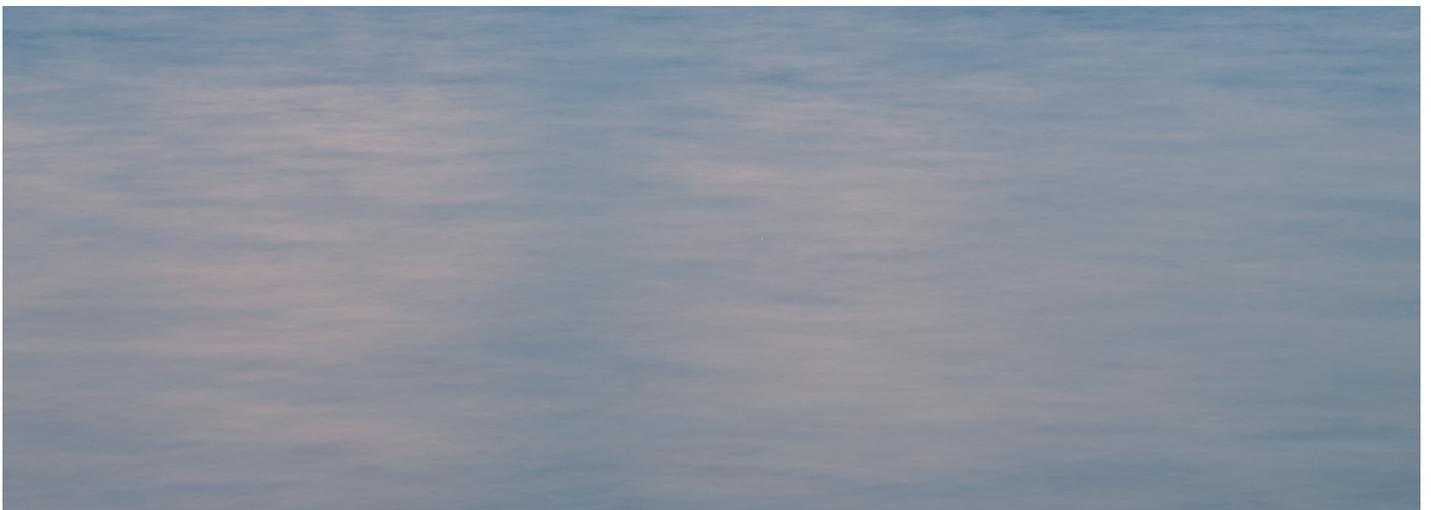


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Editor's Notes

We sometimes hear stories about fighters' challenges at the start of their professional career but rarely do we get much insight on the chapter beforehand, being their amateur days.

Something which has always interested me is the great respect with which some Japanese fighters speak about their experience in Shooto, or their pride of being a *Shooter*.

A fighter very much emblematic of Shooto - having fought in the organisation for the entirety of his career up until he was signed to RIZIN last year- I interviewed Yutaka Saito to discuss his amateur Shooto days which (as you will come to find out) were not easy for him. The RIZIN featherweight champion also discussed the various turning points and challenges in his life, including the impact of the March 11 Great East Japan earthquake on his way of thinking.

In these uncertain times, I hope his story and his belief in the strength of the human spirit can serve as a reminder to us, that sometimes things will, eventually work out for the best.

Yours in fighting,

LJ

**"THIS TOO, SHALL PASS"
- UNKNOWN**



BY MAZA FIGHT GALLERY
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Yutaka Saito: the ties that bind

By LJ

We speak to RIZIN featherweight champion Yutaka Saito on the beginnings of his journey in amateur Shooto; his relationship with his team including Masakatsu Ueda; and the challenges along the way which have helped build him to be the fighter that he is today.

"Life isn't always great but I'm now able to believe that if you do persist, working hard, you'll be able to achieve something."

Voice heavy with tears, these were words uttered by Yutaka Saito in the ring of Osaka-jo hall as he came out victorious as the inaugural RIZIN featherweight champion in November 2020. Fighting Mikuru Asakura, one of the most recognised faces of RIZIN, Saito pulled off what was arguably the biggest upset of the year in Japanese MMA.

Despite successfully attaining champion belts in Shooto and now, RIZIN - Saito's journey in MMA has been a long and winding one.

More often than not, fighters have a foundation going into MMA. However, Saito's early years were not spent learning judo or jiu-jitsu - the most commonly seen cases of his compatriots.

