer of creative nonfiction, what I'm mainly interested in is offering readers a vivid vicarious experience of what life might be like for a 527-pound Hawaiian leader of Japan's National Sport. Whenever possible, I want to activate readers' imaginations to the point where they relive such monumental moments as Rowan's first big win over the man who would become his greatest rival, or his first steps off the plane into his first winter. What I'm aiming for in such instances is the kind of "vivid and continuous dream" that John Gardner tells novelists to provide for their readers. With my authorial "I," I hope to give the reader a way into this vivid and continuous dream, partly through the greater immediacy of the scenes that include me recording Rowan and the many other rich and varied voices that appear, and partly by offering the implied companion narrative of the biographical act as a tangible, vicarious experience in itself. My narrative certainly does include third-person novelistic sections, but the first person narrative voice
preceding such sections helps ease the reader into such constructed scenes so that empathy with a person as distinctive as Chad Rowan is no longer such a stretch of the imagination.

The Research

The resulting mix of personal observations, multiple voices from interviews, historical, cultural, and biographical analysis, and dramatic reconstruction of events has required an equally complex and comprehensive mode of research. An interview (or several interviews) with Rowan alone, for instance, would have only yielded some version of the kind of my-side-of-things ghosted autobiography that was for sale at his 2001 retirement ceremony. Immersion in printed material would have yielded a narrow what-happened record of events in a shallow cultural context. A record of my own personal observations would have yielded an equally narrow slice of a few months in the man’s life.

In order to come out of hiding in the ways illustrated by James Walter and enacted by auto/biographers like Malcolm and Spiegelman—particularly in light of the fact that I do continue to rely on dramatic rendering of events to make many of the book’s important points—I’ve had to build a qualified kind of authority that demonstrates not just that I know what I’m talking about, but that I know it well enough to admit and even point out its limits—an apparently precarious rhetorical stance. Such authority, particularly in the case of a living subject still active in his career, came only from immersion in a variety of sources. The most valuable of these for me have been the multiple oral history interviews I conducted, many of which
opened doors to other interviews, contradicted printed sources and/or each other, and complicated things as often as they solved problems. In addition to revealing much about the nature of Chad Rowan, and filling in gaps in the chronological narrative, the interviews underscored the temporal, dialogic—some might even say fictive—nature of any biographical endeavor. Conduct the interview a week later, or ask mom instead of younger brother, and the story of Chad’s tenure on the Waimanalo Pop Warner football team changes.

The quality of the oral history interview, of course, depends upon what kinds of questions are asked and answered, which depended in my case on a deep understanding of the cultures and histories of sumo, Japan, and Hawai‘i. To this end I’ve supplemented my eleven years of experience living here in Hawai‘i and my three years living in Japan (half of which I spent as a member of a Japanese family) with much cultural studies scholarship on both Hawai‘i and Japan, as well as on sumo tradition and more recent sumo history. My personal experience and observations have allowed for a reflexive relationship with scholarship on sumo culture and recent sumo history. To take just one example, I have been able to watch the actual sport from varying levels of closeness, ranging from internet postings to the several hundreds of hours I spent watching daily practice and attending tournaments.

Further study of scholarship in ethnography, autoethnography, other lifewriting theory and criticism, and creative writing theory has enabled me to analyze, select, and order this wealth of material more thoughtfully, and to explain the significance of both the events I describe, and of my reasons for choosing them and ordering them as I do.
My research has been approved by the University of Hawai‘i’s Committee on Human Subjects.

**Beyond Chad Rowan: A Model of Identity Theory**

This book is a kind of admission that no one’s life flows according to a neat, novelistic narrative, that no one’s “self” can be neatly wrapped up in narrative, and therefore, that to impose a narrative on what Janet Malcolm calls “the flotsam and jetsam that floats up on the shores of biographical research” ends in a presentation that is both dishonest and inaccurate. The book is full of short authorial intrusions that occur when I feel it’s necessary to explain where my facts came from, what I’m doing with them, why I’m drawing certain conclusions, and whether conclusions should be drawn. Such a self-conscious acknowledgement of subjectivity owes much to postmodern theories suggesting that identity is multiple, temporal, dialogic, relational, and/or performed or constructed in the moment—all ideas that find easy proof in the actions of Chad Rowan.

