

SFM Review of the Year – 2008

by Chris Gould

With its incredible series of ups and downs, 2008 will certainly go down as a year in which the sumo landscape changed considerably. Seldom before have the issues plaguing sumo at the year-end differed so substantially from those at the year's beginning.

Back in January, the Japanese media were portraying sumo's 2008 as a simple battle between the forces of Good and Evil. The former were clearly represented by Hakuho, the 190-centimetre, 150-kilogram Mongol who – by gaining promotion to yokozuna in 2007 – had finally broken Asashoryu's stranglehold over the Emperor's Cup. Tall, dark, handsome and worshipped by the media as the Stop Asa Candidate, Hakuho was portrayed as the sort of guy a girlfriend would happily introduce to her parents. Representing Evil

was, of course, Asashoryu, the black-belted, badly-behaved and truculent grand champion of five years, now returning from an unprecedented two-tournament suspension for playing football in a Wayne Rooney shirt.

Few expected Asashoryu to bounce back from his NSK-imposed house arrest and subsequent spiral into depression, but the majestic Mongol shocked the sumo world at the January yokozuna practice, felling Hakuho five times out of seven. The media reacted with horror, accused Hakuho of not taking the practice seriously, and prayed that Asashoryu would get his comeuppance soon. Sure enough, that moment arrived on just the second day of the Hatsu basho, when Asashoryu miscalculated a neck-throw and was resultantly knocked into the



Kisenosato

audience by Kisenosato. The following day saw several tabloid newspapers gleefully blow up ringside shots of Asashoryu's anguished face as he fell.



Yokozuna Hakuho

January 2008 turned out to be the best basho of the year by far. Toyonoshima's matches against the two yokozuna, Asashoryu-Tochinonada and Asashoryu-Ama served up some pulsating sumo which whipped the Kokugikan into a frenzy. The two yokozuna became tied for the lead on day 10 when Ama spectacularly upended Hakuho, and remained inseparable until the final day decider, which will be replayed in the media for years to come. I had never seen a Kokugikan so excited as when Asashoryu and Hakuho glared each other down in the shikiri-naoshi, and then produced an epic one-minute encounter which, to the media's delight, Hakuho eventually won.

Despite his final day disappointment in January, Asashoryu clearly confounded his

critics with his 13 victories, and looked to have rolled back the years in Osaka with 13 more victories – and yusho Number 22. His achievement was tainted only by his nonchalant loss to Kotoshogiku and his inexplicably defeat – for the first time in 29 encounters! – to Kotomitsuki, who somehow recovered from 2-6 to kachi-koshi.

Onto May, and the makuuchi debut of Georgian Tochinoshin, who had unexpectedly captured the juryo yusho at his first attempt in January. Despite appearing muscular on the belt, the 140-kilogram Kasugano-man made his first ever make-koshi, but stayed in makuuchi for the remainder of the year, even climbing as high as maegashira 4 for Kyushu. May will of course be remembered for Kotooshu's complete destruction of the form-book, and of 14 opponents, to become the first European to collect the makuuchi yusho – and the first person other than the two yokozuna to win the championship for 14 basho. Premature talk of a yokozuna promotion in July evidently unsettled the Bulgarian beanpole, though, who went 9-6, 8-7 and 8-7 in the final three tourneys of the year. His small consolation was to convincingly arrest his losing streak against nemesis Aminishiki in September.

The final day of the Natsu was, alas, overshadowed by a stunning stand-off between Asashoryu and Hakuho. The former defeated the latter in the basho's final bout, went in for afters, and elicited a furious response from Hakuho, who turned on his sempai and probably thought about flooring him. Sumo fans thus eagerly awaited the next three scheduled Asa-Haku contests for 2008, and were left disappointed as none of them materialised.

A steamy and sweaty Nagoya was where the sumo year changed tone drastically. First, Asashoryu was



Ama

forced into kyujo after only five days, following humiliating defeats to an injured Toyonoshima and an ageing Tochinonada. His speedy return to Mongolia following his withdrawal led to accusations that he was more concerned with profiting from the August Mongolian jungyo – organised by his family – than with doing his real job. Critics thus felt that September dealt him his just deserts, with four losses in nine days triggering his second successive withdrawal.

Most striking was his absence of thrusting power against the cumbersome Miyabiyama and his lack of belt-strength against



Yamamotoyama

Toyonoshima. A complete 15-day absence in November fuelled further speculation that the once invincible Mongol may soon retire.

