

Statue of 46th Sumo Grand Champion Asashio Taro

The sumo wrestler Asashio Taro became the pride of Tokunoshima in 1959 by winning promotion to *yokozuna* grand champion, the pinnacle of Japan's national sport. Asashio later became a coach and was instrumental in training Japan's first foreign wrestler to achieve high rank (Konishiki, from Hawaii), thereby helping to popularize sumo internationally.

The economy of Tokunoshima was still struggling in the aftermath of World War II when the teenage Asashio was forging a reputation as a gentle giant who went easy on his training partners to avoid injuring them. Leaving the island at age 19, he joined a sumo stable in Kobe and competed in his first professional tournament in 1948.

He took the name Asashio in 1952. He would go on to win five grand championships, four of those at the annual tournaments held in Osaka in March. He became the 46th *yokozuna* in sumo history in 1959, aged 30. But his best days were behind him, and after one more championship, he retired in 1962.

Asashio became a coach at the Takasago stable, becoming its *oyakata* (stable master) in 1971. His tenure would see the wrestlers Asashio Taro IV (Asashio himself had been the third wrestler to bear the name), and Hawaiian-born Japanese-Samoan Konishiki reach the second-highest rank of *ozeki*. Konishiki was the first sumo wrestler born outside Japan to reach that rank, and he paved the way for numerous non-Japanese wrestlers to succeed in this ancient sport.

Asashio died in late 1988 at the age of 58, following a stroke.

The statue of Asashio, wearing his *yokozuna* ceremonial *kesho-mawashi* belt, was completed in 1995 with funds raised largely by the local community. Behind him stands Mt. Inokawa, the island's tallest peak at 645 meters.