

The Odyssey of Yukio Tani

By Graham Noble
Part 1

Yukio Tani was never too good with dates, and even the one date he did quote -- September 26, 1899, when he and his brother arrived in London at the invitation of Edward W. Barton-Wright -- was wrong. Richard Bowen has established that the two came to Britain in September 1900, and were followed not long after by S. Yamamoto. Yukio Tani was to stay in England for the rest of his life, but his brother and Yamamoto returned to Japan within a year, possibly due to a disagreement on the use of jujutsu as "entertainment." When Barton-Wright gave his lecture before the Japan Society of London in 1901 he took along Tani and Yamamoto to demonstrate jujutsu technique. The three men showed the throws and locks of the art and then Yamamoto performed what seems to have been pretty much a standard feat among many of those early jujutsu pioneers. He lay on his back with his hands tied and had a pole placed against his throat. Three men on either side of the pole held it down while two stood on Yamamoto and another two held his legs in position. At a signal



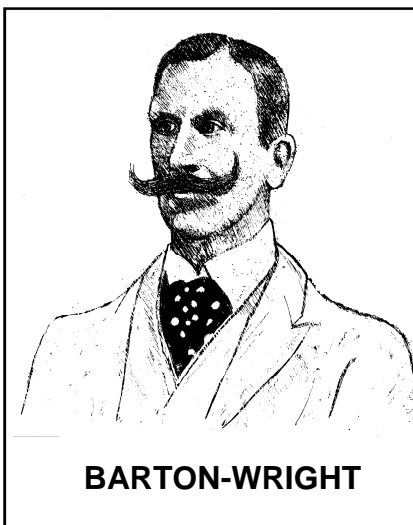
YUKIO TANI

these ten men pressed down to prevent Yamamoto moving, but within twenty seconds he had escaped the holds and was a free man. At the same lecture Barton-Wright gave a demonstration of "locking" on a volunteer from the audience, the six-foot tall Lt. Douglas. "The lecturer," the report read, "a much smaller man than his opponent with the great-

est of ease threw him down and in a variety of practical performances illustrated the modes of obtaining victory."

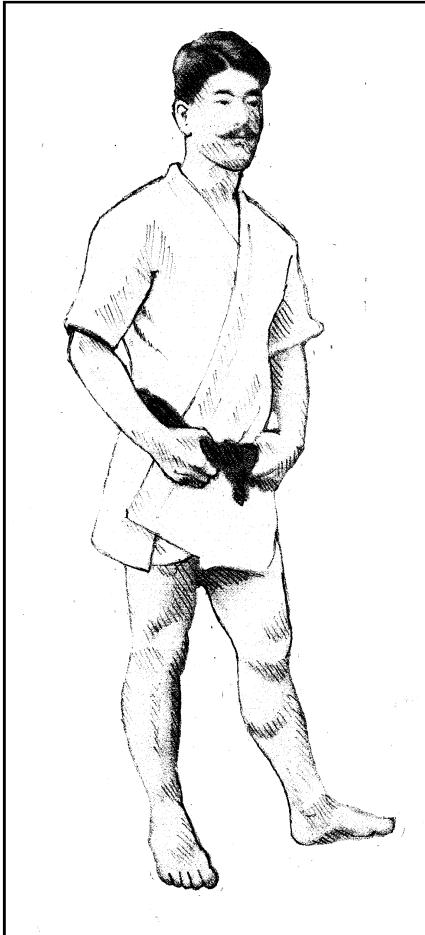
Barton-Wright set up a school of arms with his Japanese instructors. It didn't attract a great deal of interest. Sadakazu Uyenishi's student William E. Garrud thought this was probably because of large entrance and instruction fees. But whatever the reason, the venture failed. At this, Tani split with Barton-Wright and then went into the music halls under the management of William Bankier (the strongman Apollo).

In the world of the music hall strongman and wrestler, with its challenges and counter challenges meant he had to be able to prove his art



BARTON-WRIGHT

against any opponent, but Tani had been ready to meet



SADAKAZU UYENISHI

all-comers from his first days in England. Bankier had first met Tani at Barton-Wright's school and tested him on the mat. He later wrote,

"As Tani stands only 5 foot in height, the task before me seemed a particularly light one. To my astonishment however, he had me at his mercy in less than two minutes. How it was accomplished I did not know, but there I lay at the end of the bout, completely tied up with the Jap grinning from ear to ear and laughingly asking me if I had had enough?"

