

# The Ozeki Jobsite

by Lon Howard

Here we'll return to the commonly accepted performance standard an ozeki should meet in order to have 'done his job,' which is to have challenged for the yusho. That may be what they say, but in reality it's been a tall order for most of them and an impossible dream for a few. The last 32 ozeki have had a collective total of 754 basho at the rank, with only 130 yusho challenges being recorded. That's an average of only 17 per cent, and even worse, the median challenge percentage is just 11 per cent.

That sounds pretty bad, but remember we're only talking about the ozeki who never made yokozuna. The 17 per cent goes to 27 per cent when you throw in the ones who did go on up, but a more telling statistic is that the percentage of yusho challenges for only those ozeki that were later promoted is less than 49%! This means that mounting a serious challenge for a yusho is less than routine for even those ozeki who are yokozuna-bound, and somewhat rare for most of the other ozeki. This calls into question the whole idea that an ozeki is not doing his job if he doesn't often challenge for a yusho; because based on past ozeki performance, a challenge is actually a notable event.

Let's look at those ozeki who have put the most heat on yokozuna, in terms of challenging them for yusho. Of course there are those rare yusho won by a rikishi below ozeki, but in general it's the yokozuna that the ozeki are challenging. Here's the top ten list, in terms of the percentage of their total ozeki basho in which a yusho challenge was recorded

(minimum of 10 ozeki basho here):

<b>Ozeki</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Basho</b>
Takanonami	43	37
Wakashimazu	36	28
Kirishima	31	16
Konishiki	28	39
Kotokaze	27	22
Tochihikari	23	22
<b>Chiyotakai</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Kaio</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>52</b>
Yutakayama	20	35
Kitabayama	19	31

When compared this way, Takanonami makes a splendid case for GOAT (Greatest Of All Time). His 43 per cent yusho challenge rate is conspicuous evidence of his job readiness, made even more imposing by the fact that it encompassed 37 basho. Note also that our current duo on the list still acquits itself superbly when compared to ozeki of yore, even as their percentage goes ever lower with each basho.

So who's at the bottom of this particular register (never thought you'd ask...)? Here are the bottom five, again listed in terms of the percentage of their total ozeki basho in which a yusho challenge was recorded (worst first/minimum of 10 ozeki basho):

<b>Ozeki</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Basho</b>
Maenoyama	0	10
Matsunobori	0	15
Asashio	3	36
Musoyama	4	27
Asahikuni	5	21

It should be noted that Daiju, Miyabiyama and Masuiyama II also never challenged for a title, but they had less than 10 basho at

ozeki; and that Kotooshu will duplicate Asahikuni's record if he fails to record a challenge in the Natsu Basho.

Asashio is the preeminent one in this group since his 'accomplishment' of only one challenge occurred over a laborious ozeki career of 36 basho. Musoyama and Asahikuni get an honorable mention, each also with a single challenge.

All of the information in these lists is gleaned from the ozeki database, found [here](#). To interpret the database, it may be helpful to review An Introduction To The Ozeki Jobsite, found [here](#), and Ozeki Grade Calculation, found [here](#).

Following Chiyotakai's inglorious 2-13 mark in the Haru Basho, there has been a small ripple (at least at the time of writing this) of discussion among NSK and YDC members about reforming the kadoban process by some means other than reinstating kosho. I doubt that anything will come of this, although personally I would not oppose something simple and straightforward, such as requiring nine wins instead of eight to avoid not only kadoban but subsequent demotion. Anything more intricate than that would be too distracting, I feel.

In the English-speaking sumo fandom though, the ozeki-bashing has curiously been more about Kaio, even though he's had only two make koshi in the past two and half years, compared to four for Chiyotakai. I find this to be not only curious, but really baffling. To begin with, it was suggested that he should retire

suggested that he should retire because he has injured some rikishi with his kotenage technique. He has been doing this for years, but now suddenly it's part of a 'make him retire' argument? And then there is the other red herring, which is that he hasn't challenged for a yusho in over four years. That of course is also nothing new. Challenging for a yusho may be an ideal for an ozeki, but the truth is that if it were vital, the rank would sit empty for extended periods. Of course, to avoid demotions, the description of a yusho challenge could be restated ad hoc, but that would require a continuing series of elaborately worded statements of mitigation – something that Rijicho would not exactly relish doing.

Let's face it – the number of ozeki who have met the 'should challenge for yusho' standard have been few and often far between. If this standard were to have been a

real historical requisite, it would have warranted the insertion of an additional rank on the banzuke. This is because most of the ozeki who didn't live up to that standard were STILL markedly superior to the other sanyaku rikishi and deserved to be distinguished from them. The fact that an additional rank was not established to distinguish between the 'good' ozeki and the 'journeyman' ozeki is evidence of the mythic nature of the 'yusho challenge' ideal. In other words, that ideal is an urban legend and does not exist in ozumo's inner circle. For the journeyman ozeki, it's a little late for adding a 'sekizeki' rank, but very unfair to lump them with the sekiwake. To use an overworked but sometimes fitting locution: The banzuke is what it is – let's live with it.

That said, there's nothing wrong with raising the criteria for avoiding kadoban and demotion, as long as the change is to a single

component, and is easily comprehended. This is so that, in the future, the weight of sumo records and statistics can be easily adjusted for in the mind. But singling out someone to be scuttled just because 'it's time for a change' or it looks like he 'no longer belongs' is not only unfair, but also insulting. I suspect that if Kaio were 33 years of age, he would still belong, but now that he's pushing 37, somehow he doesn't belong, regardless of how competitive he is.

It probably is accurate to say that ozeki is the best job in sumo. Still, those who have the job have earned it by doing things no other rikishi below the rank of yokozuna could do; and to this day they must continue to do that if they are to avoid demotion – occasional 'back-scratching' notwithstanding. In light of that, the fact that the job has a certain degree of indemnity is not necessarily unreasonable.

## 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	Konishiki	0.615	1987	39
6	<b>Kaio</b>	0.500	2000	52
7	<b>Harumafuji</b>	0.500	2009	2
8	<b>Chiyotaikai</b>	0.426	1999	61
9	<b>Kotomitsuki</b>	0.400	2007	10
10	Kiyokuni	0.393	1969	28
11	Hokutenyu	0.386	1983	44
12	Yutakayama	0.382	1963	34
13	Takanohana	0.360	1972	50
14	Tochihikari	0.318	1962	22
15	Kitabayama	0.300	1961	30
16	<b>Kotooshu</b>	0.300	2006	20
17	Ouchiyama	0.286	1955	7
18	Dejima	0.250	1999	12
19	Mitsuneyama	0.250	1953	8
20	Tochiazuma	0.241	2002	29
21	Daikirin	0.240	1970	25
22	Wakahaguro	0.154	1959	13
23	Asashio	0.111	1983	36
24	Asahikuni	0.095	1976	21
25	Kotogahama	0.071	1958	28
26	Musoyama	-0.037	2000	27
27	Kaiketsu	-0.111	1975	9
28	Masuiyama II	-0.286	1980	7
29	Maenoyama	-0.300	1970	10
30	Matsunobori	-0.467	1956	15
31	Miyabiyama	-0.500	2000	8
32	Daiju	-0.600	1973	5

\* YAO: Year Attained Ozeki

## The Yokozuna

<b><u>RANK</u></b>	<b><u>RIKISHI</u></b>	<b><u>GRADE</u></b>	<b><u>YAO*</u></b>	<b><u># OZEKI</u></b> <b><u>BASHO</u></b>	
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	Yoshiyama	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