

Hatsu Basho Summary

by Lon Howard

If you agreed with my remarks in the Kyushu Summary about how that basho ended, then you would have felt, going into the Hatsu basho, that 'they' owed us one. They couldn't stick us with another dud, right? Or could they?

Reportedly, yokozuna Hakuho's keiko was slacking, and then he was thrashed by his counterpart Asashoryu in the pre-basho soken. The ozeki seemed in disarray: Kotomitsuki had lost 15 kilos after gall bladder surgery; Chiyotaikai had done almost no keiko because of the elbow injury suffered on Day 14 of Kyushu; Kotooshu had withdrawn from Kyushu after just six days with his injured knee; and as for Kaio, he was largely felt to have been gifted his kachi-koshi in Kyushu, thereby avoiding not just demotion, but intai.

And then Asashoryu – back in action for the first time in six months due to his two-basho suspension for transgressions now known even to the Taliban. Back from the depths of depression, according to his doctors – plus injuries to the ankle, elbow, back – and who knows what else. But by the time Hatsu started, in keiko he was demolishing all in his domain with the swagger of old, outwardly oblivious to his ordeal. The boogieman was back, but now he was juxtaposed with Hakuho the messiah, and since Hakuho's preparations were murky, this portrayal had taken on stark proportions. What if the 'evil one' ran away from the field after a six-month absence while the savior floundered? It would have made depressing Kyushu seem like Obon week.

And if one wanted to be picky, it could be said that the basho

started flat because after seven days, only two ozeki had more wins than losses: Kaio and Kotooshu with four each. But this time, these issues were mere flummery.

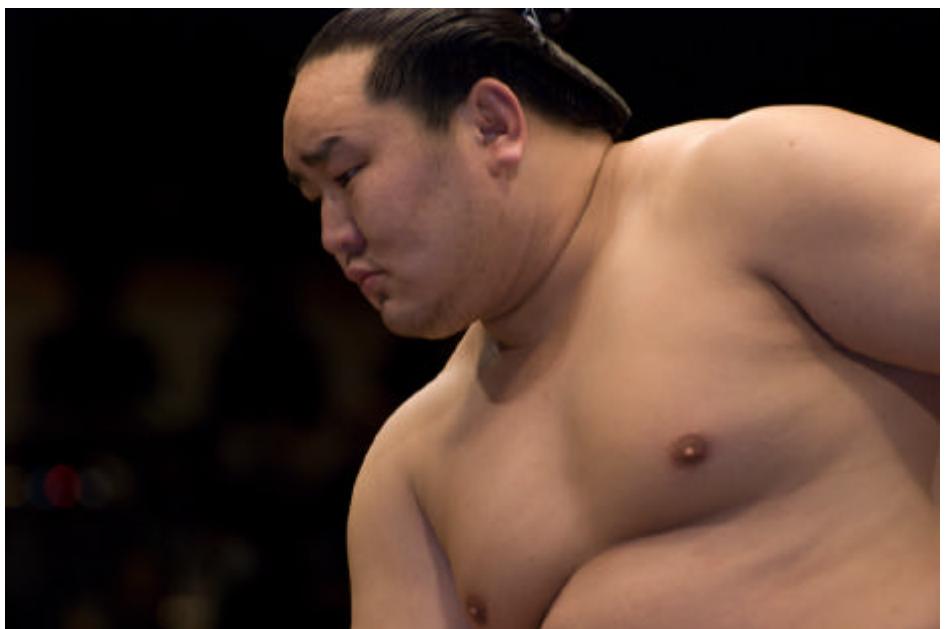
The fireworks started on Day 2 when Asashoryu got himself turned around against M1 Kisenosato and was rudely shoved out from the rear. Zabutons went zinging everywhere and hearty jubilation was palpable through the prolonged whooping and applause that followed the end of the match. The ensuing hearsay was that the yokozuna had lost his 'ring sense,' and other such speculation. Some fans, by their own admission, eagerly anticipated more losses. Those were disappointed though because in the days that followed, Asashoryu pulled off several escape acts while continuing to avoid another loss.

Contrast that to Day 10 when Hakuho suffered his first defeat at the hands of sekiwake Ama. There

was the usual clamor evident when a yokozuna is defeated, but in this case it was brief and subdued, almost transitioning to a hush at the end. The zabutons could have actually been counted, if one was so inclined.

It was now conspicuous that fans had bought into the good vs. evil rendition in the media, and gave sway to little else. Not the ozeki frailties, nor M10 Kyokutenho's nine wins, nor the eight wins by M8 Kakuryu and M12 Futeno. The coming senshuraku showdown between those two transcendental forces was the only thing worth anyone's time, and it was a given that the battle would be for the yusho.

And so it was. The three minions fittingly gave way to the two titans, who were even more dominant over the next four days, and finally faced off on senshuraku with 13-1 records. Both men grasped the import, as they staged an impassioned shikiri with a sustained and unrelenting stare-



Yokozuna Asashoryu - Martina Lunau

down for a chaser, which worked all into the frenzy they came for.

Their match seemed more even than it actually was but it still was a 'gripping' spectacle, as they came together in migi-yotsu and strained against each other for about 15 seconds. Hakuho put on all the pressure, sliding Asashoryu to the brink but couldn't put him away. Asashoryu's offense was confined to an inexplicable tsuri attempt in the center where he could do nothing with it. He tried two more lifting maneuvers when pushed back to the edge but they were both defensive. Finally, right after the last such move, Hakuho swiftly pivoted and unleashed his signature hidari uwate-nage that spilled Asashoryu and sprinkled nirvana dust over the jubilant throng in attendance, nailing down his third consecutive yusho.

the whole thing out. With his lame wing he would have lost at patty-cake... he never came close to winning a single bout. Strangely, Kokonoe oyakata didn't get him out of there until he had set a new record of seven consecutive ozeki losses to start a basho. His upcoming 11th kadoban in March will also be a record, but a shared one with Kaio.

