

Kyushu Basho Summary

*Text by Lon Howard
Photos by Carolyn Todd*

With two days left in the Kyushu Basho, the local fans must have been asking themselves which they would prefer, concerning their two home-grown ozeki:

- Chiyotakai wins the yusho
- Kaio gets kachi-koshi and sidesteps intai once again

The kadoban Kaio and his oyakata had both said he would retire if he recorded make-koshi. Since I think the fans somehow knew they couldn't have both wishes, I'd say they got their first choice, although I'm certain the way it went down has yet to elicit many exclamations of "Yes!" Or words to that effect.



Kaio

It's hard to imagine a more dismaying ending to a basho, when you consider that with just three days to go, three rikishi were tied for the lead with 10 wins – yokozuna Hakuho, Chiyotakai and

the auspicious M16 Baruto. But when ozeki Kotomitsuki ended his own yusho hopes by falling to sekiwake Aminishiki's henka on day 13, all eyes pivoted to the just-announced day 14 match up between Kaio and Kotomitsuki. Kaio would most certainly need that day 14 win to clinch kachi-koshi, or else deliver a sour prospect for Chiyotakai when the two faced off on senshuraku: go for the yusho by forcing Kaio to intai! It would have been a match you couldn't miss, or couldn't watch – or maybe both.

After the loss by Kotomitsuki, day 13 ended with Chiyotakai manhandling Baruto and Hakuho doing the same to Kaio, and so the stage was set for day 14 – Kaio and Kotomitsuki in the penultimate bout. I was hoping the engagement would last a little longer, but since it was difficult to watch, maybe it was best to just get it over with. Koto charged and spread his elbows a little. Kaio slipped both hands inside. A little dance towards the edge, Koto hit the clay with his belly, and the 'drama' was done. Kaio gazed upwards and exhaled. Koto slumped and left. The crowd whooped. Joy reigned in the southland.

It was soon tempered in a big way. In the day's final match, Hakuho stamped out any hopes of a double jackpot for the Kyushu fans by not only jerking Chiyotakai all around the dohyo by his arm, but damaging that arm to the extent that the ozeki declared himself kyujo the next day, thereby delivering the Emperor's Cup to Hakuho before he donned his

mawashi on senshuraku.

The yokozuna then responded to his 'good' fortune by allowing himself to be slung to the clay like a captured tuna by the suddenly energized Kotomitsuki. This, after Kaio had mounted the dohyo to accept the fusen-sho from the absent Chiyotakai. I'm certain that if I had written that script for winding down the basho, I would have fired myself!

Hakuho's 12-3 yusho was his 5th, and just the second yusho won with less than 13 wins in the last eight years.



Baruto

In contrast to the dreary ending, the first 12 days were reasonably entertaining, due in large part to two events that did NOT occur – events that fans kept waiting for that failed to materialize. First, Chiyotakai did not tire in the late

stages. His signature tsuppari attack was effective right up until the Hakuho match on day 14, where he was simply in over his head against the yokozuna. The second non-event was that the Estonian wunderkind Baruto's injured knee did not collapse on him at any time during the basho, and so in the eyes of many fans, he fulfilled his potential by steamrolling most of his opponents until he was matched with Chiyotakai and komusubi Ama on days 13 and 14. He and Chiyotakai took the jun-yusho at 11-4, and he was also rewarded with the Kanto-sho Fighting Spirit Prize.

As for Kotomitsuki, his second 10-5 mark as ozeki can be considered an improvement of sorts, given his highly publicized ordeal with gallstones just prior to the basho, and an 'allowance' for his Kaio benefaction on day 14. The fact that he remained tied for the yusho race for the first 11 days was also encouraging, as was his conquest of Hakuho on senshuraku. Kaio's nine wins release him from kadoban once more, and assure him the opportunity to extend his career to next year's Haru Basho, which would give him 20 years in Ozumo.



Hakuho

The remaining ozeki, Kotooshu, may want to get some kadoban tips from Kaio because he will taste it for the first time after withdrawing on day 7, and recording 2-5-8. He re-injured his damaged right knee just before the start of the basho, and his ozeki career is now officially in jeopardy. His window for rehabilitating that knee may have already closed, and he could be headed down the Dejima Road.

And speaking of Dejima, would you believe – or better – COULD you believe that he will be back in sanyaku in January...after 4½ years? His amazing 10-5 display at M1 should grab the lone sanyaku position left open. His power de-ashi never faltered and he showed that he's not as helpless on the mawashi as many believe him to be. But those huge legs of his... how much longer can they manage?

