

The Ozeki Jobsite

by Lon Howard

On nakabi (Day 8) of the Kyushu Basho, an English language announcer on the NHK telecast, Ken Swenson, suggested something about the ozeki that I have oft thought about myself. He said that the kachi koshi requirement for ozeki should be more than eight wins; maybe nine or even ten wins. In addition to profoundly complicating the definition of kachi koshi, that would also mean that the standard for avoiding kadoban and demotion would be raised.

A radical idea? Maybe, but before dismissing it out of hand, we should at least consider that another echelon of rikishi already has an elevated 'kachi koshi' standard of sorts: the yokozuna. With both yokozuna and ozeki carrying more responsibility than the rest, if it's preposterous to think that a yokozuna could maintain his rank with a series of eight-win basho, why should ozeki be given a markedly easier ride? Or, if a mere sekiwake could maintain his rank by stringing out eight wins, what would be so onerous about asking ozeki to do a little better, especially since they're all fighting essentially the same opponents each and every basho?

At present, ozeki have a lower standard because they're allowed to maintain their rank by merely alternating kachi koshi and make koshi, which is impossible for rikishi of any other rank in sumo. This is why it's been suggested that ozeki have the best job in sumo – after Takamisakari of course!

No argument here, but let's try to look at an ozeki world with a 9-win kachi koshi standard before

deciding. In doing so, let's apply that standard to the actual win-loss records of the last 31 ozeki covered in the study so far, beginning with Mitsuneyama and ending with Kotomitsuki. To compare apples to apples as much as possible, I ignored kosho (bouts missed due to injury) and used only the wins and losses on record. The 10- and 33-win standards for regaining ozeki (once the rank has been lost) were also applied. It's not perfectly realistic because during kosho, some ozeki would have competed instead of sitting out, but you can probably assume that if they were at least partially injured, then they would likely have produced a real make koshi anyway.

To assist in interpreting the results, I took the existing ozeki database (found [here](#)) and added a tan-colored highlight to the 9-win basho to distinguish them from the 8-win basho, since either eight or nine wins earned zero points. This ad hoc database can be seen [here](#).

Okay, so what have we got? Well for starters, there would have been no ozeki on the banzuke for the past four basho. Kaio would have been demoted from May 2006 and Chiyotaiikai from January 2005, with neither having regained their rank to this date.

A breakdown of each ozeki's runs at the rank under this scenario can be seen [here](#). It's currently sorted by total 'would-have-been' basho, but you may re-sort as you please.

During Kaio's current 50-tourney run at ozeki, he would have held the rank for only 33 of those basho, actually having two

separate runs of 15 and 18 basho. As for Chiyotaiikai, instead of his actual record-holding 59-basho ozeki skein, he would have set an entirely different and somewhat bizarre record: FIVE separate runs at ozeki, lasting (in order) 2, 10, 3, 6, and 10 basho. This would have given him 31 ozeki basho instead of 59.

This means that Takanonami and Kaio would share the record for most ozeki basho with 33 each, with Chiyotaiikai next in line at 31.

I was surprised to find that 16 of the 31 ozeki would have regained the rank, with a number – especially Konishiki and Asashio – having more success on their second run. Twelve of those 16 were 're-promoted' via the 10-win-basho-post-demotion route. The four who would have regained ozeki status with 33 wins over three basho were Konishiki, Takanohana, Tochiazuma, and Kaiketsu, although it should be mentioned that Kaio would also have done so had he not first attained the 10 wins.

The most telling statistic is at the bottom of the chart – represented by the numbers 745 and 474. The first figure represents the total number of basho that these 31 ozeki have collectively spent at the rank. The second figure is the total number they WOULD HAVE spent had they been held to a 9-win kachi koshi requirement with respect to kadoban and demotion, while retaining the current requirements for re-promotion.

Right now I don't have the time to go through 60 years of basho to be exact, but it's reasonable to conclude that during this period

there would have been a relative glut of basho with no ozeki on the banzuke, instead of just one – that being Aki 1981. So let's ask – would that have been a bad thing? Or even better, would it be a bad thing if happened in the future?

