

Natsu Bashi Summary

*Text by Lon Howard
Photos by Carolyn Todd*

There were some 'glass half empty' fans watching the Natsu Bashi who claimed that senshuraku was a non-event. The injured yokozuna Asashoryu had four losses, and ozeki Hakuho had wrapped up his second straight yusho the day before with his 14th win, and so had already secured promotion. There was nothing to decide and so there was no drama – or so they said. Luckily, this bean-counter view of that day was the minority one because there was plenty at stake.

Although not so unusual, no one likes to see a rikishi back into a yusho by losing on senshuraku. Also, only two yokozuna in the last 60 years have capped their last ozeki basho with a loss. If Hakuho had joined that elite club by losing to a hobbled yokozuna, it would have considerably thinned the ensuing celebratory sake. And finally, only three yokozuna in the last 60 years have cracked the club with zensho-yusho. So on senshuraku, Hakuho could have collected his tsuna on a very high, or a very low note.

On this day, he hit all the high notes by downing the yokozuna with a left over-arm throw in the kind of 51-second titanic clash you would have craved if the yusho had been at stake. But few people in Tokyo's Ryogoku Kokugikan were disappointed because this is the day so many had been waiting for – the day when a new lawman would come to town and declare that from here on, "business as usual" meant something different. It now meant suspense and anticipation, and for sumo aesthetes, it brought the 'balanced' banzuke that made things right

with the world.

As for Asashoryu, he apologized for not being the 'wall' that Hakuho would have to go through on his way to yokozuna, and said that, in view of his poor 10-5 showing, he'd have to change his mental approach, eschewing mention of the injuries to both arms. His right elbow problems were no secret and, even though still undefeated, he started again wearing the supporter on his right arm on day 9 against sekiwake Ama. He got through that match all right, but then offered token resistance to M4 Aminishiki in a shocking day 10 upset.



Aminishiki

Then, except for the senshuraku struggle with Hakuho, he lost tamely on the last four days to all four ozeki. In this interlude, after

being painfully migi-kotenage'd by Kaio on day 13, he appeared the next day against Kotooshu with the arm support moved from the right to the left arm. I take that to mean that the left arm injury he suffered against Kaio was worse than the existing right elbow injury; and he didn't want to give a crippled appearance by wearing two arm supports.

At 22 years and two months of age, Hakuho becomes the 3rd youngest yokozuna in history, behind Kitanoumi and Taiho. In his yusho interview, he declared that he would employ the supposedly jinxed Shiranui dohyo-iri style used by his Miyagino Beya's founder, ex-yokozuna Yoshibayama. In Yoshibayama's case, the jinx was manifested by his inability to win even one yusho as yokozuna.

Above it's stated that Asashoryu lost to all four ozeki, not five. That's because ozeki Tochiazuma made his intai announcement a week before the basho started. As many will recall, while being treated for high blood pressure, it was discovered that he had experienced a 'mini-stroke' at some prior time. His doctors couldn't assure him that he wasn't in danger, and so he decided that his health was more important than trying to squeeze out a few more years on the dohyo. As an ex-ozeki, he can retain the Tochiazuma shikona temporarily, and will take over Tamanoi-beya when his father reaches the mandatory retirement age of 65 in a little over two years.

The jun-yusho was shared by three rikishi at 12-3, and by now it

shouldn't be a shock to learn that none of them was an ozeki, even though it took nine days for any ozeki to accumulate two losses. Despite their promising starts, the other three ozeki lent little to the basho. Chiyotaikai erased kadoban on day 10 and so guaranteed that he would set the all-time record for number of basho at the ozeki rank – that being 51 come Nagoya. But he and Kaio could only fashion two more wins after that and both wound up with 10. As for Kotooshu, he continued to henka and get henka'd, and recorded nine wins. Nothing much changed.

Besides Hakuho, the only sanyaku rikishi at Natsu ringing bells was the eternal sekiwake, Kotomitsuki – the only one with a share of the jun-yusho at 12-3. He didn't look more dominating than usual because he always looks dominating in his wins. But this time he avoided the slip-down, slap-down losses that normally intersperse those manly-looking conquests. With 10 wins last time, he'll need 11 in Nagoya to meet the unwritten benchmark of 33 wins in three basho for ozeki promotion.