Departing sanyaku will be sekiwake Asasekiryu, who inexplicably nose-dived to 3-12, while the other sekiwake, Aminishiki, preserved his rank by winning on the last three days to salvage kachi-koshi. He'll be joined by his heyama-mate Ama, who claimed the Shukun-sho Outstanding Performance Prize by downing the yokozuna on day 8 on his way to a 10-5 showing at komusubi. Staying at komusubi alongside Dejima will be Kotoshogiku, a 9-6 Gino-Sho Technique Prize winner.

Most of the noise in the maegashira ranks was provided by the new boys on the block, with the biggest surprise being shin-nyu-maku M15 Wakakirin, who perhaps has established a gold standard in perseverance. It took him 8½ years in Ozumo to reach makuuchi, and he actually spent the first half of 2007 in makushita. Perhaps his 10-5 surprise was a result of not being taken seriously, but by the time he finished day 12 just one win off the yusho pace at



Aminishiki

9-3, he had everyone's attention. A tsuki-oshi specialist, he showed an array of snappy post-tachiai pulling and grabbing techniques that flowed effortlessly from one to another. Where he goes from here is unknown but he looks very much at home in the top division. The debut of the other makuuchi newcomer – the Russian M13 Wakanoho – was marked by some displays of raw power, interspersed with some backwards-leaping hanky-panky at the tachiai. At the end, it all came out to 9-6, and peering through all of that, he does have good basic mawashi technique, and appears to have a bright future. At age 19 though, he is far too focused on gamesmanship, and his sumo instincts will suffer if he doesn't fix that.

Aki Basho's newbie golden boy, M6 Goeido, charged out to 6-1, but from there he was schooled by some seasoned makuuchi men who pulled, grabbed and henka'd him to frustration. Still, he avoided a sophomore slump by forging an 8-7, with wins over the likes of Kotoshogiku and Tokitenku. Since he'll get the full complement of joi-jin in Hatsu, a kachi-koshi there would be very impressive.

The only other double-digit winner

was M12 Roho, who put together a remarkable display of sleight of hand and foot on his way to 10-5. Known now to have a serious back condition, on day 2 he hoisted out the hefty Wakanoho by tsuridashi, and I wondered right away about the effect on his back. I believe he hurt it again because, for the next 13 days, he just didn't use his back. He slipped and slapped, poked and pulled, and backed and henka'd his way to nine more wins. His opponents must have known he couldn't attack them but he 'pulled' it off anyway. Some would say that wasn't sumo, but one can't deny it took great skill. The bad news for Roho is that it will only work against the bottom of the division.

And here are the real 'bad news' boys of Kyushu: the not-yet-ready for prime time M1 Homasho at 3-12 and M3 Kakuryu at 4-11. The never-to-be-ready for prime time M5 Kasugao and M6 Tamanoshima, also with 4-11. And finally, a 4-11 from a surprising source, that being M4 Kyokutenho, who – with Japanese citizenship in hand – may have his mind more on oyakatahood than sekitorihood.

M9 Futeno will continue his pattern of spending every other



Ama

basho at a double-digit maegashira rank, posting 6-9, while M10 Yoshikaze, despite a 4-11 thumping, will probably be spared another trip to juryo due to poor performance at the top of the juryo banzuke. The same can probably be said of M14 Kaiho at 6-9, and M15 Tochiozan, with his 7-8. The only makuuchi rikishi guaranteed to make that journey is M12 Hakurozan, whose wobbly knees are seemingly on their own 'last legs.' He could only muster 3-12. M16 Kasuganishiki is probably on the bubble with his 7-8.

M8 Takamisakari got three early wins but was declared kyujo with an injured ankle after being utchari'd by Yoshikaze on day 4. Reportedly, he 'pleaded' with Azumazeki Oyakata to let him return, which he did on day 11. Sumo's Robocop and designated meal ticket then reeled off two quick wins to assure his continued presence in the top division for the Hatsu Basho, as sighs of relief abounded and echoed their way back to Tokyo. His official line for Kyushu was 5-5-5. The rest of the makuuchi men provided no surprises and will be slightly reshuffled on the Hatsu banzuke.

The biggest challenge in Ozumo for the Hatsu Basho may be for the tate-gyoji, who must now make a mental note that Asashoryu is on the west side, and point his gumbai in the appropriate direction. As badly as the Kyushu Basho ended, the good news right now appears to be that all parties with direct sway to the Asashoryu debacle over the past four months appear to be willing to forgive, if not forget, and let the news take place on the dohyo and not elsewhere. Boy, am I ready for that! Have a happy holiday season, everybody.