

Natsu Basho Summary

by Lon Howard

He's been a much-maligned ozeki for a while but most fans probably felt a little sorry for Kotooshu, even as he achieved goals in the Natsu Basho he could barely dream about. After his second kadoban in three basho, if you had promised him only eight wins, how could he have refused? How about eight wins without aggravating his knee or bicep injuries? Even better. How about double-digit wins for the first time in 18 months? Stop right there, done deal. Hey, what about being in the yusho hunt on the 14th day? Oh my God, of course, of course. Going 14-1 and winning the yusho on day 14? Get out...

But leave it to two peevish, under-performing yokozuna to get into a shoving, near-slapping stare down AFTER their match on senshuraku to divert attention from the celebratory ambience. Somehow, they were the only ones who needed telling that the basho wasn't about them anymore. But let's get back to what really happened.

And really, Kotooshu was all that happened. Without him, this basho would've had all the impact of charm school on John McEnroe, and the only thing worth anticipating in Nagoya would've been whether or not there might be three sekiwake.

But more than his 14 wins, it was how he won. Even when he flourished in the past, he usually set up his wins with nage, and also won – and lost – a fair amount of bouts by slapping. In this basho, from shonichi to senshuraku inclusive, he attempted zero nage – nada, zilch – as in never at any time. Further, there was only one



Kotooshu - Carolyn Todd

slapping motion, which was in the flow of the match against Kakuryu.

So what did he do? Simply, he squared up against his opponents without retreating, albeit with two tachiai circumventions. There was no panic if he didn't directly get the mawashi – he stood his ground and inched forward, sometimes thrusting his man out, or using the eventual belt grip to

win by yorikiri. There were no stand-around mawashi gripping, ottsuke grabbing interludes – just get the belt and walk 'em out boring Taka-Taiho sumo. Except that in this basho, it wasn't boring because we couldn't believe what we were seeing.

It was also striking that only one rikishi exerted any visible resistance against him (hint:

happened on day 2). He did what he wanted, and quickly, like a man among boys. His one loss was due to his own ham-handed attempt to play mind games with maegashira 4 Aminishiki at the tachiai on day 13. Apparently fearing one of the ex-sekiwake's henka, he refused to touch down. The two resulting matta only served to upset his own timing, and he was thumped out before he could get moving. Afterwards, Sadogatake Oyakata told reporters that he was distraught over his bumbling gambit.



Aminishiki - Carolyn Todd

So what turned a hurting, listless shell of an ozeki into an overnight titan? Some cited a few more kilo as a major factor, although it wasn't that noticeable. If anything, the extra weight may have just given him the confidence to do straight-up sumo. Whatever the case, it at least appears that if his injured knee is 'right,' there are few rikishi who can take him on, as long as he doesn't revert to his old tactics.

A few major ifs in there for sure, and when the two yokozuna are

right themselves, they should be up to the task. But there was nothing right about either Asashoryu or Hakuho, as their twin 11-4 records attest. Asashoryu appeared to recover from another early basho loss to Kisenosato to stand at 9-1 after ten days. That tied him with Hakuho, who had matched Kotooshu's zensho pace for the first nine days, but then fell victim to an Ama tachiai sidestep and resulting uwatenage win.

That's when it all went south for both of them. Hakuho injured his left ankle as he was hurtled off the dohyo by Ama and was lucky to get two more wins. Asashoryu was bounced around at will by his next three opponents, and was mysteriously seen with lots of tape on his lower left back for the last four days. The basho was decided before either of their day 14 bouts when Kotooshu ran straight through sekiwake Ama's tachiai thrusts and slammed him down. So for the last two days, both yokozuna were reduced to mere obligatory add-ons to a show that was already into its curtain call.

The only thing good about the ugly scene at the end of the senshuraku musubi no ichiban was that it could have been uglier. Asashoryu pulled Hakuho down for the win and then pushed and kneed him for good measure. Hakuho bumped him back in retaliation while getting up, and Asashoryu nearly slapped Hakuho in the face, only scraping the cheek after catching himself in time. They then had a three- or four-second niramiai in the middle of the dohyo as everyone held their collective breaths. Thankfully, they finally parted and finished up properly, Asashoryu receiving kensho with a wry smile – its meaning still unknown. Instead of Kotooshu being the center of attention as he returned to the shitaku beya to prepare for the yusho ceremony, the fans were surely thinking, "I don't believe

what I just saw!" Sadly they weren't contemplating the ozeki's yusho.

Hyperbole being a universal human failing – on further review, let's concede that conjecture about bungling yokozuna or a potential ozeki intai takes precedence over the odds of there being an extra sekiwake. Let's start with the ozeki.



