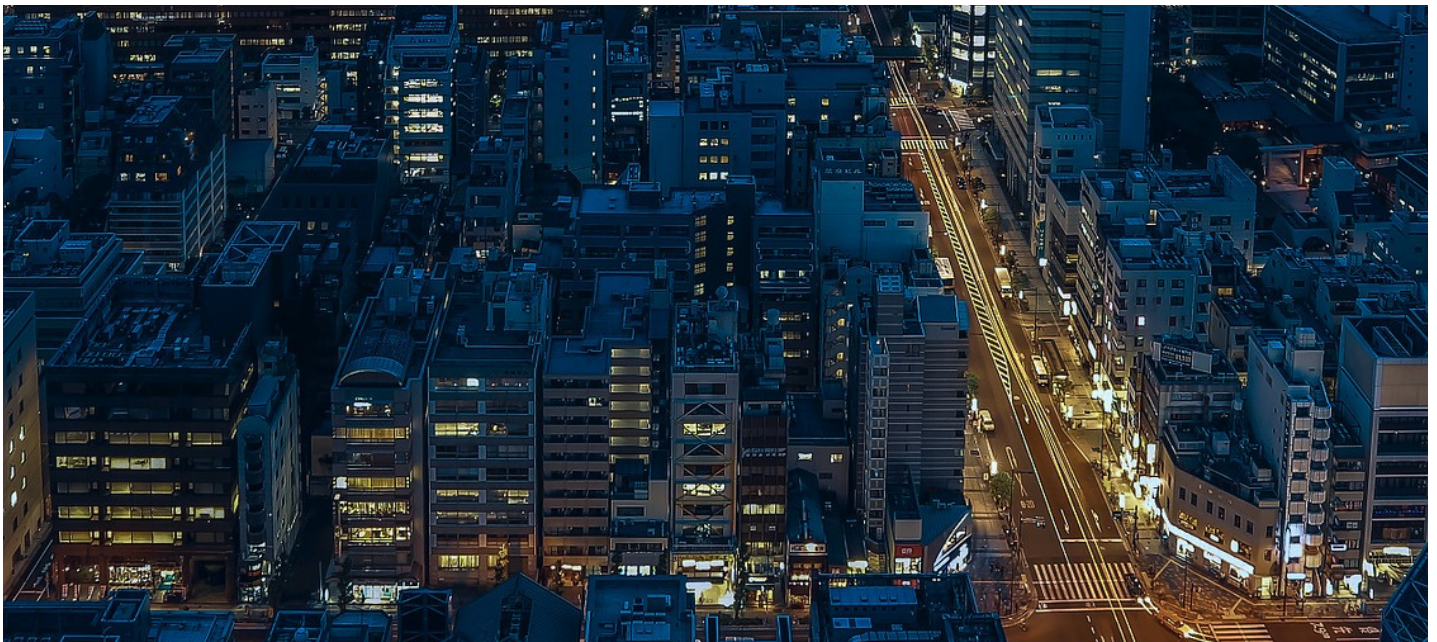


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THE OPENING ROUND



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Editor's Notes

There is no doubt mixed martial arts is a sport, but more often - it is a story.

A story? A bit saccharine, you might say. "It's not that deep", you might laugh.

However, there is truly a bigger story to be told about fighting that is often overlooked by fans. Beyond the brevity of their performance in the ring and cage, there is a plethora of tales to be told about each fighters' beginnings, challenges and motivations.

And so, with each issue of "The Fighter", I endeavour to uncover a glimpse of some of these stories in the Japanese fight scene. In this issue, we speak to former DEEP featherweight champion Takahiro Ashida who, amongst other things, discusses what fighting means to him and his relationship with his mentor Kazuyuki Miyata.

Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy our first issue: the opening round.

Yours in fighting,

LJ

**"THE FIGHT IS WON OR LOST FAR AWAY FROM WITNESSES - BEHIND THE LINES, IN THE GYM, AND OUT THERE ON THE ROAD, LONG BEFORE I DANCE UNDER THOSE LIGHTS"
- MUHAMMAD ALI**



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Takahiro Ashida: an unwavering spirit

By LJ

Against the burgeoning depth of the featherweight division, we speak to one of its strongest players - Takahiro Ashida - on realising his childhood dreams; his relationship with mentor Kazuyuki Miyata; and staying true to himself in an age increasingly marked by pressure for fighters to self-promote.

