

SPORTING LEGENDS: KONISHIKI

SPORT: SUMO WRESTLING

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1982 - 1992

Konishiki Yasokichi was born Salevaa Atisanoe in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1963. His Samoan parents had nine children, and Sally was the youngest of five boys.



He excelled at swimming, surfing and American football, and enjoyed weight training and wrestling at high school. He grew up in a rough suburb of Honolulu, but claims he was the smartest kid on the block. I was one of only two Samoans accepted to the University of Hawaii that year, and I was offered two scholarships. But I really wanted to study law at Syracuse University.

However, Sally was spotted by Jesse Kuhaulua, another Hawaiian who had been the first non-Asian to become a professional sumo wrestler, nearly 20 years earlier. Kuhaulua, or Takamiyama as he was known, persuaded the young Samoan to go to Japan with him to learn the art of sumo wrestling.

In 1982 Sally entered a sumo stable where he trained with other young wrestlers. Takamiyama warned him that it would be a hard life, and the route to the top would not be easy, you'd have to get up early in the morning and work out on the dirt ring in your bare feet every day. You'd have to kowtow to all the wrestlers who entered ahead of you, not matter what their age. You'd even have to wash them in the bath.

For a man who had wanted to be an American lawyer, life was taking strange turns!

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Konishiki was an absolute mountain of a man!

Undaunted, Sally entered the apprentice ranks and, at his initial weigh-in, two weighing machines had to be used, as he was the second heaviest apprentice ever. However, he continued adding to his bulk, and quickly took to the sumo diet of chanko-nabe, a highly fattening combination of vegetables, meat and fish. His weight went up to 252 kilos, more than 39 stones, by 1988 he was the heaviest wrestler in sumo.

His progress was rapid. He even surprised himself by reaching sekitori, or professional rank, in just two and a half years, and in 1984 he rocked the sumo world by beating the only two yokozuna (grand champions). He adapted just as well to Japanese life, learning the language much faster than many foreigners. Sumo wrestlers have one-word names, and Sally took the name Konishiki, which means *little brocade*.

During his career he won the top division championship on three occasions and came close to becoming the first foreign born grand champion, or yokozuna, prompting first a debate as to whether a foreigner could have the necessary cultural understanding to be acceptable in sumo's ultimate rank. Subsequently after winning two championships in three tournaments he prompted controversy as to whether his non-promotion to yokozuna was based on racism by the Japan Sumo Association who run the sport.

By 1988, Konishiki was firmly established as a leading ozeki, or champion. He retained his Ozeki rank for more than six years, and carried on fighting in the top division for a further four years. Towards the end of his career he became progressively more popular with many Japanese fans, due to his fighting spirit, distinctive bulk and personality.

After his retirement he remained in the Sumo Association as an elder for a short time, before branching out as a Japanese entertainer under the name "KONISHIKI" (The capitalization is an effort to reflect the association's requiring him to write the name in the Roman alphabet, forbidding its being spelled out in Japanese characters, after he left sumo).

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Scott Burton's Final Thought

Sporting Legends come in all shapes and sizes, and to be fair, Konishiki is arguably the biggest

No other Sporting Legend can claim to weigh 39 stones and still be a grand champion at their chosen sport!

This guy was strong, powerful, and frighteningly agile for someone so huge.

He was the best at what he did throughout his competitive era, and became a household name in his native Japan.

At a typical fighting weight of around 270 kg he was the heaviest rikishi ever in sumo and used his weight to power his opponents out of the ring. However, particularly in latter years, his weight led him to be susceptible to belt throws by lighter and more agile opponents.



Konishiki was a fearsome opponent, no matter how big you thought you were!