The last three makuuchi yusho of the year were won by Hakuho with a combined 42-3 record. The Kyushu basho, as it has done many times before, signalled a changing of the guard in the upper echelons of the banzuke. The ozeki continued to underperform, with Kaio, the local hero, joining Asashoryu on the kyujo list after three days, and Kotooshu and Chiyotakai stuttering to 8-7 again. Beneath them, makuuchi's rising stars staked their claim for future greatness, with Baruto, Toyonoshima, Kisenosato and Kotoshogiku all looking impressive at times. November, undoubtedly, belonged to Ama, who posted a career-best 13-2 to earn promotion to ozeki and a shikona-change to Harumafuji. At present, there is only one name mentioned as a possible replacement for Asashoryu.

Of the success stories outside of makuuchi, the most notable was surely that of Yamamotoyama, who – at 252 kilograms – became the heaviest shin-juryo debutant ever and posted consecutive winning scores. Another surprise package was 32-year-old Bushuyama, who started the year fumbling in makushita but stormed to the juryo yusho in July and achieved kachi-koshi in makuuchi in November. September's juryo-yusho winner was the Russian warrior Aran, who rose meteorically from mae-zumo to makuuchi in just 11 basho, and developed a fierce rivalry with both Bushuyama and Yamamotoyama.

Youngster Tosayutaka also continued his speedy ascent of the banzuke, reaching upper-juryo in November. Lower down in makushita, 18-year-old Tsubasaumi provided new hope for Kitanoumi beya, while – at the

bottom – Dewanoumi's ex-college champion Ozakiumi earned three quickfire promotions.

Notable retirements included those of 36-year-old Tamakasuga, who had led the makuuchi yusho race just 18 months earlier. The January basho saw the Kasugano double-act of Tochinohana and Tochisakae retire within two days of each other, and decide to hold a joint-retirement ceremony at the Kokugikan on February 1st, 2009. January 2008 also saw the lock-cutting of heroic ozeki Tochiazuma, while the autumn saw the severance of the mage of Buyuzan, a one-time komusubi forced into makushita through injury. Below the salaried radar lay Buyuzan's Musahigawa stablemate, Minaminoshima, the only fluent English-speaking rikishi in sumo, who dropped into sandanme and departed the NSK in August.

Unfortunately, the main changes to the sumo landscape in 2008 came off the dohyo, and yet again for negative reasons. First to suffer the media's wrath were

Tokitsukaze oyakata and two of his deshi, who were finally arrested and charged with the unlawful death of Tokitsukaze-beya novice Tokitaizan in June 2007. Second in the firing line were the Russian trio of Wakanoho, Hakurozan and Roho, who were all fired from the NSK before the September tournament for alleged possession and consumption of marijuana. The crisis also led to the departure of long-serving NSK Chairman Kitanoumi, and his hasty replacement by Musahigawa oyakata.

However, the major bombshell was dropped by Wakanoho who, livid at his dismissal, told a tabloid newspaper that he had taken part in fixed matches and even named names. The hot-headed Russian, who famously destroyed a dressing room after his phenomenal utchari defeat to Ama in May, was asked to testify in court by the *Shukan Gendai*, which had itself alleged match-fixing in sumo the previous year, and had consequently earned a law-suit from the NSK. Wakanoho agreed, but then shockingly u-turned in early

December, telling a news conference that no fixed matches had taken place at all. The motives for such a u-turn earned widespread condemnation, including from normally passive sources like Mr Sugiyama, the revered NHK sumo commentator of the 1970s and 80s.

Sumo thus enters 2009 anxious to see if a line will finally be drawn under Wakanoho's match-fixing allegations, and whether Asashoryu will end the speculation surrounding his future. Expect to see retirements atop the banzuke, and some further cause for optimism from Ama, Baruto, Kisenosato, Kotoshogiku and Toyonoshima. Anticipate a frantic struggle for survival among familiar faces at the bottom of juryo, with veteran salt-thrower Kitazakura heavily involved. Keep eyes open for the young Japanese rapidly mounting the unsalaried levels of the banzuke. And, most importantly of all, pray for a sumo year in which action of the dohyo takes priority over action off it.

Happy New Year everyone!



Roho, Hakurozan and Wakanoho