

Haru Bashi Summary

by Lon Howard

If Yokozuna Hakuho had been able to nail down his fourth straight yusho in the Haru Bashi, he would have joined a short list of six other men in the modern era, starting with Futabayama. Well, he had his chances but as we recall, fell short on the final day against fellow yokozuna Asashoryu, who won his 22nd yusho and thereby tied Takanohana for fourth place in the number of yusho won. Asashoryu's 13-2 conquest was compelling in several ways but his fresh yokozuna rivalry with Hakuho was not the thrust of this basho because the two of them have been holding up sumo for some time now.



Hakuho - Carolyn Todd

In recalling that Hakuho had his chances, we are again reminded that it was he, and he alone, who had any chance at the yusho, other than Asashoryu. Two others

duplicated his 12-3 finish, but was there ever any thought that either maegashira 5 Kokkai or maegashira 7 Baruto were actually in the hunt, even though Baruto was actually tied with Hakuho after 12 days? In each basho there are always hiramaku rikishi who have breakout basho and make hay with the lower rankers, and thereafter slip quietly back into their comfort zone; but a sanyaku rikishi almost never gets a scent of yusho anymore. Since Tochiazuma in 2006, there has been no rikishi who loomed as a threat to Asashoryu and Hakuho. Three such rikishi have made inadvertent advances – Kotomitsuki and Miyabiyama (interviewed [here](#)) while on their ozeki runs, and Chiyotaikai last November; but after their little surprises they too re-settled in their own environs.

As ozeki, Kotomitsuki and Kotooshu have yet to mount a yusho challenge, Chiyotaikai has done so just twice in the past four years, and Kaio has not notched a single challenge since November 2004. Both Kaio and Chiyo were once formidable barriers to a yokozuna yusho, but that was then and this is now. I've been kicking some figures around and have established that we have not seen such inferior ozeki performance since the late 1970s. And worse, there is no relief at hand, especially since Asashoryu and Hakuho are still young and will probably make each other even better.

But at least we can now say that with Asashoryu's victory, the Hakusho, or Hakkuro era as I like to call it, has been cemented because... well, we can't really have

a twin yokozuna era if the same guy keeps winning, can we? Some say that Asashoryu, in only his second basho since his two-basho suspension, isn't all the way back yet. To me he looks like the same guy. Unlike in the Hatsu Bashi, this time he thoroughly squashed all his opponents for the first 11 days and looked to be invincible.



Kokkai - Carolyn Todd

But Hakuho was hesitant and cautious, especially after falling to a taichai henka by maegashira 2 Aminishiki on Day 4. Witness his Day 8 struggle against the canny maegashira 3 Tokitenku. When an early offense yielded no fruit, he settled for a protracted migi yotsu. He finally assembled a morozashi after 45 seconds and used it for nothing, so Tokitenku responded with his own maki kai and took it away. It was one minute plus 20 seconds before he finally worked Tenku to the edge and lifted him out.

At that point Hakuho seemed to be living on borrowed time since Asashoryu had been so

commanding. His ruination seemed complete when in the Day 12 penultimate bout, he allowed Chiyotakai to stand him up at the tachiai, then jerk him forward and off the dohyo for his second loss. So there he had two losses while Asashoryu was still zensho.

How quickly the perception changed! After seeing his only rival for the emperor's cup take a seemingly lethal defeat, Asashoryu promptly put the yusho back in play by letting Sekiwake Kotoshogiku smother him at the tachiai and hip-hop him out with



Kotoshogiku - Carolyn Todd

his patented gaburi yori. If one thought the audience went ga-ga over that, they saw ga-ga in spades the next day when Asashoryu faced Kotomitsuki, gunning for his 29th consecutive win over the star-crossed ozeki. It was apparent from the start that he was going to work for it, as Kotomitsuki used his longer arms and bulk to get his own two-handed migi yotsu while denying the yokozuna a left hand grip. As the bout wore on, with Asashoryu dangling his left arm

and meandering like a duck shot with an arrow, some fans were seen with both hands on their opened-mouth cheeks, riveted in their expectation. When Kotomitsuki finally dumped him by hidari uwatenage after 53 seconds of suspense, some of them actually cried.

With both men now tied at 11 wins each, the presumption had flip-flopped, as Asashoryu appeared to have slipped while Hakuho was seen gaining strength. After both won easily on Day 14, the banter was that Asashoryu needed a quick win on senshuraku or he would again be a dead duck.

He listened well. Surprisingly, he gave Hakuho the momentum and a left arm inside at the tachiai, but his only concern was denying Hakuho a right hand belt grip so he could plant his right leg and pivot as he was backing up. From there, using Hakuho's forward momentum, the migi kotenage he used to fling Hakuho around and out was just a formality. It was done in short order and Hakuho looked stunned, having now lost three bouts, none of which lasted five seconds.

