

Aki Bashi Summary

by Chris Gould

What must the hapless Hakuho be thinking? In most years, posting 14 wins in all three Tokyo basho would guarantee a triple yusho. Yet, in 2009, despite an outstanding record of 42-3 in Japan's capital, Hakuho has failed to collect a single Tokyo championship. Three times he has defeated Asashoryu in the final match of the tourney. Three times he has faced a playoff, twice against Asashoryu, once against Harumafuji. Three times he has lost.



Yokozuna Hakuho

The 2009 Aki basho will thus go down as a tournament for startling statistics, beginning with those at the very top of the banzuke. Even seasoned fans cannot ever recall a yokozuna losing three playoffs in

the same year, least of all in Tokyo. Hakuho, despite seeming destined to break Asashoryu's record for victories in a calendar year, will definitely finish with fewer tournament wins than in both 2007 and 2008. At present, excluding playoffs, Hakuho's combined achievements over five basho stand at an astonishing 71 wins and 4 defeats. He needs 14 in Kyushu to surpass the 84-win landmark set by his Mongolian sempai in 2005. Few would bet against him, given his generally impeccable technique and aura of invincibility – outside the playoff zone, that is.

Despite losing all five of the yokozuna senshuraku matches this year (for the first time ever), and despite a vastly inferior overall record (61-14), Asashoryu is somehow tied with Hakuho in the 2009 yusho stakes (2-2). His spectacular sukuinage playoff triumph secured a 24th yusho and placed him level with former Japan Sumo Association (NSK) Chairman Kitanoumi in the record books. Only two wrestlers, Taiho of the 1960s and Chiyonofuji of the 1980s, have captured more Emperor's Cups (32 and 31 respectively). Had Asashoryu not missed two tournaments in 2007 through suspension, and not capitulated in the last third of 2008, he would have a fine chance of surpassing these two sumo legends.

Unfortunately, though, a weakening left-elbow and the sheer consistency of Hakuho makes it difficult to see where Asashoryu will find the extra nine yusho. As sumo's senior yokozuna playfully revealed to the media with his fingers, he collected his

24th yusho on his 29th birthday. Regrettably, time is no longer on the senior yokozuna's side.

That said, time has been against ozeki Kaio for years and yet he still finds the means to set records. Merely by taking to the dohyo in September, Kaio equalled the record for number of consecutive tournaments ranked in the top division (97), previously held by Hawaiian legend Takamiyama. Subsequently, on day 10, the 37-year-old Fukuokan defeated Kotooshu by his increasingly favoured arm-pull to post his 965th career win, one more than 40-year-old Oshio who retired in 1988.



Ozeki Kaio

Only Chiyonofuji, with 1045, has savoured sumo's winning feeling on more occasions. As ever, Kaio started well only to fade against the stronger athletes in the latter half of the basho, winning only one of his last five bouts and losing to Hakuho for the 16th time in succession. However, the bout against Kotomitsuki which

delivered his 966th win marked the 10th time in succession (and the sixth time in seven basho) that an ozeki has entered the final day needing to win and secured the requisite victory.

According to NHK, Chiyotakai's lame tenth-day loss to Tamanoshima marked the 14th occasion on which he has gone kadoban – another sumo first. It is the second time Chiyonofuji's protégé has found himself kadoban this year, as injuries to both knees and elbows begin to cruelly reduce his power. Having plucked only 28 wins from 75 matches from January to September, even a 15-0 in Kyushu will not deliver him a positive overall score for the year.



Kakuryu

Unsurprisingly, talk of retirement has surfaced, with seasoned observers suggesting that the upcoming Fukuoka basho, held close to his home prefecture of Oita, may make for a fitting career finale. At present, of course, Chiyotakai has held the rank of ozeki for more tournaments than any other fighter (September 2009 was his 64th!) He can certainly be proud of a career that also includes two yusho, and must feel immeasurably dejected that his body can no longer overpower the foes he once beat easily.