“By the time I graduated from junior high school, I had made up my mind that I was going to become a professional MMA fighter,” says Takahiro Ashida.

As an elementary schoolboy, he was already mesmerised by the world of martial arts. He avidly watched fights of the kickboxing promotion K-1: fighters like the late K-1 legend, Andy Hug, appeared as heroes to the young boys' eyes.

However, the decision to become a fighter did not come immediately to Ashida. “I thought it was too difficult for me to pursue,” he reminisces. Creative at heart, he was also interested in becoming a manga artist or going into the field of robotics.

It was not until Ashida discovered PRIDE Fighting Championships, that he considered turning his dreams into reality.

“Once I began junior high school, I picked up judo seriously and also started watching PRIDE,” says Ashida.

Whilst Ashida was enthralled by fighters like Fedor Emelianenko and Mirko “Cro Cop” Filipović along with the rest of the world, what truly captivated him was seeing his compatriots go head-to-head with esteemed fighters from all around the world. As the young boy watched ardently, he thought - *maybe, I might have a chance at this.*

As Ashida's skills in judo strengthened, so did his confidence and conviction of becoming an MMA fighter. And at 15 years old, he laid out his dreams on paper, vowing in his graduation essay that he would pursue a professional career in MMA.

His senior high school years were spent at Hanasaki Tokuharu High School, where he picked up wrestling before transitioning to boxing. The high school is well-known for its boxing program: its alumni include former WBA super-featherweight champion Takashi Uchiyama.



From left, kickboxer Tsukuru Midorikawa, Takashi Uchiyama and Takahiro Ashida at Uchiyama's gym, KOD LAB. Ashida has been training with Uchiyama for the past two years. Photo courtesy of Takahiro Ashida.

With a strong background in combat sports, Ashida was ready to begin his journey as a professional MMA fighter. By chance, MMA fighter Kazuyuki Miyata had just opened a gym in Tokyo, close by to where Ashida was living.

Dubbed 'Hercules', Miyata – a former Olympic freestyle wrestler – was fighting for the promotion DREAM at the time. There was no hesitation for the then 19 year old Ashida to sign up to the new 'BRAVE' gym.

However, the beginnings of his professional career were not without its challenges. For Ashida, the difficulty lay in trying to balance practice, college and part-time work. A year into training at BRAVE gym, Miyata set him aside for a conversation.

With the amount of practice Ashida was fitting in, he was given the brutal truth: "*I was never going to get to his level*". While Ashida was busy at work, his opponents were inevitably one step ahead with practice.

The reality, both within and outside Japan, is that most fighters are not able to support themselves solely through fighting. This predicament especially rings true for young fighters who have just embarked on their professional career. Seeking sponsorship; negotiating fight purses; and arranging for fights to be booked – the economics of fighting are an overbearing burden on top of training when young fighters are simply trying to get their foot in the door.

Miyata proposed to Ashida that he become his *uchi-deshi*, or pupil. Under the *uchi-deshi* system, students train and assist their *sensei* (teacher), on a full-time basis. This system is widely seen in Japanese classical arts like *kabuki* or traditional sports such as sumo but it is relatively rare in the world of MMA.

"When he suggested that I become his pupil, I was incredibly happy," says Ashida. Although he had already long set his heart on life as an MMA fighter, Ashida was able to reaffirm again that this was the road that he would travel: it was a moment of truth.

As a pupil, Ashida's work includes working as an instructor and assisting with the administrative and operational aspects of BRAVE gym. Since taking on Ashida as his first pupil, Miyata now has a number of fighters under his wing, including DEEP lightweight champion Koji Takeda and ZST flyweight champion Tatsuki Saomoto, both of whom have fought at RIZIN Fighting Federation. Some of them even live on the gym premises to save the costs of rent; Miyata is now in the midst of completing a dorm for his pupils.