Rather, much of his childhood was dedicated to playing baseball, which he began as an elementary school student.

"I was incredibly busy playing baseball so I don't really recall doing many fun things," Saito laughs softly, when reflecting on his childhood years.

"My weekends were spent mostly practising or playing at baseball games."

Perhaps the rural nature of his hometown, Noshiro, on the coast in the northwest region of the Akita prefecture, was a factor which also played into his childhood being focused on sports. Known for its rice and sake production, the economy of Akita is largely agricultural. For most, Akita also brings to mind images of harsh winters: its coldest months bring heavy snowfall, enveloping the mountainous plains in thick blankets of white. It is, as Saito says, "a stark difference to life in Tokyo".

Saito would, however, come to put an end to his baseball days, playing his last game in his third year of high school.

"I had nothing to do and no other extra-curriculars and I was contemplating what I should do."

Shortly after, the 15 year-old Saito would happen to encounter Bob Sapp vs Ernesto Hoost at the K-1 World Grand Prix. It was 2002, the height of the golden era of martial arts. Mere curiosity led to rapture for this new and exciting world he had discovered. Moving beyond heavyweight fights being televised, Saito also began to watch the fights of Shooto - the very organisation he would begin his career in 10 years later. Eager to discover more, he frequented the local video store, borrowing what was available from left-to-right of the entire aisle.

For Saito, watching Shooto shifted a simple interest to a determination that he too, was going to become an MMA fighter. The likes of lightweight fighters Takanori Gomi and Tatsuya Kawajiri, who began their careers in Shooto before moving onto becoming stars in PRIDE Fighting Championships, opened up a new world to him.



<https://mazafightgallery.com/fight-gallery/nggallery/pro-shooto-2021/pro-shooto-2021/page/1#gallery/4a34951587f31788858d44ac1b31ddb/29112>. Licence at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/#>

"Previously, I was under the impression that kakutogi only focused on the heavyweights. They [Kawajiri and Gomi] taught us that was not only the case. I think a lot of people of my generation would say the same - that Kawajiri and Gomi inspired them."

Saito had no time to waste, picking up a new sport in senior high school to prepare himself to become a fighter. Despite initially intending to learn wrestling, given its unavailability, he opted for traditional-style karate which he continued for the rest of his high school years.

Although Saito was already set on his pursuits, his family were keen for him to continue his studies. He progressed to study engineering at a university in Fukushima and at the same time, formally commenced his MMA training at the-then Fukushima branch of Paraestra (now known as Brave Heart Fukushima).

Saito had hoped that a full year of training would be sufficient for him to become a professional fighter in Shooto. However, when he went to watch an amateur Shooto tournament for the very first time, he was in for a rude awakening - he was hardly at that level.

The road ahead was a rugged one. Furthering his training regime and entering grappling competitions, by the time Saito felt ready, a broken ankle from practice left him unable to train for months, pushing his amateur debut even further. Once recovered, Saito won his first amateur fight with a submission in the first round. However, he lost his next fight. And the one after. And another. The losses piled up.

Whilst a different system is currently employed, Saito explains that in order to be recognised as a professional fighter in Shooto back in his day, winning was not only a prerequisite, but securing wins of *multiple* tournaments was often a requirement. It was not an easy feat for most who had just started in the game. Saito recognises however, that there were outliers, who progressed to become professional fighters without much difficulty.

"Some fighters could turn pro quickly, if they had a foundation for 10, sometimes even 20 years. That was simply not the case for me," says Saito.

In 2009, Saito decided that this would be his year of resolve. In the same year, he was juggling job applications to secure a role following graduation. However, time was running out - once he started full-time work, there was a possibility that he could not train as frequently as before. Saito's hopes were to enter the All Japan Amateur Shooto Championships in September that year.

To attain entry to the All Japans however, winning the regional tournaments was a necessity. Saito was unsuccessful in the July *Tōhoku* regional tournament, losing in the second round. Wrought with injuries leaving him unable to participate in the remaining regional tournaments, his ticket to the All Japans that year was lost.

Nonetheless, Saito decided that he would still take a chance at the East Japan Open Tournament at the end of the year. In this tournament, the fruits of his labour finally began to show. Saito won all four fights, coming out as the winner of the 20-man tournament in his division. It gave Saito motivation that he could continue for a little longer - up to the All Japans in the following year.

