

Nagoya Basho Summary

by Chris Gould

On the 12th day of the Nagoya Basho came an announcement. 'My body has become useless, therefore my sumo has become useless,' it read. Although such words seem perfectly apt for some existing ozeki, they actually came from the former ozeki Dejima Takeharu, who announced his retirement from professional sumo at the age of 35. As Kirishima Kazuhiro revealed in his memoirs, it is sumo custom for an ex-ozeki not to subject himself to demotion to juryo. With nine defeats in eleven hot July days propelling Dejima to the second division, retirement was the only option. He will now take up the post of Onaruto oyakata and finally have a chance to rest his right ankle, which is surely the most swollen in sumo.



Dejima

History will reserve far fewer

words for Dejima than other ozeki of his era. His tenure on the second rung was short, a mere 12 basho between September 1999 and 2001. His retirement came almost ten years to the very day that he defeated Akebono via henka to win the 1999 Nagoya Basho, and earn promotion to sumo's second rung. Many seasoned observers say that he was broken by the injury which cost him ozeki status, and that his fate draws remarkable parallels with that of his stablemate Miyabiyama.



Kotomitsuki

That said, his fighting spirit remained undiminished, and he not only punished Asashoryu famously in January 2007 but even returned to komusubi a year later, just shy of his 34th birthday. Although Dejima will be most renowned for surviving more basho after demotion from ozeki than anybody else, he should also be remembered as the man who had the dignity to drop from a position that his body was not fit for, and who had the self-belief and sumo heart to try and fight his way back there. His retirement

should signal the time for others on the makuuchi banzuke to consider their position, and ask themselves whether they really deserve their rankings more than Dejima did.



Yokozuna Hakuho

Dejima's retirement was perhaps the biggest surprise of the Nagoya Basho, the rest of which was vastly more predictable than the media liked to make out. As expected, Harumafuji – like Kotooshu the year before – was completely overwhelmed by the prospect of a yokozuna promotion and crashed to six defeats, including a chronic miscalculation against mediocre Aran. As expected, Kotomitsuki turned in a customary good score in front of his home fans, only to fall away when it really mattered. As expected, Asashoryu laboured to a few early victories before the extent of his injuries became apparent with a host of second-

week losses. And, as expected, Hakuho continued to look in his prime, and unfazed by anything thrown at him. Even Kotooshu's 13-2 – although a marked improvement on usual performances – failed to look out of place in the general environment, where two ozeki and one yokozuna appear nigh-crippled.



Yokozuna Asashoryu

If the Natsu Basho set the bell tolling for Asashoryu, Nagoya simply amplified the clamour. The yokozuna's left elbow is in serious trouble, and his opponents know it. The extent of the weakness was exposed as early as the second day, when despite fashioning a morozashi against Aran, Asashoryu took over 30 seconds to achieve a winning position – against a man who was in mae-zumo barely 30 months before. The once majestic Mongol's quickfire thinking and general skill may have been too much for the middle rankers, but proved insufficient against the makuuchi elite, who seized upon his source of discomfort.

Kaio, Kotooshu and Hakuho all charged into Asashoryu with the sole intention of preventing his healthy right hand from grabbing the belt. The right arm deactivated, the rest was simple, although Kaio's kotenage on the injured limb was uncalled for and distinctly lacking the spirit of fair-

play. Unless the yokozuna finds a miracle elbow cure, Fanta commercials may be his main source of income in the near future.

As one yokozuna painfully declines, his counterpart on the highest rank continues to shine, his body glistening in the bright overhead lighting of the Aichi Gymnasium. In posting another 14-1, Hakuho took his combined 2009 record to 57-3 and remains well on course to surpass Asashoryu's landmark feat of 84 wins in a calendar year. At present his body is a nigh-unbeatable sumo specimen, a winning-machine blessed with a long reach, nifty feet, incredible power, considerable technique, commendable stamina and – most crucially – perfect health. Although it is not like watching Muhammad Ali, it is certainly the case that very few can lay a glove upon him as he builds up winning records over everybody. Even Asashoryu has now lost four consecutive senshuraku matches against him – that's every one this year.

True, sumo's new Prince looked decidedly lethargic – even uninterested – against Kotomitsuki, but was impeccable when he needed to be, namely against Kisenosato, Kotooshu, Harumafuji and on senshuraku. The tournament victory was his eleventh in total and leaves fans wondering just how many Emperors Cups he can collect. As Asashoryu has doubtless already told him, and certainly shown him, the key is to stay injury-free for as long as possible. At present, Hakuho's niggling foot troubles of two years ago appear firmly behind him.

It is, at times, jaw-dropping to think that certain ozeki lie just one rank below the brilliance of Hakuho. Alas, kachi-koshi for all the men on the second rung means that this situation stays the same

for at least two more basho. For the third time this year, Chiyotakai secured a senshuraku kachi-koshi, slapping down Kakuryu to do so. He essentially owes his winning score to two other unlikely slapdowns inflicted upon Asashoryu and, incredibly, Kotooshu, who was unbeaten until that moment. Kaio, who turned 37 during the tournament, also pieced together his fourth consecutive 8-7.