Bankier induced some of the top professional wrestlers of the day to visit Barton-Wright's school. The group included Jack Carkeek (the

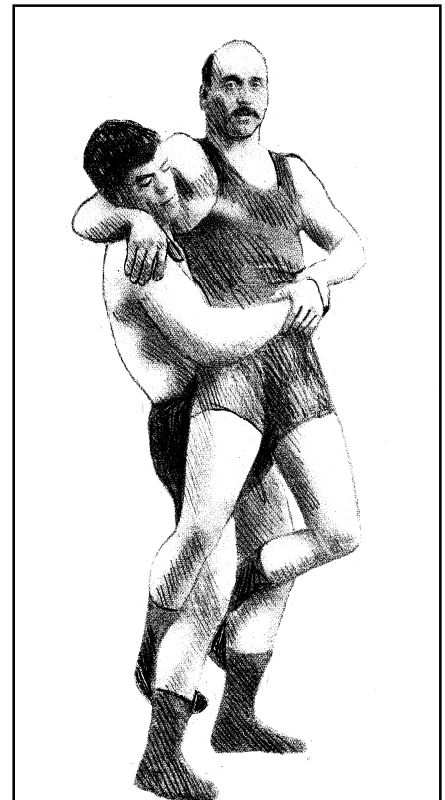
self-styled "King of Wrestlers"), Antonio Pierri, and the former English national champion Tom Cannon, but none of these big guns could be persuaded to have a bout with Tani. A wrestler called Collins did go to the mat however and within a minute he was thrown heavily, falling outside the mat and on the stone floor. *"Being a little stunned,"* wrote Bankier, *"he was unable to renew the contest."*

There is a long list of wrestlers who tried conclusions with Yukio Tani -- but, note, under jujutsu rules with which they were unfamiliar -- and they all seem to have succumbed to a stranglehold or armlock. Ernest Gruhn, the five times amateur lightweight champion (1898, 1900-1902, and 1904) wrestled Tani and later told **Health and Strength**

magazine *"You couldn't do anything with him. He was as slippery as an eel. Of course I lost."* Another wrestling authority, Gordon Tringham, recalled, *"I remember once, while having a bout with Yukio Tani, after going fast for some minutes he tried his usual finish, the armlock, but fortunately for myself, however, I had studied the business for some time previously, and after scrambling out of danger somehow once or twice, he finished me with an armlock I had never seen before, or since seen used."* Peter Gotz, a top professional wrestler of the early 1900s, acknowledged his debt to both Tani and

Uyenishi for the success of his footwork and techniques. In his autobiography **Worthwhile Journey**, the South African wrestler and strongman Tromp Van Diggellen recalled

It was at the Apollo-Saldo club in 1908 that I learned what a great art ju-jutsu really is. At that time Yukio Tani was giving music hall exhibi-

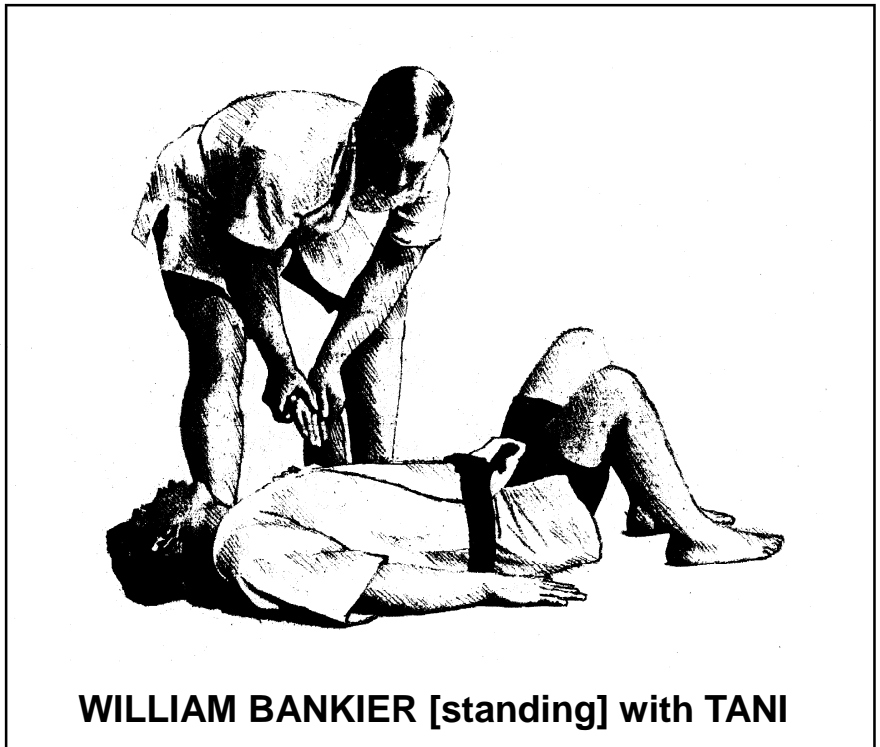


ERNEST GRUHN
COUNTER TO BUTTOCK
AND PARRY

tions all over England. Hitherto this skilful means of self-defence had never been properly demonstrated in Europe. People were amazed at the simple manner in which a powerful man could be overcome in a question of seconds by the quick moving little Jap. Strength seemed to