In 1981, when it was foretold that the banzuke was headed for zero ozeki, there was hand wringing as people asked what went wrong. In July of that year, sumo reporter Ryo Hatano wrote that ozeki were more indispensable than yokozuna, and he was not speaking just for himself. In fact, it has always been a given that there must be ozeki on the banzuke. When there are less than two ozeki, at least one yokozuna must double as an ozeki, and is listed on the banzuke as a Yokozuna-Ozeki, and in the case of Aki 1981, there were two of those Y-O. The banzuke is viewed by many in Japan as a piece of fabric representing a historical paragon, and if an essential part of that fabric disappears, traditionalists see a breakdown of national proportions. It is men of this ilk who still run sumo, and that is why there has been only one basho in the past 103 years with no actual ozeki on the banzuke. In a world where promotion to – and defense of – the rank is theoretically based on authentic competition, this could not have happened without some less-than-divine

intervention.

When there is no clear and reasonably permanent dissimilarity between ozeki and the rest of sanyaku, the banzuke is considered to be broken down; even worse, broken down at its most visible point. So then, in order to keep the banzuke intact, ozeki must be permitted to establish ownership of the rank, while exuding the semblance of genuinely competing with each other. If the standard of avoiding kadoban and demotion were to be raised, as the chart indicates, the engineering that would be necessary to maintain an intact banzuke would make the ozeki cooperation bouts currently discussed resemble Roman gladiator struggles by comparison.

So thanks for the idea, Ken. In my perfect world as well as your own, I agree with you. Since I have no problem accepting that all cultures do evolve, I relish the idea that actually holding onto the rank of ozeki for several years at a time would be held in much higher esteem than it is today. And those senshuraku bouts between the ozeki during a basho's final days would be lovely to see, wouldn't they?

But as we have seen, it's much easier to pass any number of constitutional amendments for a

country's governance than it is to pass even one for a banzuke, so for my lifetime at least, that's not a show I'm counting on being able to watch.

A few notes:

Several 'fixes' have been made to the ozeki database since the last issue:

1. Tochiazuma's last three basho were somehow missed, and have been added. As a result, his ranking is 18th instead of 16th.
2. Kiyokuni, Yutakayama and Kitabayama's ozeki careers were erroneously begun one basho early, and as a result, their rankings are 9th, 11th and 14th, instead of 10th, 9th and 13th respectively.
3. Shionoumi has been temporarily scratched from the list because I discovered that he had two runs at ozeki, and the first one took place prior to the beginning of the 15 bouts per basho format. He'll be added back when I establish a template for including those bouts.
4. For a complete explanation of The Ozeki Jobsite, and how it was conceived, continue scrolling down to the succeeding pages.

An Introduction To The Ozeki Jobsite

A portion of the inspiration for this comes from David Shapiro, the occasional color sidekick on NHK's English language sumo telecast. In addition to providing the most voluminous analytical minutiae among the color guys and gals, David never fails to remind us at least twice in each of his appearances that the ozeki's job is to challenge yokozuna for the yusho.

Another oft-repeated job requirement for ozeki is that he should win at least 10 matches in a basho. After hearing this for many years I finally began to wonder if ozeki had ever been directly measured and compared in these terms, so I thought I'd give it a go.

In mulling over the criteria, I thought about the ozeki discussions we've had online. When we talk about the job ozeki are doing, we are usually interested in the here and now, and our memories are short. Regardless of how they performed when they were 'strong,' or when they weren't injured, or when their competition was weaker, we demand that they do the job today; and if they don't, we let them hear about it. If they not only fall short of the ozeki mission but also register another kadoban, we make a big fuss over it: "Kadoban... again? Why doesn't he just retire?" With this in mind, I thought it was best to include every ozeki basho and not cherry-pick parts of a career.

I tried to make the measuring as simple as possible, awarding points to each ozeki every basho, depending on what they accomplished. Starting with the minimum 10-win requirement, one point was awarded if they won at least ten matches, which means that if they won eight or nine, zero points were awarded since they

didn't really accomplish anything. Simple enough so far. But ten wins doesn't usually challenge for a yusho, so it follows that more than one point should be awarded if one does challenge. But then sometimes ozeki actually win yusho and of course an actual yusho should earn more points than a yusho challenge. So that's what led to awarding one, two and three points respectively for 10 wins, a yusho challenge and an actual yusho.

