

Statue of 46th Sumo Grand Champion Asashio Taro

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

Gentle giant

Born Yonekawa Fumitoshi in Inokawa in 1929, Asashio developed his wrestling skills when Tokunoshima was still struggling in the aftermath of World War II. He forged a reputation as a gentle giant who went easy on his training partners to avoid injuring them. At that time, travel was still restricted since the island was under the jurisdiction of the U.S. military, but at age 19 he left without notifying the authorities. He joined a sumo stable in Kobe and competed in his first professional tournament in 1948.

Champion

By 1951 he had won promotion to the top division and took the name Asashio the following year, when he also celebrated upset victories over two grand champions. He went on to win five grand championships, with four of those coming at the annual Spring *Basho* tournaments held in Osaka in March. Asashio was finally promoted to *yokozuna* in 1959 at the age of 30. He was the 46th wrestler to hold the title in sumo's centuries-long history.

But the grueling sport took its toll. A string of injuries meant his best days were behind him, and after just one more championship victory and another as a tournament runner-up, Asashio retired in 1962.

Later career

He became a coach at the Takasago stable where he had wrestled, taking over as its *oyakata* (stable master) in 1971. During his tenure the wrestlers Asashio Taro IV (Asashio himself had been the third wrestler to bear the name) and Hawaiian-born Japanese-Samoan Konishiki reached the second-highest rank of *ozeki*. Konishiki was in fact the first sumo wrestler born outside Japan to reach that rank and some sumo fans believed he would have been promoted to *yokozuna* had he been native Japanese. Nevertheless, Konishiki was hugely popular and paved the way for numerous non-Japanese wrestlers to later succeed in the ancient sport.

Asashio died in late 1988 at age 58 following a stroke. The statue commemorating him was completed in 1995 with funds for its construction raised largely by the local Inokawa community.

Majestic site

The conical Mount Inokawa, the island's tallest peak at 645 meters, provides an impressive backdrop to the statue of Asashio Taro, looking suitably imposing in his *yokozuna* ceremonial *kesho-mawashi* champion belt.

A museum charting the life and career of this local hero is planned for a site adjacent to the statue.

Getting there

The statue sits near the eastern shore of the island, a 30-minute drive from the airport or 15 minutes from Kametoku New Port.