Baki Official Interview
Participant:

- **Yuki Yokoi**, Director of Promotions at AKITASHOTEN

Original Work: Keisuke Itagaki
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A huge number of characters have appeared in Baki over the manga's 35-year run. Has the popularity of any of them surprised you, or have any characters become more of a presence in the story than you initially expected?

Yokoi: I'd say Musashi Miyamoto.

He's based on a real historical figure, so readers already have a certain image of him, yet he came in 2nd in the recent popularity poll, which really surprised me.

I think the anime adaptation played a part in that too.

Combat sports are far more popular today than they were at the Baki manga's inception. Do you think this change in the world has influenced Baki as the work has gone on?

Yokoi: Personally, I think it's less that the world changed Baki and more that Baki has had a big influence on combat sports in the world. I believe there are many fighters who started training after reading Baki.

It was without a doubt a work that was ahead of its time.

Baki is famed for its anatomically focused artwork. Does Itagaki-sensei have any go-to references for specific characters or poses, and how does he arrive at depicting this striking musculature?

Yokoi: Itagaki-sensei made his own scrapbook of especially striking shots of each muscle group, collected from countless bodybuilding magazines, and uses it as reference material.

Of course, he also refers to medical books on human anatomy, but for depicting muscle, those photos of bodybuilders are what he relies on.

How has the production of the Baki manga changed over the years? Did it make the jump to digital during COVID like other long-running manga series?

Yokoi: No, the production environment hasn't changed much since I became the editor in charge 20 years ago. We still work on analog manuscripts, applying screentone and scraping it by hand.

What are your favorite fights in Baki?

Yokoi: Fans love fights like Yujiro vs. Kaku Kaioh and Hanayama vs. Spec, but personally, the one that stays with me is Retsu Kaioh vs. Musashi. Retsu's final line in that last scene, "I'll make use of this next time…," came from a suggestion I made to Itagaki-sensei, so it's a scene where my own idea lives on directly in the making of Baki.

What are your favorite storylines in Baki?

Yokoi: Aside from the fight I mentioned as my favorite, I think the whole storyline of Katsumi heading into his fight with Pickle is really cool. The way he works so earnestly and relentlessly to forge a brand-new technique has stayed with me.

Are there any panels or illustrations from Baki that you particularly enjoy?

Yokoi: I love the "Scorching Summer" panel from Pickle vs. Katsumi.

Who are your favorite Baki characters?

Yokoi: I can feel the anime's influence here, but it's Spec and Musashi Miyamoto. They're my favorites because they're the two characters who really brought the excitement when the series was adapted for the screen.

What are your favorite character designs in Baki?

Yokoi: "Favorite character design" is a pretty broad question, but if we're talking about the character I like most visually, I'd say Shibukawa-sensei. In the world of Baki, I think it's so cool to see someone who looks like an ordinary person fighting with such overwhelming martial skill.

What are your favorite Yujiro moments?

Yokoi: The scene in the father-son fight with Baki where the invisible table with the miso soup gets flipped and Yujiro looks genuinely startled.

I had the exact same reaction when I was checking the storyboards, so it's a scene where Yujiro felt a little closer to me.

Anime-only fans were introduced to Baki's take on Miyamoto Musashi in the most recent season of the Baki anime. What work and considerations went into bringing such a well-known and frequently depicted character into Baki's story? What qualities made him a good fit to appear as an antagonist in the Baki manga?

Yokoi: The starting premise, of course, is that as the origin of "the strongest," he was always a character who could plausibly appear in the Baki series.

What made Itagaki-sensei want to draw him was curiosity about what Musashi, a man who carries a sword, would say to Doppo, who uses terms like "knife hand" and "iron fist."

Sensei spent a long time searching for a reason why a character from the Edo period could believably be born into the world of Baki by leaping across time, whether through cloning technology or otherwise.

The Most Evil Death Row Convicts Saga is set to be published in the Perfect Edition of the New Grappler Baki manga for the first time in the US soon. A turning point for the franchise after the more traditional Underground Arena tournament arc, do you have any thoughts or feelings on this storyline looking back on it now?

Yokoi: I wasn't the editor in charge at the time, but after the Maximum Tournament, the idea was to bring in even stronger opponents, and building characters who stand close to "death" made for incredibly powerful adversaries.

The Baki manga has inspired several side stories focusing on supporting characters like Retsu, Doppo Orochi, and Kaoru Hanayama. Is there any character that you'd like to see going about their daily life or going on their own mini-adventure?

Yokoi: I'd like to see the story of how the death row convicts became death row convicts.

This year featured collaborations between Baki and the Japan National Tourism Organization, as well as an announced collaboration between Baki and the TEKKEN fighting game franchise. How did these collaborations come about?

Yokoi: For the TEKKEN collaboration, we had been approaching them about doing something together ever since the 30th anniversary five years ago. Of course, we hadn't gone as far as discussing Yujiro as a playable character, but because both are stories about a father-son feud, I felt the two works were a natural fit, so I'm really happy it came true.

The JNTO collaboration came about after we had done a Japan-only train etiquette ad campaign. Following that, JNTO approached us about creating a similar-looking etiquette campaign for foreign tourists visiting Japan.

Do you fondly recall any fan reactions to Baki or memes that the series inspired?

Yokoi: The scene where Retsu Kaioh is lying in the hospital after Pickle ate his leg.

The meme of Retsu getting shorter and shorter was hilarious. That scene actually wasn't in the original storyboards; it was added later, so it really stuck with me that it ended up getting so much attention.

Can you recall any Baki cosplays or cosplayers that are particularly memorable?

Yokoi: It has to be Logan-san. He really looks the part, and the photos he first posted to the Baki fan creation contest for the 30th anniversary also left a big impression on me.

In the US at least, masculinity and how to present as masculine are increasingly popular topics of social discourse. What insights or direction can Baki provide for young men figuring out how to navigate this part of their identity for the first time?

Yokoi: Strength is beautiful.

Why do you think the Baki manga has managed to stay relevant as similar action shonen manga have become more high-concept, supernatural, or darker in tone since Baki premiered?

Yokoi: I think it's the overwhelming appeal of the characters. That's what it all comes down to.

Itagaki-sensei has said in interviews that creating characters is his own special talent… and I think that is exactly what makes Baki so compelling.