I was first drawn to Chad Rowan as an interesting character eleven years ago when I lived in Japan—a particularly formal place where social situations govern behaviors and modes of speech in much stricter ways than anywhere else I had ever lived. And from what little I could pick up about the details of Japan’s National Sport back then, I concluded that Rowan’s success in sumo depended upon assimilation to Japanese culture. Rowan had actually become Japanese, an idea suggested by the declaration that those promoted to sumo’s top rank had to possess *hinkaku*—a kind of dignity which only Japanese could possibly have. After further research, I concluded
that Rowan had not assimilated, but had been able to enact a culturally appropriate role in the Japanese drama. And finally I concluded that, at least most of the time, he was not acting—a notion that suggests insincerity or even dishonesty—but that he actually was sincere, was *himself*, in very contradictory instances, such as when he angrily and privately referred collectively to the sumo elders as exceedingly narrow-minded and uneducated old men while at the same time he has always bowed to any of these men with deep and sincere reverence and respect. He could feel and express these and other seemingly opposing emotions almost simultaneously, suggesting that he was not just “acting” in the let’s-pretend sense of the word, but that he, in subtle ways, could completely shift his identity depending upon the situation.
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Lifewriting Theory-related:


**Appendix: Glossary**

aki-- autumn. The Aki BASHO takes place at the KOKUGIKAN every September.

ani-deshi-- older brother. According to sumo's seniority system, the ani-deshi wields authority over those younger than him in his HEYA. See also, DESHI.

basho-- a sumo tournament. Each of the six bi-monthly major tournaments is referred to as a Hon-BASHO. Most of the smaller tournaments throughout the year, which have no effect on ranking, are referred to in Japanese-English as tonomento.
banzuke— the list of all active RIKISHI in the NIHON SUMO KYOKAI according to rank. The banzuke is composed by a group of OYAKATA prior to each Hon-BASHO, somewhat subjectively but largely based on the results of the previous Hon-BASHO.

beya— see HEY A. When used in compound form, Japanese words normally beginning with an “h” sound slightly change pronunciation to have a “b” sound.

deshi— brother. Those who belong to the same HEY A call one another deshi.

dohyo— the hard, clay fighting surface in the center of the arena on which the bouts take place. The boundary in sumo is a ring constructed of straw bales sunken into the dohyo during its construction. A new dohyo is built before each major BASHO.

dohyo-iri— the ring-entering ceremony. Before each day of each HON-BASHO there are at least two dohyo-iri: one preceding the JURYO matches, and one preceding the MAKUNOUCHI matches, in which the RIKISHI are introduced according to rank and the DOHYO is blessed for competition. The YOKOZUNA each conduct separated dohyo-iri immediately following that of the rest of the makunouchi rikishi. Yokozuna are also called upon to perform dohyo-iri outside of sumo for various spiritual purposes.

gaijin— outsider; foreigner. Sometimes used and/or taken as derogatory, as compared to the more polite “gaikokujin,” or the more specific “Americajin” or “Hawaiijin.” (The suffix jin means person.)

gaman— to forge on in spite of pain. RIKISHI are told to gaman when they are tired, or often, when they are injured.

gyoji— the referee in sumo.

hanamichi— the path through the crowd along which the RIKISHI walk to get to the DOHYO. It is a Kabuki term, meaning “flower path.”

haori— a black kimono-like garment worn by men on formal occasions such as traditional Japanese wedding ceremonies. The oyakata who act as judges beside the dohyo wear haori.

haru— spring. The Haru BASHO takes place in Osaka every March.

heya— the building in which a collective of RIKISHI live and train under the same OYAKATA. The typical heya has baths and showers on the basement level, a practice DOHYO, viewing area, eating area, kitchen, and office on the main floor, a living area for the RIKISHI on the second floor--private rooms for
SEKITORI, who are not required to live in the heya, and a common area for everyone else, who must live in the heya—and an apartment on the third floor for the OYAKATA and his family. When combined with its name, “heya” sounds like “BEYA,” as in, Azumazeki Beya or Takasago Beya. The horribly inept English translation is “stable.”

**hinkaku**—a nearly undefinable kind of dignity, thought by many Japanese to be impossible for GAIJIN to understand, let alone possess. It is a requirement for promotion to YOKOZUNA.

**juryo**—sumo’s first paid rank fittingly translates into “ten ryo,” an ancient form of Japanese currency. Promotion to juryo is the most dramatic moment in a RIKISHI’s life, for not only does he begin to receive a monthly salary; he also moves from the position of servant to lord within the HEYA and is granted great respect outside. There can only be 26 rikishi in the juryo division at one time. See the banzuke on page 94.