With a supportive environment where he could put practice at his forefront, Ashida maintained a consistent record, primarily fighting for the promotion DEEP. He also added overseas fights on his resume, fighting Miguel Torres at REBEL FC in Singapore and taking on JJ Ambrose for the Pacific Xtreme Combat Lightweight Title in Guam on little notice. For Ashida, there is no hesitancy however, when it comes to his opponents or venue. "I'm always game to take on any fight," he says.

Shortly after, Ashida would be given another opportunity to challenge a title: Hiroto Uesako for the DEEP featherweight belt back home. This time, he would be successful in his attempt. In December 2017, seven years into his career, he was crowned champion.

The moment the ring announcer declares the majority decision for Ashida, the usually collected and composed fighter beaks down. Fellow fighters from BRAVE burst into the cage, congratulating him – equally emotional.

In his post-fight speech, Ashida expresses his gratitude for his fans and those around him. He then takes off the belt that has just been given to him.

"There is someone I want to give this belt to...Miyata-san," he chokes up.

As the crowd cheers, Miyata comes into the cage with a shy smile. Ashida hands him the belt and Miyata lifts it up – looking immensely proud. There is a warm embrace between the two. Miyata says little but words are not necessary to see that he is deeply touched.



Screenshot taken from "上迫博仁 vs 芦田 崇広(HIROTO UESAKO VS TAKAHIRO ASHIDA)", DEEP チャンネル, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7UD_voQOTU.

For Ashida, handing Miyata the belt was a scene that he had played in his mind, over and over.

"I wanted to give the belt to Miyata-sensei more than anyone else. If I'm going to be honest, he was the first person I wanted to give the belt to, even more so than my own family," he says, contemplatively. "When I got the belt, it had already been seven years since I was under his care."

Even though Miyata has retired from the competitive scene of MMA, Ashida notes that he is nonetheless a significant guiding figure, who helps him "discern the rights and wrongs of fighting".

When Ashida made his long-awaited RIZIN MMA debut in September last year, taking on up-and-coming Kyohei Hagiwara, Miyata was seen in the corner, calmly giving instructions to Ashida.

"Yes, very good. Take it slowly. Ok, let's go."

It was a swift job for Ashida. Quietly and smoothly, with no unnecessary movement, he submitted Hagiwara in the first round. One could even argue the modified armlock was an artistic finish.



Screenshot taken from "Full Fight | 芦田崇宏 vs. 萩原京平 / Takahiro Ashida vs. Kyohei Hagiwara - RIZIN.24", RIZIN Fighting Federation Official, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4W2UnC-V8Nc>

In the moments he is congratulated as the winner in the ring, there is a hint of contentment in Ashida's expression but he looks almost just as placid as before the fight.

Building up an undisturbed exterior is something Ashida has developed over the years. "I control my mind into staying calm all the time," he says.

In the past, excessive boosts of adrenaline have hindered the effectiveness of his strikes or his game plan. At RIZIN24, he was completely relaxed - fighting as his "natural self", his "usual self".

"I think people got the impression that I was being a bit 'cool' but that's not a persona I'm putting on," he laughs.

Like any other fandom in the online space, the fight fanbase is not immune from hyperaware fans who at times, appear to 'police' fighter behaviour, dissecting their every movement. It also comes hand in hand with the heavy use of social media by fighters in an attempt to boost their profiles and fan engagement, following the footsteps of MMA star siblings Mikuru and Kai Asakura who are also incredibly successful YouTubers.

At times, it is a strange phenomenon where fans obsess over who is the most successful in trash talking their opponents or producing entertaining social media content.

It is not to say all fighters or fight fans enjoy the theatrics of bad blood. But in an era where fighters are almost inevitably forced into the position to use social media to increase engagement, self-promotion becomes a mounting burden.

For Ashida however, he has no intentions of changing who he is at heart to align with current trends.

"I think MMA has changed a lot stylistically over the years. And not only that, the style of promoting fighters has also changed a lot. I think there are various perspectives on that point but because I grew up watching PRIDE, I intend to keep what I'm doing," he notes.

What has changed most significantly, in Ashida's view, is "the way fighters carry themselves", as well as "the audience's perception of fighters".

"For me, professional fighters who were fighting in PRIDE were a presence so 'high up', like you weren't ever able to reach out to them," he continues. "But now you've got things like social media, YouTube, where you get a lot of insight into fighters' lives."