Chiyotakai - Carolyn Todd

Chiyotakai's career is in jeopardy. The elbow injury he sustained when he was kotenage'd by Hakuho last November is still evident – possibly being tweaked early on – and his right arm was feeble for most of the basho. He was 3-8 after 11 days but insisted on finishing, doing so at 5-10. He said he would immediately retire if he doesn't get his kachi-koshi in Nagoya. That would be a sad moment, but I hope it doesn't come down to a day 14 or 15 must win against another ozeki with nothing more to lose. Either way it went it would be a blue day. As for the other two ozeki, Kaio clinched his kachi-koshi on day 13 against Asashoryu. Breathing easy, he was yorikiri'd by Hakuho

the next day, and then perfunctorily overwhelmed by the 7-7 Kotomitsuki on senshuraku. The overplayed optimism on Kotomitsuki's ozeki promotion just four basho ago is now fully exposed.

The sekiwake stayed on course, but nothing more. Ama had his usual moments with nine wins by day 13 and then flushed his hopes for starting another ozeki run by failing on the last two days, receiving the gino-sho technique prize as a consolation award. Kotoshogiku wandered through the basho and finally wrested kachi-koshi against maegashira 5 Toyonoshima on senshuraku. There is speculation that a third sekiwake spot may be made for 10-5 komusubi Kisenosato after his fourth straight kachi-koshi in the joi-jin – a miniature lifetime achievement award, I suppose, if it happens. Asasekiryu gave up his komusubi spot with 6-9.

There are three maegashira candidates for the open komusubi spot, or spots – no. 2 Wakanoho 8-7, no. 4 Aminishiki 10-5, and no. 5 Toyonoshima 11-4. Aminishiki took the shukun-sho outstanding performance prize, while Toyonoshima shared the kanto-sho fighting spirit prize with Kisenosato. Wakanoho has yet to bang into a makuuchi wall but one of his promises bounced, as he reprised henka three times despite vowing never to do it again after the Hatsu Basho.

Both maegashira 6 boys turned in mild surprises. Futeno's 9-6 was his first winning record at a rank this high in nearly three years, while Hokutoriki threw down nine straight wins in the middle of the basho on the way to 10-5, which positions him nicely to buff up his elevator numbers in July.

Maegashira 1 Baruto again found no joi-jin joy as he found make-koshi on day 9 and wound up 5-10. Reportedly worried about his injuries, the strain on him was laid bare on senshuraku when he blurted to his tsukebito on his way out, "owatte yokatta!" – roughly, "thank God it's over!"

Maegashira 1 Kokkai and no. 2 Kyokutenho will go back down the banzuke elevator with 3-12 and 4-11, respectively. Kokkai now looks stuck in waza purgatory. He doesn't push people around anymore and his new orthodox sumo style is still – well, new to him. Kyokutenho may have joined Tamakasuga's senior slow dance club – he can still boogie, but with different partners from now on.

Maegashira 7 Goeido's mantle as a great new hope is on hold until he can break his habit of retreating and pulling. It's great when it works, but he too often gives up control of the match. He barely made eight wins and looks very passive.

Both maegashira 9 failed to finish. Kasugao suffered left knee ligament damage on day 8 against Toyonoshima and was kyujo after that. His 3-6-6 could send him to juryo. Roho's injured elbow and chronic back pain forced him into kyujo after day 13 but his henka and pulling magic still posted eight wins so it appears he'll stay in the pack as long as he can pull himself out of bed.

Both maegashira 16 hit shin-nyumaku bumps at 4-11, so both Kotokasuga and Hakuba will gear up for another makuuchi run in juryo. The other newbie, Tochinoshin, won his first three and then said makuuchi was just like juryo, but after being bashed around the rest of the way, he

conceded at basho's end that, "They hit a lot harder in makuuchi." Still, his mawashi talent produced seven wins, so he'll probably stay in for Nagoya. All the other men in the top division should also stay.



Wakanoho - Carolyn Todd

If Kotooshu's 14 wins hadn't been so decisive, I'd be very suspicious of his performance, but since I predicted some time ago that he'd be yokozuna, I'm not at all shy about saying I'm stoked about his chances for a repeat performance in Nagoya. I hope he gets back into keiko early on and doesn't get injured. If so, the shimpan group could have a knotty consideration on their hands at basho's end; namely – for the first time – sending a recommendation for promotion to the YDC the name of an ozeki who was kadoban just two basho before. That would be one smoke-filled room I'd love to hide out in.