**kenka**—a street fight, or brawl.

**kesho mawashi**—prize MAWASHI. The beautiful apron-like garment worn by SEKITORI during the DOHYO-IRI.

**kohai**—junior in a seniority-based relationship. See SEMPAI.

**Kokugikan**—the Hall of National Sport. The arena in Tokyo where the January, May, and September Hon-BASHO are held. The building also houses the NIHON SUMO KYOKAI offices, a sumo museum, and a sumo school which all new recruits attend for six months. Kokugi means “national sport.”

**makunouchi**—the major leagues in sumo, also referred to as “makuuchí.”

**matsuri**—festival, or ceremony.

**mawashi**—the clothing worn by RIKISHI during competition or practice. It consists of a single length of cloth—silk for SEKITORI during competition, white canvas during practice, and black canvas during both practice and competition for those ranked below. A mawashi is usually around seven meters long, wound through the groin area once and several times around the waist as a belt, and then tied at the back. During a match it is the most practical place to grab an opponent and steer him off of the DOHYO.

**mizu**—water.

**natsu**—summer. The Natsu BASHO takes place in the KOKUGIKAN every May.
Nihon Sumo Kyokai-- The Japan Sumo Association. This is everything and everyone involved in professional sumo, including all RIKISHI, OYAKATA, GYOJI, and many more employees. It is a not-for-profit corporation registered under the Ministry of Education in Japan. For the purposes of this paper, it is simply the governing body of the sport.

oyakata-- and elder or coach in the NIHON SUMO KYOKAI. There are 105 oyakata positions in the Kyokai which are purchased and sold much the same way as shares of stock in a company. An active RIKISHI must arrange for purchase of one of these positions--usually between one and three million dollars--in order to stay with the Kyokai after retirement. Oyakata are the sole administrators of the Kyokai, which they run through various elected committees, and are paid a monthly salary. Each HEYA is named for, owned, and operated by an oyakata, who has the right to pass it on to any oyakata of his choosing upon his own mandatory retirement at the age of 65. He can pass his stock along as well to a qualified retiring RIKISHI, but this is usually sold.

ozeki-- sumo’s second-highest rank. An ozeki’s privileges of rank include the chance to redeem a losing record. All those ranked below are demoted for majority-loss records, while the ozeki are given a second chance.

rikishi-- literally, “strong man.” Those who do sumo are sometimes referred to as SUMOTORI or O-sumo-san, but usually as rikishi.

sekitori-- literally, “one who has taken a barrier.” All RIKISHI ranked JURYO and above—that is, those who are paid a monthly salary—are referred to as sekitori.

sempai-- senior. Most institutions, corporations, and clubs in Japan are structured hierarchically according to years of service, membership or employment. Most public relationships run according to senior-junior (sempai-KOHAI) terms.

senshuraku-- the last day of the performance, referring to the final day of a HonBASHO or the final day of a Kabuki performance.

shin-deshi-- a new recruit. The newest members of a HEYA.

sumotori-- one who does sumo. Also called O-sumo-san or RIKISHI. While RIKISHI is more commonly used, these terms are interchangeable.

tsukebito-- attendant or servant. RIKISHI ranked below JURYO are assigned to SEKITORI as tsukebito and must attend to various needs ranging from scrubbing the sekitori’s back in the bath, to running errands, to accompanying the sekitori outside the HEYA to carry his bags and protect him from crowds. The tsukebito is basically a slave, but is usually given gratuities for his services. The sekitori in many respects treats his tsukebito as younger brothers. The number of tsukebito
assigned to a sekitori depends on his rank (usually between one and two for juryo, and as many as eight for a yokozuna).

Tsuriyane-- the roof-like structure suspended over the DOHYO from the arena’s ceiling, built in the style of a Shinto shrine and maintained as a reminder of days when sumo was held outside. (Yane means “roof.”)

Yobidashi-- ring announcers. A yobidashi mounts the DOHYO before each match and sings out the names of the two competitors.

Yokozuna-- sumo’s highest rank.

Yukata-- the kimono-like robe worn by RIKISHI whenever they are in public, except during practice and competition, or performance of the DOHYO-IRI.

Yusho-- championship. The winner of contests in Japan ranging from golf tournaments to game shows to sumo is said to have yusho shimashita, or “done the yusho.” The MAKUNOUCHI yusho winner in a HON-BASHO is awarded the Emperor’s Cup.

Zensho-yusho-- to take the YUSHO with a perfect record of 15-0 in JURYO or MAKUNOUCHI, or 7-0 in the ranks below. In the upper divisions, its rough equivalent is baseball’s perfect game.