

Aki Basho Summary

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Pictures by Chris Gould**

Let's take a look at a few Aki Basho highlights. First, three sekitori were banned for life prior to the basho for marijuana issues. This caused one makuuchi banzuke spot to be completely blank, and played a part in two banzuke-listed joi-jin rikishi not competing at all. Thanks to an eleventh-hour tachiai directive by the new Rijicho, there were so many 'mada mada' during the basho that fans and media pundits were united in their exasperation and disbelief with the

laughable but humorless spectacles before them. Once during the basho, the Rijicho lambasted a head judge for defying his directive. Before the basho, the same Rijicho also threatened one of the yokozuna with intai for improper conduct, after which the said yokozuna withdrew after losing four matches in nine days. Finally, the yusho was, for the fourth tournament in succession, decided before Day 15. All in all, it was a fairly decent basho.

Huh?

Amazingly, even with all those distractions, it wasn't hard paying attention to the actual sumo, even on senshuraku. For one thing, except for Kotooshu's otherworldly yusho in May, an ozeki (and a native at that) mounted a serious yusho challenge for only the second time in two and a half years, with Kotomitsuki entering Day 14 only one win behind yokozuna Hakuho. Furthermore, the feisty sekiwake Ama was right there with him, his stack of wins making him a serious ozeki candidate. For these reasons, most observers remained engrossed in the basho until deep into the final weekend.

I could almost do a copy and paste of my description of Hakuho's Nagoya performance here – but only almost. Even if he had managed another zensho yusho instead of his mere 14-1, it wouldn't have been as impressive because he did expend more time and energy this time, despite staying in charge of his bouts. He continued his priority of cautiously diminishing his opponent's strength and then moving in for the kill. He had a few wins of the slap down and pivoting variety but they were executed from a position of dominance – the one exception being the Day Five debacle against maegashira 2 Kisenosato, in which he inexplicably back-pedalled when pressed, giving up the momentum and the match. This was his third yusho this year, and eighth overall.

For Kotomitsuki, his performance was compelling on several fronts, even though he lost on the final





two days to ozeki Kaio and Hakuho. For starters, he was hospitalized prior to the basho, this being the second such occurrence in less than a year. This time it happened in Seoul while en route to the Mongolian jungyo, and he was returned to a Japanese hospital, where he recovered. Originally thought to be appendicitis, his condition was later diagnosed as a kidney stone, which apparently passed. He was also hospitalized before AND after last year's Kyushu Basho with gallstones, resulting in eventual surgery that led to a 15-kilo weight loss. After all that, his second consecutive 11-4 record in Aki is remarkable. Not only a physically robust and gritty fighter, his stellar

losing effort against Hakuho on senshuraku clearly established him as the Mongolian's foremost challenger. Kotomitsuki is now at his mental and physical peak, with only lapses in concentration precluding a shot at yokozuna promotion.

Having gotten this far without mentioning the 'other' yokozuna's name reminds me that a prominent member of the Yokozuna Deliberation Council (YDC) had recently played dodge-ball with his moniker, saying that she already considered Asashoryu to be retired. At the time, it was wishful thinking on her part, but right now Ozumo's former sole headliner is undeniably living on

the edge of retirement, having – for the first time in his career – failed to finish two consecutive basho due to injuries. If that wasn't enough, he was threatened with forced retirement for deportation issues by the new Rijicho, Musashigawa. Finally, when Musashigawa promulgated his new get-tough policy with the two-hands-down tachiai rule, he also reminded the public that Asashoryu was one of the most notorious offenders of this rule. There are many reasons for YDC diva Uchidate to mention Asashoryu's name these days, and to her credit, she's on record as saying she wants him to take as many basho off as is necessary to completely recover from his injuries. Or maybe she just considers any basho without Asashoryu to be a good basho for her.

Also living on the edge is Ama, but on the edge of ozeki promotion. His 12-3 jun-yusho, preceded by 10-5 in Nagoya, puts him on course to achieve the unofficial promotion standard of 33 wins over three straight basho. But with four current ozeki appearing capable of holding the rank for the foreseeable future, he may have to get to 34 wins – thus 12 more in Kyushu – to go up. Ama's display was capped with his fourth Shukun-sho (Outstanding Performance Prize), received for his Day Nine win over Asashoryu – albeit via the henka route.

As for existing ozeki, Kaio and Chiyotaikai are looking more like their 'good ole' selves than the 'old' selves that we have become accustomed to for the past five years. Both have fashioned two consecutive 9-6 marks, with Kaio now sitting on six straight kachi-koshi. Kotooshu however, IS back to his old self – otherwise known as a mess. He did manage a final-day kachi-koshi against ozeki partner Chiyotaikai, but his sumo throughout was tentative, with several wins being nothing more

than serendipitous meanderings of providence. As for his 14-1 Natsu Basho yusho: it's just too bad they couldn't have done a before-and-after brain scan. It'll never be explained, I suppose.