The two Sadogatake men, meanwhile, excelled themselves in gathering 25 wins between them (Kotooshu 13-2, Kotomitsuki 12-3), and will hope to build on this fine form in September. Harumafuji, conversely, had his promotion chances smashed by two yokozuna and two ozeki, and will have to start impressing from square one upon returning to Tokyo. Recently, he has shown himself far more deserving of sumo's highest accolade than his ozeki partners, but amazingly enough, Kotooshu may get there before him if he scores 13s in September and November.



Ozeki Kotooshu

In general, though, something must be done to liven up the ozeki situation. The fixture list could certainly be livened up; fans struggle to remember the last time two ozeki on 7-7 were paired together on senshuraku. That possibility could have arisen with a Chiyotaikai-Kaio contest on the final day of this basho, but – frustratingly – the fixture organisers decided on a 14th-day match when far less was at stake.

Of the sekiwake, Kakuryu disappointed on his first appearance at the rank, tumbling to 5-10 against largely the same opponents he impressed against in May. Kisenosato, meanwhile, consolidated upon his 13-2 last time with a 9-6 on his return to sekiwake, and gained great satisfaction from trouncing Asashoryu. He must now seek to post regular nines and tens, before mounting his ozeki charge sometime next year. He remains, as ever, Japan's best ozeki hope.

At komusubi, Kyokutenho continues to show superhuman strength in periods, especially when beating up Kisenosato. Kotoshogiku, meanwhile, supplemented his 10-5 in May with an 8-7 which included five straight wins against the middle-rankers. Alas, his effort may not earn a sekiwake berth, as Baruto's 11-4 from maegashira 3 should be enough to leapfrog him.

There were many guest appearances from non-regulars in upper-maegashira this time – and most of them were appearances to forget. Aran may be strong, but his dearth of technique proved a handicap against the joijin, and he stumbled to a 4-11. Toyohibiki lost all of his first eight bouts and finished with 3-12. Iwakiyama, back in upper-maegashira for the first time since 2006, fared only slightly better at 5-10, despite gaining notable victories against Kakuryu and Chiyotaikai. That said, the upper-maegashira

regulars were no better, Goeido turning in 5-10 and Tochiozan losing his opening 13 bouts before grabbing two consolation victories.



Aminishiki

In September, the big banzuke movers will include Aminishiki, whose recovery from injury and extra bulk yielded a scintillating 11-4 and a Technique Award. He will probably take Kyokutenho's komusubi position. Tochinoshin of Georgia will also rise dramatically to his highest ever banzuke ranking, following a muscular 9-6 from maegashira 5. He will be closely followed by a rejuvenated Tamanoshima, who has transformed himself from juryo regular to joijin punchbag in just over a year. Mokonami, though, failed to improve his career-best grading at maegashira 7, registering only six wins. Homasho (10-5), Tokitenku (9-6) and Shotenro (11-4) will all receive bumper promotions, the latter taking the Fighting Spirit prize in only his second makuuchi basho.

Big losers come September (in more than one sense of the word) will include 260-kilogram Yamamotoyama, who withdrew from Nagoya after a slapdown defeat to Tamanoshima, and will probably find himself back in

juryo. He may be joined there by Futeno, who appeared to be nursing an injury when surprisingly falling to 6-9 at maegashira 13. Of the two shin-nyumaku, Tosayutaka achieved kachi-koshi but Wakakoyu returned to juryo with a paltry four wins. The demotees will be replaced by aspirant shin-nyumaku Tamaasuka, who posted 11-4 at juryo 1; Hokutoriki, who overpowered 11 opponents from juryo 4; and Wakanosato, who overcame his latest injury setback to claim the juryo yusho with an outstanding 14-1.



Wakanosato

Lower down in juryo, debutant Tokusegawa, fresh from the makushita yusho, staggered to a final-day kachi koshi. However, the person promoted with him, 37-year-old Kitazakura, looked exhausted by the heat and slumped to 3-12. The defiant Cherry Blossom insists on his blog

that he remains healthy and will compete in September, contrary to expectations. He will be accompanied into makushita by Hoshihikari (5-10) and an afflicted Kotokuni (1-14). These men will be replaced by aspirant shin-juryo Sotairyu, who scored 6-1 at makushita 1, and fellow makushita 1 Sagatsukasa, who returns to salaried level after a 4-3.

The lower division titles were all captured by Japanese, Fukao taking makushita, Takarafuji capturing sandanme, Tochihiroyu winning jonidan and Aisaka conquering jonokuchi. Whether this signals a Japanese renaissance is, of course, too early to say, but the September tournament will certainly see some exciting climbs up the sumo ladder, with ex-

college champion Fukao finally getting a realistic shot at shin-juryo. Hot on his heels will be famed lightweight Takanoyama of the Czech Republic, who seems destined for his highest ever ranking. Sumo's hopes are riding on the makushita elite to produce the next generation of ozeki – and sooner rather than later.