Then there's the difference between kachi koshi and make koshi. That's a huge deal for ozeki since make koshi could lead to a loss of rank and prestige on a far greater scale than for any rikishi ranked below them, and the more kadoban an ozeki compiles, the larger the detraction from his overall body of work. So that led to the step of subtracting a point for a make koshi.

Not too complicated so far. Except for one thing, which I'm sure hasn't escaped your eye. Of course it is this: How does one qualify for the prized two points awarded for a yusho challenge, or to put it more bluntly - how do you tell when an ozeki has challenged for – but not won – a yusho?

The answer of course is similar to the Elevator Rules – with nothing to go on, I had to make something up! The most obvious way of challenging for a yusho is to lose a kettei sen. That's as close as one can get without actually winning but it doesn't happen very often so there should be other ways to record a challenge. It has always seemed to me that if an ozeki shows up for work on day 14 still in the hunt, he's leaning on the leaders in a serious way, and has 'done his job,' even if he then falls out of contention. I think I've even heard David say so.

So with that, the minimum criteria for an ozeki challenging for a yusho is to not be eliminated from yusho contention when day 14 action begins. That sounds very reasonable, except for one thing. Were this applied exclusively, it's possible that an imposing 12-win ozeki performance would not earn the two points for a challenge. As a practical matter, if this has ever actually happened, it's been infrequent enough to be inconsequential; so I thought it both simple and eminently fair that two points for a challenge be automatically earned when an ozeki records 12 wins.

The thing that still bothered me was the fact that the minimum of 10 wins could earn not only one point, but two; so I decided to raise the bar for a 10-win showing by requiring that the ozeki still be in the yusho race on senshuraku, instead of on day 14.

So with this, the yusho challenge criterion actually shakes out into four categories:

1. Lose a kettei sen
2. At least 12 wins
3. 11 Wins and still in the yusho race on day 14
4. 10 Wins and still in the yusho race on day 15

I'm still a little itchy about awarding the two points for a ten win performance, but in the end I felt that... well, if you're in the hunt you're in the hunt. It's only happened nine times, going back to 1949.

Each ozeki is assigned a grade, calculated this way: After awarding the ozeki his points for each basho (-1 to 3), just add all his numbers (positive and negative) and divide the total by the number of his ozeki basho. The resulting grade is simply the average number of points awarded

per ozeki basho, expressed in decimals.

I thought about possibly accounting for longevity in some way but decided to just list the raw grade; and include the number of basho alongside so that each person can write in their own asterisk if they wish.

In constructing the Excel database spreadsheet, I color coded the cells containing the numeral '2' for the four separate categories of a yusho challenge, as well as the cell containing the numeral '3' for an actual yusho. It's not just for informational purposes, but it also makes it easier to quickly identify which ozeki most often won or challenged for yusho. In addition, it allows for easy recognition of

those era that had a greater or smaller degree of ozeki excellence. The legend for the color codes is near the top, at the very beginning of the spreadsheet.

Since I had to dig out and interpret the data, basho by basho, I won't swear that it's mistake-free, but I will say that the number of errors would not be great enough to move anyone up or down the list more than a couple places. Any errors that do exist would most likely relate to the lavender-colored numeral '2' cells (11-win challenge), or to the absence of them. I will periodically go back through the spreadsheet to check for any errors and report them when/if I find them.

The grades of the current ozeki

will be updated with each future issue, and incorporated into the overall listing(s). Also, I'll go a little farther back in time until reaching a point that makes further comparisons silly due to a limited number of basho and/or number of bouts per basho. I'll also try to glean a few items of interest from the spreadsheet each time, such as Chiyonoyama being the last (and possibly only?) ozeki to win two consecutive yusho and not be promoted (he eventually was promoted four basho later).

I'll be the first to admit that this isn't a perfect system but without something from the NSK that defines or even suggests what a yusho challenge is, I'm going to go with it. I'm also open to your comments as well, so don't be shy.