be of no avail, for he had the uncanny knack of applying holds which made a man's own strength defeat itself; in other words, the more powerful the resistance was, the more unbearable the resultant pain which the attacker experienced when he tried to extricate himself from one of the expert holds which Yukio Tani applied like lightning. When he came to London, he did his training at the Apollo Saldo club in Great Newport Street, where at times I did my own training. Bill Klein, the able instructor and masseur who was employed by Monte Saldo, told me that [world heavyweight champion, George] Hackenschmidt had refused to have a bout with Tani saying that he might strain a muscle and so be incapacitated for the music hall exhibitions he gave nightly.

To amuse the habitués of the famous club I agreed to have a contest with the wiry Jap. First we wrestled, and Tani was very fair and made no attempt to use his jujutsu locks. In a couple of minutes I had him pinned flat on his back. This had been expected of me and so I laughingly donned the special canvas jacket that one wears when indulging in the art of ju-jutsu. Seventeen seconds later I was not smiling, but choking, while I tapped the mat as quickly as I could. The Jap had neatly tripped me as I applied a hold to his jacket. I hit the mat and before I could spring to my feet, his two feet were at my neck,



WILLIAM BANKIER [standing] with TANI

choking me. The feet were naked and all my strength failed to pull them apart. Not only strength but some peculiar knack was in that hold.

I tried once more, but as I seized Tani's canvas jacket he fell backwards, a foot was applied to my abdomen and I sailed through the air as he hit the mat with his back. Again I had no chance of getting away, and again those sinewy feet held me by the neck and more strongly than any man's hands could! This time only fifteen seconds had elapsed before I was choking and tapping the mat with both hands [i.e., signalling submission] as fast as I could. As I walked off with my arms over the shoulders of the little 'Yellow Peril' I asked him if he really was the Japanese champion. 'No, no,' came the reply. 'That is only publicity talk. In Japan I am only third rate. The great

champions are amateurs and they never give public shows of our art. To the masters of ju-jutsu, our science is almost a religion.

It's worth remembering that there was some scepticism about jujutsu when it originally appeared in England. William Bankier himself wrote that when "Tani and a fellow countryman" first made their appearance at the Tivoli Theatre, "the art was described as farcical, and the demonstrators knockabout comedians." Bankier put the blame for this on the managers of the Japanese, so maybe that was a cheap shot at Barton-Wright, but other people also wrote about their early reservations on the new Japanese art. Percy Longhurst was one of England's leading writers on wrestling, and he too recalled those early demonstrations. "I have a very lively

recollection of the first exposition of the science given to the public," Longhurst wrote. I was on the platform with several others interested in antagonistics, and we were not impressed. I had witnessed several private exhibitions previously, and my incredulity as to the utility of the new system. The public demonstration left my unbelief somewhat shaken; but I was anything but satisfied that jiu-jits [sic], although it provided an interesting spectacle, as a practical form of antagonistics, had any value worth consideration.

Longhurst then went on to say, however, that thereafter he had been able to form "A more practical opinion, and original suspicion and disbelief have not only been greatly modified, but changed to a sound respect." His view changed after he had gone on the mat with the Japanese, and he wrote about this in **Health and Strength** in January 1902, at a time when the art was still being presented as Barton-Wright's "Bartitsu." [In a three-page article called "Bartitsu and European Wrestling," Longhurst wrote:

"My personal experience of Bartitsu consisted in two encounters with one of the Japanese professors [either Tani or Uyenishi] while they were performing at the Tivoli, and although I cannot truthfully say that I look back at them with pure, unalloyed pleasure, for one of my arms has not yet regained its normal condition, and probably will

not for many months to come, I cannot regret having gone through the experience. On the contrary, I shall always feel pleased that the opportunity was given me of taking part in these tests, but at the same time I shall forever congratulate myself that my acquaintance with the practical side of Bartitsu was made under such circumstances, and not through the medium of international conflict. I have a very fair knowledge of wrestling in the different styles practised in England, and flatter myself that I am able to hold my own with any amateur in London of my own weight in either the catch hold [freestyle], or North country [Cumberland and Westmorland backhold] styles. But I will freely admit that when it came to tackling the Japanese wrestler my knowledge was completely discounted by the methods of Bartitsu, and had the game been in earnest I should probably have become a candidate for the accident ward of the King's College Hospital. Of course, I was in both encounters handicapped to a certain extent. The Jap knew perfectly well what he was going to do, while I did not, and I was by no means sure what I was going to do either. It is not easy to reproduce exactly 'in play' the sort of attack against which Bartitsu claims to be -- and is -- so effective a defence: a most aggressive sort of defence, too, which aims at disabling one's adversary. I had