By chance, RIZIN bantamweight champion Kyoji Horiguchi made his amateur debut at the very same event, also winning the tournament. His first appearance however, was enough for Shooto to declare that he was of professional status.

Saito continued to pick up wins, coming out victorious in the Saitama Open Tournament in February of the following year. This was the last time he would fight for Paraestra Fukushima before joining his current gym, Paraestra Koiwa.



Paraestra Koiwa. Photo courtesy of Yutaka Saito.

Shortly after, Saito moved to Tokyo for his new role as a site foreman for a construction company. Despite the move to the nation's capital, coupled with the responsibilities of his new job, he continued to train with eyes set on the All Japans. Saito managed to enter the 12-man *Kantō* Tournament in July, advancing to the finals but coming in second place.

Two months later, Saito was at the All Japan Championships. Although he was hoping to attain entry by winning the *Kantō* Tournament, Saito was able to secure a place through general application. Saito won the first two rounds but lost in the semi-finals, coming in third place.

At the end of the event, the Shooto representatives read out a list of those who were successfully in attaining professional status. His name was one of them.

Looking back on his amateur days however, Saito is glad that he did not progress to professional status quickly.

"If I was going to end up turning pro not quite good enough, it was better that I turned pro once I polished my skillset a bit more."

Although Saito was now a pro 'Shooter' - that is, a professional fighter in Shooto - he still had qualms of his future as a fighter. New lifestyle changes came about his time-intensive job as a site foreman. Saito had also moved from the Fukushima prefecture with its largest cities having populations of just over 300,000 to the nation's bustling capital. He was suddenly plunged into the depths of millions in the claustrophobic streets of Tokyo.

In a video where he discusses the difficulty of his initial Tokyo days with a colleague from Paraestra Koiwa, Saito recalls endlessly riding his bike along the Arakawa river to alleviate negative thoughts.

"The loneliness was crushing," he noted. "I'm not very good at bottling up my emotions...it was tough not having someone close by I could confide in."

A turning point however, came about early in his career. On 11 March 2011, Japan was hit by the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in the nation's history.

"I felt a huge tremor. The disaster was truly chaotic," Saito recalls.

The onset of the Great East Japan earthquake spiralled into a tsunami, then a subsequent nuclear power plant meltdown in Fukushima – leaving the nation wrought with tragedy and suffering. The 'triple disasters' caused damage at unprecedented levels and the most devastated areas were in northeast Japan: the *Tōhoku* region. This was something which affected Saito greatly - he had lived his life in the very region, prior to moving to Tokyo.

Suddenly confronted with the realities of death, he was forced to re-evaluate his goals and motivations.

"Especially in the devastated areas, there were people who weren't able to pursue what they wanted to do and had no choice but to give up...I decided that I wanted to live my life so that even if I died tomorrow, I would have no regrets."

Later that year, Saito won his debut fight by unanimous decision. The beginning of his career consisted mostly of modest wins but his breakthrough came about when he won the Shooto 'Infinity League' tournament in 2014. Around this time, Saito would also attain a major sponsor, MOBSTYLES - a streetwear brand well-known for supporting fighters.

In 2015, he challenged Yoshifumi Nakamura, better known as 'Nakamura Jr.' hailing from PRIDE veteran Hayato 'Mach' Sakurai's dojo for the Shooto Pacific Rim belt. Nakamura Jr. had previously beaten Saito in the amateur Tōhoku regional tournament.

Saito was successful however, in the rematch and when the two faced each other again in the following year to fight for the vacant Shooto lightweight (now known as featherweight) world title, Saito was victorious once again.



Saito facing Nakamura Jr. at Professional Shooto 1/11 for the Shooto world title. By MAZA Fight Gallery. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mazafight/23725740384/in/album-72157662786585629/> Licence at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

However, Saito's career would take a hazardous turn shortly after. Coming off a 6-fight winning streak, he was booked for the main event of the cross-promotional VTJ 8th against ISAO, the current PANCRASE featherweight champion. Saito lost the close fight via split decision; MMA legend Rumina Sato even noting in the commentary booth, "I would have personally called that a draw". It was nonetheless, a loss; and a hard one, not long after attaining the Shooto belt.