Ozeki Grade Calculation

Points are awarded to each ozeki every basho, depending on what was accomplished (points in highest category only, of course):

Points	Category
-1	Make Koshi
0	Eight or Nine Wins
1	Ten or More Wins
2	Yusho Challenge
3	Yusho

There are four ways in which to

earn a yusho challenge in a basho:

1. Lose a kettei sen
2. At least 12 wins
3. 11 Wins and still in the yusho race on day 14
4. 10 Wins and still in the yusho race on day 15

Each ozeki is assigned a grade, but calculated this way: After awarding the ozeki his points for each basho (-1 to 3), just add all the points awarded during his

ozeki career (positive and negative) and divide the total by the number of his ozeki basho. The resulting grade is simply the average number of points awarded per ozeki basho, expressed in decimals.

So far, no ozeki who was never promoted to yokozuna has averaged 1 point per basho; even those who won multiple yusho with many yusho challenges.

The Ozeki

<u>RANK</u>	<u>RIKISHI</u>	<u>GRADE</u>	<u>YAO*</u>	<u># OZEKI BASHO</u>
1	Kotokaze	0.818	1981	22
2	Takanonami	0.784	1994	37
3	Wakashimazu	0.643	1983	28
4	Kirishima	0.625	1990	16
5	Kotomitsuki	0.625	2007	8
6	Konishiki	0.615	1987	39
7	Kaio	0.520	2000	50
8	Chiyotaikai	0.458	1999	59
9	Kiyokuni	0.393	1969	28
10	Hokutenyu	0.386	1983	44
11	Yutakayama	0.382	1963	34
12	Takanohana	0.360	1972	50
13	Tochihikari	0.318	1962	22
14	Kitabayama	0.300	1961	30
15	Ouchiya	0.286	1955	7
16	Dejima	0.250	1999	12
17	Mitsuneyama	0.250	1953	8
18	Tochiazuma	0.241	2002	29
19	Daikirin	0.240	1970	25
20	Kotooshu	0.222	2006	18
21	Wakahaguro	0.154	1959	13
22	Asashio	0.111	1983	36
23	Asahikuni	0.095	1976	21
24	Kotogahama	0.071	1958	28
25	Musoyama	-0.037	2000	27
26	Kaiketsu	-0.111	1975	9
27	Masuiyama II	-0.286	1980	7
28	Maenoyama	-0.300	1970	10
29	Matsunobori	-0.467	1956	15
30	Miyabiyama	-0.500	2000	8
31	Daiju	-0.600	1973	5

* YAO: Year Attained Ozeki

The Yokozuna

<u>RANK</u>	<u>RIKISHI</u>	<u>GRADE</u>	<u>YAO*</u>	<u># OZEKI</u> <u>BASHO</u>	
1	Asashoryu	2.333	2002	3	
2	Chiyonofuji	2.333	1981	3	
3	Taiho	2.200	1961	5	
4	Takanohana	2.091	1993	11	
5	Kitanoumi	2.000	1974	3	
6	Wajima	2.000	1972	4	
7	Kashiwado	2.000	1960	7	
8	Wakanohana I	2.000	1956	10	
9	Takanosato	1.889	1982	9	
10	Kagamisato	1.833	1951	6	
11	Chiyonoyama	1.833	1949	6	
12	Hokutoumi	1.800	1986	5	
13	Tochinishiki	1.625	1953	8	
14	Hakuho	1.571	2007	7	
15	Musashimaru	1.515	1994	33	
16	Kitao	1.500	1986	4	Y Futahaguro
17	Wakamisugi	1.500	1977	8	Y Wakanohana II
18	Asahifuji	1.471	1987	17	
19	Asashio	1.364	1957	11	
20	Akebono	1.250	1992	4	
21	Onokuni	1.231	1985	13	
22	Yoshibayama	1.200	1951	10	
23	Wakanohana III	1.138	1993	29	
24	Sadanoyama	1.118	1962	17	
25	Tamanoshima	1.050	1966	20	Y Tamanoumi
26	Kitanofuji	0.857	1966	21	
27	Tochinoumi	0.800	1962	10	
28	Kotozakura	0.656	1967	32	
29	Mienoumi	0.333	1976	21	

* YAO: Year Attained Ozeki