Kaio himself looked better than he did in Kyushu but still limped in with just eight wins, securing his kachi-koshi early though, on Day 12. The kadoban Kotooshu showed that he still wins the mawashi battles but loses the rest of them, usually badly, taking 14 days to guarantee retention of his rank. He finished the basho on senshuraku by preventing Kaio's right uwate, and then just outlasted the older man to finish

crisp and he swiftly drove Asa to the brink, but alas, his hip placement was too high and he couldn't finish the deal. Back in the center, he again drove the yokozuna to the edge but was twisted sideways and out. A great contest but same result... better luck in Osaka! The next day against Hakuho, he again pushed his man around but fell victim to a lovely and well timed nage. Finally, on senshuraku, he overwhelmed sekiwake Aminishiki to avoid kadoban and get some well-earned rest. Given his recent physical ordeal, I can't say I was disappointed with his 8-7 result, as it included some robust efforts against the yokozunae.

Aminishiki's surprising three-basho run at sekiwake comes to a halt with a disappointing 5-10. It's tempting to say that advancing age and younger talent finally caught up with him but when I look at the so-called young bucks around him, I'm not yet convinced of that. It probably is accurate to say that komusubi Dejima's first sanyaku airing in 4½ years was a one and done show. The weary warhorse's four-basho run facing all the top-rankers finally wiped him out, and the 3-12 outcome was no 'fluke.'

As for Ama, despite his Hakuho conquest and shared Shukun-Sho Outstanding Performance Prize (with Kisenosato), he disappointed with 9-6 and his ozeki run is back to square one. The last of the sanyaku men, komusubi Kotoshogiku, was literally on again, off again, leaping to 6-1, then kyujo with an injured knee and ankle, finally returning to squeeze out three more wins for a 9-4-2 finish. So despite missing three days of action in the middle of the basho, he will advance to the open sekiwake spot left by Aminishiki. His injuries aside, he is probably considered the leading ozeki hopeful right now.

Kisenosato's 10-5 mark will stamp his return ticket to one of the open komusubi spots, while the other is



Komusubi Kotoshogiku - Martina Lunau

Afterwards, Hakuho said he 'couldn't' lose to someone who had been away from hon-basho for six months, while Asashoryu vowed he would claim the Haru yusho. Oh boy, I think we've got an era... so what shall we call it? Maybe Hakkuro (white & black)?

But before we start feeling that it's all good, let's get back to the ozeki, starting with Chiyotaikai, who would have been well advised to sit

at 9-6.

Kotomitsuki was a close call. After a 2-0 start, he stumbled to 3-5 before stringing four wins to stand at 7-5 going into Day 13 against Asashoryu. Having lost 27 consecutive times to the yokozuna, his determination to put an end to this blight was plain. In fact, if they passed out wins for a shikiri contest, I would've given him the nod on this day. His tachiai was

probably a toss-up between M4 Asasekiryu, also at 10-5, and M7 Takekaze, who was awarded the Kanto-sho Fighting Spirit Prize for his inspiring 12-3 performance. A follow-up is not likely, though.

Of the three maegashira men who were still in the running after Day 10, only Kakuryu remained near the top, finishing with 11-4 and showing off his Gino-Sho Technique Prize. Kyokutenho won just one more match and cruised to 10-5, while Futeno settled for the same eight wins, failing to win another bout.

M9 Kokkai is a winner once again with 9-6, and it should be noted that he abandoned his chaotic tactics and went straight ahead, often with yotsu-zumo, but he hasn't faced anyone of note since last May, so probably nothing to get excited about there. There was no sophomore jinx for M10 Wakanoho with his 10-5, but with three more henka. He lost two of those though so maybe he'll go back to the basics, with which he does very well. M13 Iwakiyama's neck and back injuries look to be on the mend with his 9-6, and the hefty ex-collegian M16 Ichihara made a promising makuuchi debut

at 8-7.

The ex-ozeki candidate M7 Homasho continues his mystifying descent with a soft 4-11 mark. A soft tachiai is also the prime



Kisenosato - Carolyn Todd

culprit behind M3 Goeido's arrival at 'the wall,' as he could get only five wins in his first try against all the joi-jin. As for M6 Baruto, he hit his first wall that didn't involve a new injury, posting just seven

wins while facing not a single joi-jin. If neither his knee nor his tachiai improves, this may be about where he belongs. M5 Roho continued his prolific henka pace but his eight slip and slide shows could produce only seven wins. This is probably how it's going to be from here, as his chronic back condition is good enough for just one or two power moves each basho.

The makuuchi out-basket this time includes an old friend, as M13 Tamanoshima will take a hurting back and a 3-12 record with him as he returns to juryo for the first time in seven years. M14 Shimootori re-injured his herniated disc on shonichi and was thereafter kyujo. His makuuchi days may now be at an end. M12 Tosanoumi's 5-10 puts him again on the juryo bubble.

So now it's on to Osaka in March, where Asashoryu will go all out to prove that he can finally win a yusho entering from the west. Should Hakuho win again though, that would make four straight, and six of the last seven – quite extraordinary, regardless of the circumstances. See you then.



Yokozuna Hakuho - Martina Lunau