Kotomitsuki

I suspect though, that – with only three ozeki left – 10 wins would do it, as long as the impalpable 'content' of sumo was adequate, and especially since he's defended sekiwake so well for so long. I'm wary but I hope he makes it and

then goes all the way. Another hohum ozeki going in and out of kadoban, or barely escaping it won't add anything. Despite his stellar performance, it's interesting that he was the only rikishi to lose to the tottering yokozuna in the last six days of the basho – his 26th consecutive loss to Asashoryu.

The other two jun-yusho winners were from way down the banzuke – M8 Asasekiryu and M10 Dejima. These two can do some good things when they sink that low but they did much more this time. Asasekiryu wasn't eliminated from the yusho chase until day 14 and collected his 2nd Gino-sho (Technique) prize, but Dejima was a bigger surprise. An old(er) perpetually injured pusher like him being able to bang out 12 wins was beautiful, and he richly deserved his 4th Kanto-sho (Fighting Spirit) prize. Both men will, of course, re-enter the down elevator in Nagoya (that's just a prediction...).

There were four men below the rank of ozeki with ten wins. M13 Futeno – at his lowest rank in 14 basho – surprised no one by racing to a 9-1 record, and also raised few eyebrows by winning just one more match after that, despite never going against anyone ranked higher than M5. Once an ozeki hope, instead he's now a budding elevator star. I thought M7 Wakanosato wouldn't have the steam to go higher, but he looked better going 10-5 this time than he did with his 11-4 in March. Instead of sliding and gliding, this time he unleashed his trademark strongman sumo against a better class of opponents. He still didn't face any sanyaku men though, and I'll really be surprised if he continues on up in July.

The major surprise among the 10-win rikishi was M14 Ryuo. First, because he was a shin-nyu-maku, second, because he didn't enter makuuchi with the hype of some

others like Tochiozan and Satoyama, and third because he was darned dominating in his some of his wins. A Mongolian oddity, in that he's a big pusher-thruster instead of a technician, he appears to have a bright future, which should be enhanced by residing in the same heya as Hakuho.



Ryuo

The last of the 10-win guys was M9 Roho, who really should have done better at this rank. If that's all he has, he may be on the way to becoming another Tamanoshima, and I don't mean the one who made yokozuna 37 years ago. He may be lucky just to remain in sumo, considering his penchant for miscreant behavior. He began Natsu by misreading the tachiai on day 1 and getting escorted out by M9 Miyabiyama; then later railing on the gyoji for 'not recognizing' his matta. Before that hot seat could subside, he made it worse on day 3. After forcing out M7 Takamisakari for his first win, he gave the Robo-man a stiff shove several feet outside the ring after both men's posture had relaxed. Later, the ruling lords of the NSK pointedly let him know that they were losing patience with him. Even though he then demonstrated the proper penance,

he may not have any wiggle room left.

Miyabiyama's 9-6 outing felt like a letdown at his M9 rank, and he had to scramble to get that, starting with 3-5. He himself has no explanation for his listless demeanor on the dohyo, although he's gone through these phases before. One thing appears certain though – there's no way he can gather the intensity needed for another ozeki run.

I recently predicted that Aminishiki hadn't the pep needed for another run at sanyaku, but he and Wakanosato – along with Kotomitsuki – have just delivered me more humble pie. He registered just two more wins after pushing the start button to the yokozuna's decline on day 10, but 9-6 was enough to secure his first Shukun-sho (Outstanding Performance) prize and also could return him to komusubi for the Nagoya Basho. Takamisakari and M16 Hokutoriki round out those at 9-6. If Takamisakari gets boosted to M4, he'll be at his highest rank in three years, while Hokutoriki gets some makuuchi breathing room.

Sekiwake Ama's believers are saying "I told you so!" one more time as the slim shrimp of sumo continued to amaze one and all with his dogged resilience, this time coming through on senshuraku against Asasekiryu. This nailed down his 8-7 kachikoshi, defending his sekiwake rank on his first try. The major league henka he laid on Kotooshu on day 10 – for a change – upset no one as most felt it was richly deserved. For his part, Ama made the obligatory "I'm not that happy with my win" apology. At this point, he's probably not able to challenge for ozeki, but if he puts on a bit more weight – along with more experience, I'd be afraid to bet against him. Chiyonofuji was once viewed in more or less the same way.

The other kachi-koshi men at 8-7 were M1 Tokitenku, M5 Takekaze and M11 Tochinonada. It gives Tokitenku another shot at sanyaku, where I still think he can stay IF he can reduce his dependence on tripping and pulling. He admits as much himself... but old habits die hard.