In his next fight, Saito would face an opponent no less difficult: Englishman Mike Grundy. Currently signed to the UFC, Grundy had an accomplished wrestling background, having competed in the Commonwealth games twice. The Commonwealth bronze medallist dominated all three rounds with relentless take downs and a dangerous top game, granting him the win. It was yet another heavy loss for Saito.



Saito at Professional Shooto 1/29, facing Mike Grundy. By MAZA FIGHT GALLERY.
<https://mazafightgallery.com/fight-gallery/nggallery/pro-shooto/pro-shooto-1-29#gallery/84d2efc8a48124ad5cdb9d79715f9930/14272>. Licence at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Around this time, Saito changed his walkout music from Linkin Park's "Numb" to Japanese rock band MAN WITH A MISSION's 'Dead End in Tokyo', co-written and produced by Fall Out Boy's Patrick Stump.

"I lost to ISAO so I wanted to make a fresh start ...the CEO of MOBSTYLES also suggested to me that I use the song," Saito explains.

Despite its infectiously catchy tune, 'Dead End in Tokyo' paints a bleak image of Japan's capital being consumed by decadence and nihilism. Individuals navigate the soulless streets with a "suitcase full of big dreams" in a "city full of bigger lies". Although Saito tells me that he was drawn to the sound of the song, the unlikely duality of the melancholic lyrics and the upbeat melody is somewhat fitting to the fighter: a picture of light within dark; hope within despair; turning the chorus into an optimistic chant that it is "just another dead end in Tokyo".

Three months later, Saito was back in the Shooto cage to defend his title against veteran Caol Uno. When I ask him to look back on the fight, there is an unmissable hint of pain in Saito's expression.

"If I lost again, I knew that I didn't have much of a future ahead as a fighter. I would not rise to the top levels."

Beyond the pressures of coming off two losses, an intense backstory to the fight was being built in the background, wherein most were supporting the 41 year-old pioneer. Fans were incredibly hopeful to see Uno with the belt once again, since he vacated his Shooto lightweight title 17 years ago. Saito was pitted as the unlikely role of the 'heel'.

"There was also the pressure of the media that wanted Uno-san to win. Like that'd be more dramatic."

"I really felt that atmosphere. I remember, just wondering things, as time passed, day by day," Saito notes with a wry laugh.

Shattering the hopes of Uno's fans, Saito came out victorious with a decisive win. That night, he took home the belt, still safe in his hands.

For the remainder of his career in Shooto, Saito furthered a steady record, amassing wins against respected fighters like Takeshi Inoue. However, he still remained relatively unrecognised by local mainstream fans and almost unknown in the international sphere.

In March 2020, Saito was scheduled to defend his Shooto featherweight title against Dutchman Duane van Helvoirt. However, at the height of the pandemic, Helvoirt could not enter Japan. Despite his opponent being changed to compatriot Taison Naito, Saito was unable to defend his title - the event was called off, a day before weigh-ins.

Despite the seemingly desperate situation with no fight scheduled on the horizon for Saito, the circumstances steered him into a new direction. Five months later, it was announced that Saito would fight at one of RIZIN's comeback shows against REBEL FC champion Kazumasa Majima. Although Saito had previously received offers from RIZIN, this was the first time that the stars had aligned.

In his fight against Majima at RIZIN23, Saito delivered one of the most violent performances of his career, launching a brutal soccer kick to the esteemed grappler's head in the second round, followed by a flurry of grounded knees. It was a fight which brought the mild-mannered champion into recognition overnight.



Saito at RIZIN23. By MAZA Fight Gallery, <https://mazafightgallery.com/fight-gallery/nggallery/rizin-23/rizin-23-calling-over/page/3#gallery/a3ef5ac8e2c5a5e6f4dd6a08940e1bc5/28780/> Licence at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Sitting in the commentary booth that night was none other than Mikuru Asakura, one of RIZIN's biggest stars. Not only was Asakura a successful YouTuber with over 1.7 million subscribers, he was on a 7-fight win streak in RIZIN - the very definition of unstoppable.

"Is this what we call the highest level of fighting in the featherweight division? Why don't I give him a try," Asakura called out from his seat.

"Let's do it if the timing is right", was Saito's response. Despite the neutrality of his tone, in the post-fight official interview, Saito was heard clarifying, "if he wants to do it, I'll fight him but I'm not the one calling him out".