some idea of the principles of the game and knew that even if I did succeed in throwing my opponent to the ground, it did not follow that I had got the better of him. On the contrary, in many instances the absolute reverse would be the case. By the mere nature of the styles of wrestling with which I am acquainted, my endeavours could be solely directed to the throwing of my opponent to the ground, whereas his energies were being used for a far wider object; consequently I was placed at a disadvantage. The use, too, of the jacket -- the loose, short coat which both of us wore -- did not come easy to me, although in Bartitsu it is a factor of the highest importance; and my knowledge of wrestling did not enable me to offer a successful defence against the tactics of my opponent. I must admit too, that some of the most punishing and disabling tricks were, with a charitableness, which I fully appreciate, not made use of by the Japanese."

"It must be remembered," Longhurst wrote elsewhere, "that Apollo [William Bankier], who has sung the loudest song, is naturally anxious to attract the attention of the public to Tani's performances."

Bankier was a showman to his boots and so when Tani came under his management it was only natural that he would be presented to the public as something of a wonder. But then Tani had to live up to the hype, and he

did it by being ready to meet all comers from his very first days in England. That willingness to go on the mat continued years later when he was instructing at the London judo club called the Budokwai. Shaw Desmond, a Budokwai veteran, remembered Tani throwing "*an all-in pro-wrestling champion*" and then working him over on the ground with a series of locks and strangleholds. He also threw "*an 18-stone Greco-Roman style wrestler*" who had come to study judo with Desmond. But Tani's reputation, and the reputation of jujutsu, was really made in the boisterous world of the music hall, where he worked for years. He had to be ready to meet all-comers, regardless of weight, so the worth of jujutsu was proved night after night, in town after town, throughout Britain. According to Percy Longhurst, writing in 1905, "*The shrewd Scotsman Apollo, the professional strongman, has taken Yukio Tani in hand, carrying him from place to place until there is scarcely a town of considerable size south of Glasgow where Tani has not given a demonstration of Jiu-Jitsu.*" Like other wrestlers and strong men performing in the halls, Tani and Bankier had to offer a public challenge, and for the record it read (from **Sporting Life**, December 1904):

I don't know exactly when Tani joined with Bankier to begin his years-long odyssey through the music halls and

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Japanese Wrestler**

YUKIO TANI

£100 to any man who can defeat him. Notwithstanding the physical disadvantages against heavier men (for Tani weighs 9 stone only), Apollo will pay any living man twenty guineas who Tani fails to defeat in fifteen minutes: Professional champion wrestlers specially invited. To induce amateurs to try their skill, Apollo will present a magnificent silver cup, value 40 guineas (supplied by Mappin Brothers) to the one who Tani fails to defeat. The amateur making the best show will receive a valuable gold medal. All entries must be received each evening before the contests.

theatres of Great Britain, but by 1903 he was a well-known figure to the public. Said **Health and Strength** in December 1903:

"Yukio Tani the clever Japanese wrestler, has lately been appearing at the Tivoli music hall, Leeds. His offer of twenty guineas to anyone whom he fails to defeat in fifteen minutes, brought him before the best wrestlers from Lancashire and Yorkshire, but the twenty guineas still stands to Tani's account. In several quarters the Jap's methods are not considered orthodox, according to the British

system of wrestling. Acton, the well known Lancashire wrestler, met defeat in 7-1/2 minutes."

Newspaper coverage of music hall wrestling of those days was pretty good, so if we look through the files of, say, **The Sportsman** and pick out a typical edition such as December 10, 1907, we can read a short notice of Tani's performance at the Chelsea Palace the previous night.

"The star item at the Chelsea Palace this week is the Jiu-jitsu expert Yukio Tani. He offers £100 for any man that can defeat him, and £20 for the man staying fifteen minutes. A silver cup value £40 will be presented to the amateur staying fifteen minutes, while a solid gold medal will be presented to the one making the best show during the week. The first to oppose the Jap last night was Foster Scancha (Fulham), a well known athlete of about 10-1/2 st. [147 pounds]. An armlock beat him in 2 min. 23 sec. Tom Pearce (Battersea) followed and an exciting tussle took place, Tani finally winning with an arm and leg hold in 5 min. 38 sec. Two fine bouts were decided at the second performance, Alf James lasting for 3 min. 27 sec., and Bill Williams, a local wrestler, for 8 min. 11 sec. Tonight Jack Madden tries conclusions with Tani."

CONTINUED IN NEXT ISSUE