Asasekiryu

Both komusubi will vacate their posts. In Toyonoshima's case it's because he suffered a painful knee injury in a pre-basho keiko session with Asashoryu. At 4-11, he still looked respectable despite limping through most of his matches, derailing ozeki Chiyotaikai along the way. As for Kotoshogiku, he's just not ready, falling short at 7-8. As Toyonoshima over-relies on morozashi, Kotoshogiku does the same with gaburi-yori. He needs more ways to go after his opponents, or he'll struggle to stay in sanyaku. His futile senshuraku henka attempt on Dejima was ugly, and it was great fun to see Dejima stay upright and get the win.

One head-shaking slide continues – here we're talking about Kisenosato. After four consecutive basho at komusubi, he's fast

approaching the rank-and-file club, this time clocking in at 6-9 at M3. If the Rijicho's aspersions cast his way on senshuraku in March did light a fire, it only served to distract him. He now seems either lost or uninspired, and is unable to prevent his opponents from getting into the position they want. The impudent swagger he had affected is on the wane as well.

More was also expected of M1 Homasho – at least more than the 5-10 he delivered, but it was his first basho at a joi-jin rank, and so he gets a small pass this time. He needs to rebound quickly though, and I expect he will in July. M15 Iwakiyama's 6-9 mark and the certain dive into juryo might be considered disappointing, but in view of his continued dismal showings due to his neck injury, it wasn't really surprising. I wish him well, and hope he can solve this problem and return to the big show.



Dejima

As always, there were some 'over-ranked' rikishi, but some of them got more than their share of comeuppance this time. Heading the list was M3 Kakizoe. He showed up for 11 days with no known injuries, and then headed back to the heya for the last four days with a 0-12-3 record. He didn't look particularly bad – he just couldn't

pull off a win. His M3 rank should be high enough to keep him in the top division, though. Then there were M2 Kokkai and M6 Tokitsuumi, both at 3-12. No big deal with Tokitsuumi, but what's with Kokkai? He continues to shed the kilos, but that's just increased the number of rikishi who can manhandle him. His brawling, rushing, arm-waving style is a shadow of it's former self, and despite his new mobility, his balance is no better. Whatever he's trying to do, it's clear that the weight watchers program is not working.



Takamisakari

Here are some make-koshi in line with expectations. At 6-9, there were M2 Tamanoshima, M4 Tochiozan, M5 Kakuryu, M14 Hochiyama. At 5-10, we find M6 Kasugao, M12 Tamakasuga and M15 Ushiomaru. Then with 4-11, there were M11 Otsukasa, M13

Tochinohana and M16 Kasuganishiki.

One make-koshi that was not a letdown was the 7-8 by the M12 shin-nyu-maku Satoyama, who by the way now replaces Ama as the lightest rikishi in makuuchi – 120 kg vs. 124 kg. Even so, he's expected to become a makuuchi stalwart, and many were disillusioned when he started the basho at 1-6. But after he got his 'dohyo legs,' he won six of his last eight matches and it was clear that he knew how to win in the top division, where he'll surely stay for the Nagoya Basho.

Two names that have not been mentioned are M8 Kyokutenho and M10 Shimotori. Kyokutenho ran afoul of one of the prohibitions for rikishi, by getting behind the wheel of a car and driving it on public roads. The infraction was discovered after he caused an accident by crashing into the back of a vehicle stopped at a traffic signal. As a result, he was fined, and also suspended for the Natsu Basho, resulting in the 0-0-15 record which will land him in juryo in Nagoya. Shimotori withdrew just prior to the basho with an injury suffered in keiko in April, and so also posted 0-0-15.

The upset of this basho is either Asashoryu losing to Aminishiki on day 10, or losing to Chiyotaikai on day 12. I'll have to go with Chiyotaikai's win because it confirmed that the yokozuna was just not right and also because it meant that he no longer controlled his own yusho destiny, practically assuring Hakuho's promotion at that point.



Futeno

It's interesting that when the Yokozuna Deliberation Council rubber-stamped Hakuho's promotion to yokozuna, they mentioned something about a 'condition' to his promotion: that he not become like Asashoryu. I don't know what this means, but just the fact that something like this is put out there is probably more a message for Asashoryu than it is for Hakuho. Anyway, the YDC and the rest of us are getting what we wanted – a wall for Asashoryu to climb if he wants more yusho. If he has trouble, will his department improve or decline? He hasn't 'wrestled' with much adversity so far. Those who feel that the true measure of a man is how he handles the hard times are now undoubtedly licking their chops and dusting off their meters.

So ladies and gentlemen, we have a new era. What shall we call it?