Two months later, RIZIN booked the inaugural RIZIN featherweight title match between Asakura and Saito. The fight was built up by fans and the promotion alike as the fiery narrative between the two intensified. In line with his persona, there was endless trash-talk from Asakura that he was levels above Saito – the Shooto champion was no opponent for him.



Screenshot from "Yogibo presents RIZIN.25 in OSAKA | Official Trailer". By RIZIN FIGHTING FEDERATION Official. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GU1cjhauAFs>

No two fighters could be more unlike. The 28 year-old Asakura, dubbed "the legend of the streets", was a reformed fighter who had spent almost a year and a half in juvenile detention as a teenager. Lauded as a genius with an innate talent for fighting, Mikuru was the anti-hero who had built his own empire from rags to riches. Saito was painted as the traditionalist carrying Shooto on his back - the elite but humble fighter.

Although Saito received considerable support, especially from committed watchers of Shooto, the vast majority of fight fans nonetheless predicted that he was here to lose.

Fans were curious as to how Saito would prepare for the fight, given Asakura was well-known for elaborately analysing his opponents. Fellow RIZIN fighter and former PANCRASE bantamweight champion, Shintaro Ishiwatari, helped Saito prepare for the fight.

"He picked up on things like [Asakura's] very minor habits. As we discussed those things together, I was able to get good advice from him. And every week, as we were adjusting for the fight together, we were putting together a strategy. He did an immense amount of fight analysis and also devised my practice routine geared towards the strategy," says Saito.

Going into the fight, Saito appeared incredibly calm. In an interview where I previously spoke to him, he had noted placidly, "...during the five minutes of each round, I am certain there will be moments I can capitalise on". Saito had seemed confident that he had picked up on Asakura's weaknesses and had even noted in English at the end of the interview, "I will win. I believe it".

The two went face-to-face for what was an incredibly tense three rounds. Whilst the fight was close, Saito had done enough to gain the win. Despite his bruised face and bloodied nose, there was a look of relief and contentment in Saito's expression as the unanimous win was called out.



Screenshot from "Full Fight | 朝倉未来 vs. 高藤裕 / Mikuru Asakura vs. Yutaka Saito - RIZIN.25". By RIZIN FIGHTING FEDERATION Official. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9I20IcVcRc>

In episode 59 of RIZIN's documentary 'Confessions' series, Saito is shown shortly after the match as he heads backstage. He roams around, head turning left and right as he scans the area.

"Endo-san," he calls out, as a figure slowly approaches him in the corridor.

"I did it," Saito says, walking towards him. He hastily takes off the new champion belt around his waist, handing it to the man.

"I did it," he repeats again, sobbing loudly. The two embrace as Saito continues to cry into his shoulder.



Screenshot from "【番組】RIZIN CONFESIONS #59". By RIZIN FIGHTING FEDERATION OFFICIAL. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ob8dE0kBrq4&t=1367s>

Some readers may recognise this figure as Saito's manager, Shogo Endo, who also made a brief appearance in episode 58 of Confessions. Endo, who has been Saito's manager for approximately the past 4 years, also manages Shintaro Ishiwatari, amongst other fighters. He too, is undoubtedly an integral member of Saito's team.

"In a way, I do think he was the one who helped put me out to the world," notes Saito, when we discuss their relationship.

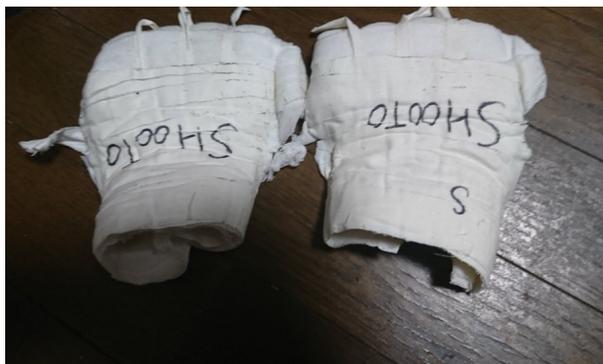
"I think there's a possibility things wouldn't have worked out had [my manager] been someone else," he adds.

Although Saito's career has been marked by various setbacks, it is clear that he has been able to build a team along the way who have supported him, with genuine devotion.

At RIZIN25, former Shooto bantamweight champion Masakatsu Ueda could be seen in Saito's corner. For those not familiar, Ueda is one of only three men who have beaten Kyoji Horiguchi in MMA: the first to mark a loss in Horiguchi's record back in 2012 at a Shooto event. Despite retiring from competition in 2018, Ueda continues to support Saito as he always has, from the featherweight champion's novice days.