Two sanyaku men defending new ranks appeared to be headed in the same direction after nine days but then parted ways conspicuously. New sekiwake Toyonoshima was still viable with 4-5 and could have gotten kachi-koshi by taking care of business with lower rankers. Instead, the self-described new ozeki candidate limped home with 2-4 and is now seeking a seat at the drawing board. Conversely, after having all of the upper rankers thrust at him from the start, shin-komusubi Baruto cleaned house with the lesser lights, turning 2-7 into 8-7 and earning the right to occupy Toyonoshima's sekiwake spot in Kyushu.



The remaining sanyaku man, komusubi Asasekiryu, performed as expected at this level, turning in a 4-11 – although two of the four came against ozeki Kotomitsuki and Chiyotaikai. Given the burgeoning numbers of younger hopefuls converging on the upper maegashira ranks, he may find it tough to return, despite his considerable belt strength.

Kyushu's new komusubi will probably be maegashira 4 Aminishiki (8-7) and number 5 Goeido (10-5). Goeido was actually tied with Hakuho for the lead after ten days at 9-1, but then plummeted upon encountering the joi-jin after that. As a consolation, he did depart with his second Kanto-sho (Fighting Spirit Prize). With this performance, he is now the new Japanese hope du jour, and will remain just that for now as his tachiai still lacks authority. Hopefully, he'll get some encouragement on that front when taking lumps in Kyushu.



The only thing to say about the rest of the so-called young Turks is that they all got a little older this Aki Basho. Kotoshogiku, Kisenosato and Tochiozan all offered 6-9 marks at maegashira 1, 2 and 6 respectively while number 5 Kakuryu – despite cheekily upsetting Kotooshu – confirmed his ill-preparedness for Turkdom with 7-8. The promising youngster Toyohibiki finally showed his Turkish pretensions with an 8-7, and because of no-shows and ugly shows above him, will be promoted from maegashira 6 to joi-jin, ready or not.

Four of the first 15 banzuke slots below sanyaku were occupied by rikishi who essentially did not

compete in the basho, with one such slot not occupied at all. That berth belonged to maegashira 8e Wakanoho, who received a lifetime ban for possession of marijuana after the banzuke was prepared, and his name was erased. Two other Russian sekitori, maegashira 3w Roho and his brother, juryo 6e Hakurozan, were also permanently banned after testing positive for marijuana, but their names were left on the banzuke because it was too late to remove them. In addition, injuries put maegashira 2 Homasho and maegashira 7 Iwakiyama on the sidelines – Homasho before shonichi and Iwakiyama after only two days of action.



Since only three rikishi ranked from maegashira 1 through 8 recorded kachi-koshi, a few rikishi will get rocket rides up the banzuke with mere 8-7 records, while a few more will get relatively small demotions after winning only four to six bouts. There will also be at least five promotions from juryo to makuuchi, one of those being juryo 6 Aran; thus ensuring the presence of at least one Russian on the makuuchi banzuke.

So what's on tap for Kyushu? Well, the 'Kotooshu Incident' in May showed that anything can

happen; but if ‘anything’ doesn’t happen, look for Hakuho to cruise to yusho number nine, and don’t even look for Asashoryu at all. Musashigawa Rijicho’s pre-basho threats in the media made him a marked man for just about everybody who can impact his career, and he can’t afford to show up again until he is 100 per cent healthy.

Everyone with access to full coverage of the basho knows that Musashigawa’s ill-timed edict to strictly ‘enforce’ the two-hands-down tachiai rule is – at least currently – a washout. The joi-jin were for the most part ignored unless it was a yokozuna bout, while the rank-and-file rikishi were repeatedly hammered with false starts after perfectly executed

tachiai. And sometimes, after four or five ‘mada mada,’ exasperated shimpan allowed matches to continue anyway even though the tachiai was worse than before.

This foray by Musashigawa is one of several during the modern era intended to address matta issues. Like the others, it is doomed to failure. The reasons are fourfold. First, the oyakata refuse to agree even among themselves what an acceptable tachiai is. Secondly, even in agreement, there are still varying degrees of willingness within the shimpan group to persistently stop torikumi. Third, even if they are willing, it is virtually impossible for a diverse group to be consistent regarding something so arcane. Finally, they have always refused to enforce the

rule anyway – no rikishi has ever been charged with a loss for a bad tachiai, regardless of what the current interpretation has been (the rule itself has not been altered in modern times).

Only the 1984 decree has had any legs, forcing rikishi to charge from a crouch. However, it only made matta worse, and in addition spawned the modern-day henka. This latest effort will fade into the mist like the rest of them within about a year, hopefully not causing too much distress in the meantime. Musashigawa has used his one free pass. If the farcical sideshow we witnessed in Aki continues into Kyushu, it will probably take a kettei-sen among three 14-win rikishi to save the next basho.