Despite the favorite having lost, there was the usual rousing cheer for the winner, and although he headed for the shitaku beya with arms high in celebration, Asashoryu was quietly emotional as he sat for the tokoyama to prepare him for the yusho ceremony. There was more lusty acclamation when he concluded the yusho interview by exulting "I love Osaka" in the Osaka dialect, or 'Osaka-ben,' and there was no dash for the doors after the interview.

As for the ozeki, let's start with Kotooshu. At the rate he's going, with new injuries piling on top of the old, the best he may hope for is that he'll last long enough at his rank to someday tie Kaio and Chiyotakai for the kadoban

record. Right now he trails them by nine, but he's young and I wouldn't count him out... After beginning 2-1, he was kotenage'd by maegashira 1 Kakuryu on Day 4, injuring his left bicep. After four more losses he called it a basho, recording 2-7-6. Although now relatively healthy, Kotomitsuki started in a funk at 2-6, and needed a senshuraku win over Chiyotakai to salvage kachikoshi. Kaio and Chiyotakai secured their kachikoshi on Days 11 and 12 respectively and neither won another bout.



Kotomitsuki - Carolyn Todd

Three of the other four sanyaku also grazed by with 8-7 records, the lone exception being the overmatched first-time komusubi Takekaze, whose 3-12 mark will send his already impressive Elevator Index shooting skyward. The other komusubi – Kisenosato – will probably stay put due to the kachikoshi posted by sekivake Ama and Kotoshogiku. The only other rikishi above maegashira 4 to post kachikoshi was maegashira 1 Asasekiyu, also at 8-7.

It's been apparent for a few basho that Kokkai has been trying to re-tool himself from a brawling, pulling goofball into a traditional straight-ahead mostly yotsu rikishi. He showed promise in January posting 9-6 at maegashira

9, but his 12-3 here at maegashira 5 rolled a multitude of eyeballs. Right now – at least against the lower rankers – he’s a guy who does it all with solid fundamentals, and the perseverance he’s shown in this effort has made me a new fan. He’ll be back at sanyaku again in May, taking Takekaze’s komusubi spot.



Takamisakari - Carolyn Todd

Baruto has found a way to compete with his damaged left knee. No longer all about power, this time he focused on staying balanced and challenging his opponents to move him, which with his natural strength, was a load. He still can lose very meekly though, if he gets off on the wrong knee, so to speak, and his tachiai is still a work in progress. He could be a shin komusubi in May if an extra slot is made for him. If so,

one may also be made for Asasekiryu.

Maegashira 1 Kakuryu was all the rage in the first week, dropping three ozeki in the first six days. He faded toward the end at 6-9, but is adding heft and technique with each basho. He doesn’t do anything special except compete well against almost everyone. We shall see...

Coming on strong is maegashira 4 Wakanoho. In his third makuuchi basho, the brash Russian recorded his third straight kachikoshi at 8-7 without the henka tactics shown so far. If the bodacious 19-year-old can harness his intensity and hone his already impressive technique, he may scare some people, if he hasn’t done so already.

Both maegashira 12 Tochiozan and maegashira 13 Homasho were 8-1 after nine days, and finished 11-4 and 9-6 respectively. Both men are recovering from injuries but only Tochiozan appears to have staying power as Homasho still uses the tachiai merely as a means of establishing position instead of attacking. Great new hope maegashira 8 Goeido needs more seasoning than expected, posting a disappointing 8-7.

The only other double-digit winners were maegashira 10 Futeno and maegashira 11 Takamisakari, while six men at the bottom of the makuuchi banzuke will likely make return trips to juryo, those being Kaiho, Wakakirin, Otsukasa, Ryuo, Ichihara, and shin-nyu-maku Sakaizawa. Ichihara and Sakaizawa both withdrew early on with knee injuries.



Ama - Carolyn Todd

Regardless of how the majority of fans felt about the senshuraku outcome, it’s apparent that they are more than content with the advent of Ozumo’s new era, as evidenced by ten sold out days in the Osaka Prefectural Gymnasium; and this with again no contribution to the yusho race by any sanyaku rikishi. The rumors of sumo’s demise were clearly premature and exaggerated but sumo does need some help. Will it come from Kotoshogiku or Kisenosato? Wakanoho or Baruto? Ama or Goeido? Will all four ozeki ever finish the same basho again? Is the next ozeki even in makuuchi yet? I don’t know the answers to any of these questions but I do know we’ll still be asking them after the Natsu Basho is over. Stay tuned and enjoy the spring!