Since Saito's fight against former DREAM featherweight champion Hiroyuki Takaya in 2019 where he finished the 'Streetfight Bancho' in a mere 77 seconds, Ueda has been a regular in Saito's corner. Aside from being an effective cornerman, Saito has also praised Ueda's expert skills in applying hand wraps beneath gloves, always adjusting carefully to meet promotions' specific requirements.

Saito, as he describes himself, is not one to be particularly attached to objects. Yet the champion found himself unable to dispose of the bandage after the Takaya fight, which Ueda had helped wrap around his hands so meticulously. And Saito has kept each one of them since, after every match that Ueda has helped corner him.



Saito's handwraps after the Takaya fight. Photo courtesy of Yutaka Saito.

"Ueda san is my corner but he also takes good care of me before a fight. For example, he always sends me a bunch of things before a fight. So I always wanted to keep that sense of gratitude close to me."

It is clear that perseverance and a continual reminder to preserve his self-integrity are things which Saito keeps close to his heart. I also ask him about a phrase that he often uses, 'the key is persistence', a variation of the proverb, 'persistence is key'.

"This is something I've learnt from my *senpai* when I just started training. He still helps me as my corner during fights actually," explains Saito.

They appear to be words passed on by his second corner, Kazuyuki Yoshida who he trained with in Fukushima. Yoshida had gifted Saito those words having learnt them from his own master.

"It is not 'persistence is key', but 'the key is persistence'" – the master had told Yoshida and his other disciples.

Putting the words to paper, the master had trained every day looking at those phrases on the wall, before becoming a champion. His disciples also swore by the same phrase, each continuing on their journey as a fighter.

"I was told this piece of history and it's left a big impression on me as well. It made me think that I want to go by those principles too," says Saito.

Saito's strength of heart and unfaltering belief in what he has done over the years is what grounds him as a fighter, especially his wealth of experiences in Shooto starting from his amateur days.

"As an amateur and as a pro, I've always been in the Shooto ring and cage and that experience has given me power. It's helped me develop my skillset. This is what stands as my background even as I fight now in RIZIN."

Saito hopes that he is able to continue demonstrating his Shooto spirit to the audience.

"I persevered through Shooto. I was a Shooto fighter. A Shooto champion. These are the kinds of feelings which will always stay with me and I intend to continue to fight holding these feelings. I'd be happy if the audience can feel a glimpse of that."

Ahead of the RIZIN Featherweight Grand Prix scheduled in the fall, Saito offers his thoughts on the tournament which seeks to bring together champion-level fighters from promotions around the world.

"If an event of that size is going to happen, I almost feel a kind of responsibility for Japanese fighters to be able to come through the tournament."



Saito awarded fighter of the month by fight publication eFight. Photo courtesy of Yutaka Saito.

He hopes to win all his fights this year and is braced to "do whatever it takes".

Shortly after our interview, Shooto announced that Saito had vacated his featherweight title. It is not an unusual sight for Japanese fighters to vacate their title once signed to a new promotion, as the burden of maintaining fights with both promotions often becomes a heavy one.

On Twitter, Saito noted, "I've decided to vacate the Shooto featherweight belt. This belt has helped me grow and I've accrued both happy and painful things. I can't thank Mr. Sakamoto enough for having sent me to RIZIN as a Shooto champion. I will only devote myself to higher heights."

If the RIZIN World Featherweight Grand Prix does proceed at the scale that is currently planned, it will undoubtedly garner attention from promotions and fight fans all over the world.

Regardless of what the year brings ahead, Saito will persevere on, unchanging in his ways and beliefs. There are no dead ends – merely reroutes pointing him in another direction, sometimes for the better.

Saito's journey continues, but he is no longer alone in the road he rides.

Watch LJ's interview of Yutaka Saito 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 Saito's RIZIN champion belt. Follow Yutaka Saito at @yutakasaito1008 on Twitter and Instagram and subscribe to his YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeK1fLPjfHJYZ-Ucr0VK4cw>.

"I sincerely thank those who have continued to support me, without change. Life isn't always full of great things but now I can truly believe that if you do persist, working hard, you'll be able to achieve something. I wish the best for everyone too."



YUTAKA SAITO, RIZIN25