"I think in both good and bad ways, it has closed the distance between fighters and fans."

Of course, in the days of PRIDE, you never saw Wanderlei Silva and Quinton Rampage Jackson provoking each other on Twitter. We currently live in an age where fighters' lives outside the ring are increasingly on display. Perhaps, it is unavoidable when social media and the culture of voyeurism has become the norm in modern day society.

Ashida recognises however, that there is a good side of the coin and the importance of utilising social media as a tool.

"Unfortunately, I'm a bit old-fashioned, stuck in the *showa* generation," Ashida laughs. "So I'll try my best not to be left behind".

Ashida may joke that he is set in old ways. However, at the same time, it proves to be a testament to his unwavering spirit and love for the sport - something which has never changed from his first days as a fan. A simple belief in respecting the strengths and skills of fighters in the ring.

Like many others, PRIDE never died for Ashida. Beyond its spirit living in his memorabilia - a subtle glimpse of a PRIDE mouthguard upon a flash of a smile - Ashida sees its story continued on in RIZIN, its successor.



Mouthguards over the years. Photo courtesy of Takahiro Ashida.

For Ashida, RIZIN is the "organisation that has inherited the DNA of PRIDE". He notes the same key players involved, including RIZIN CEO Nobuyuki Sakakibara: the very mastermind who was running PRIDE.

"For a person like me, whose raison d'être was PRIDE, RIZIN has a special place in my heart."

Ashida hopes that his passion for the sport continues to be shared by his fans; and for the fight scene to transform even further, in positive ways.

Although 2020 saw the fight scene being threatened by the pandemic like any other industry, we saw promoters put on a number of exciting events consistently.

Ashida also remains enthusiastic that 2021 will see the fight scene continue to flourish, whilst also recognising the difficulties.

"With COVID-19, there's a lot of uncertainty," Ashida notes. "...there is anxiety both from fighters and fans, on whether events can be held successfully amidst restrictions".

Amidst the pandemic, Ashida has approached each day to simply 'try his best', as he has done so over the years. He continues to train every day, in preparation for the next fight so that he is able to show "something great" to anticipating fans.

"I think it must be a frustrating experience for fans but I hope we can all overcome this pandemic together".

In return, he hopes that as fight fans await the fight scene to fully recover, that they continue to keep their passion for martial arts alive - *an unwavering fire, brightly burning.*



BY MAZA FIGHT GALLERY

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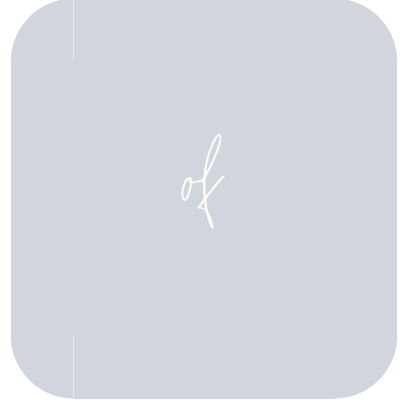
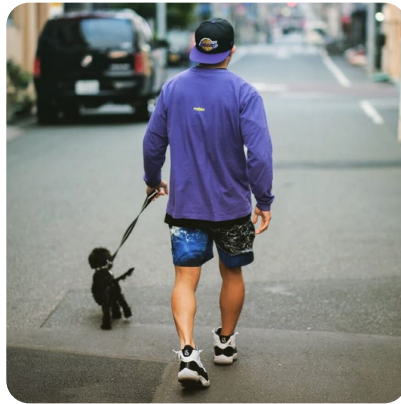
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A BRAVE group photo at RIZIN24. From left, Ashida, Kazuyuki Miyata and Koji Takeda. Photo courtesy of Takahiro Ashida.

Watch LJ's interview of Takahiro Ashida with English subtitles on the YouTube channel of 'The Fighter' at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_nnEdwM4FZzKG49m1QctQw for further details not discussed in this issue, including a glimpse of Ashida's sneaker collection. Follow Takahiro Ashida at @mmatakahiro on Twitter and @ashidatakahiro on Instagram.



TAKAHIRO ASHIDA, "KING OF BRAVE"