September was another disappointing tournament for Harumafuji, the man who staked his claim for yokozuna promotion by surprisingly capturing the May yusho. For the second tournament running, the Isegahama man failed to outscore his Sadogatake rivals, and failed to beat Kotooshu. After consecutive 9-6s, the artist formerly known as Ama looks ill-prepared to emulate the Fukuoka feats of last year which catapulted him into his first yusho playoff with Hakuho, and must now regroup for 2010. Kotooshu, meanwhile, saw his own yokozuna promotion hopes smashed after registering a disappointing 9-6. He initially followed up his 13-2 in Nagoya with eight wins in the first nine days, but the attempted tottari of Kaio injured his elbow to the extent that he was unable to overpower even maegashira Tokitenku. The tottari-inflicted problem led some supporters of Kotooshu to suggest that the technique should be banned, especially as it also produced a gruelling injury for Toyonoshima.

With no ozeki scoring higher than nine (Kotomitsuki also collapsing in the homestretch), those beneath were presented with a golden chance to look more impressive. Step forward Baruto. Despite losing to the two yokozuna early on (he has still never managed to beat them in competition), the gigantic Estonian failed to be downhearted, and rampaged into opponents with the ferocity of a raging bull. He finished with a sparkling 12-3 and a fiercely deserved Fighting Spirit Prize.

However, he still remains vulnerable to the trickier smaller fighters like Goeido and Kakuryu, and desperately needs to work out a game plan against them. Kakuryu showed incredible strength to halt, tame and fell Baruto with a crafty leg-trip on Day 14, and showed why he was awarded the Technique Prize. The

Estonian and Mongolian will occupy sekiwake East and West respectively for Kyushu – taking the slots vacated by Kisenosato (7-8) and Kotoshogiku (6-9).



Baruto

The Outstanding Performance Prize remained unclaimed, and it was not difficult to see why. On day 6, Musashigawa's Shotenro, quivering in his highest ever banzuke position of maegashira 2, took shakily to the ring for his first competitive match with Hakuho. The air of dull predictability surrounding the contest saw several hundred supporters leave early. And yet, when tuning into their TV sets back home, these same supporters would curse themselves for missing one of the greatest upsets in sumo history. Shotenro belied his inexperience and physical disadvantage by completely dominating the mercurial yokozuna, battering into his shining body, ramming a hand into his bull-like neck and shoving him down to the clay. It was Shotenro's first win of the basho, and one of only two he would register throughout the whole duration. Had he made kachikoshi, the Outstanding Performance Award would have been his.

Among the other upper

maegashira, Tochinoshin also found the going tough in his highest ever ranking slot, and crashed to a career-worst 4-11 despite showing tremendous power to smash Kisenosato on day 12. Miyabiyama, Kyokutenho and Tamanoshima all suggested their ageing bodies are no longer cut out for the highest level, garnering only 13 wins between them. Toyonoshima's injured arm continues to hamper his progress, meaning that Takekaze (9-6), Goeido (10-5) and Tokitenku (8-7) will return to the banzuke's upper echelons, the former two names presumably progressing to Komusubi for Fukuoka. The other big beneficiary of poor upper-maegashira form will be man mountain Iwakiyama (8-7), who should receive a bumper promotion.



Bushuyama

At the lower end of makuuchi, the honours belonged to balding Bushuyama (10-5), perennial nearly man Tochiozan (11-4), returning veteran Wakanosato (10-5) and tsuppari expert Kakizoe

(9-6). Those trapped in the downward elevator include 35-year-old Tochinonada (4-11), who tumbles into juryo for only the second tournament in 12 and a half years. Joining him there will be Futeno, who narrowly survived the drop in July, but forfeited the chance for salvation with a 5-10. His dramatic loss of strength in a mere few months appears due to an arm injury.

In juryo, big names Tamawashi, Kimurayama and Yamamotoyama all earned promotion back to makuuchi, the former taking the second division championship. Fellow big name Chiyohakuho, on the other hand, failed to overcome an upper-body injury and withdrew on the 11th day, thus earning a passport to lower-juryo for November. He will be pitted against the likes of 37-year-old Tosanoumi (7-8) – who seems ever unlikely to return to makuuchi – and Kiyoseumi (7-8), who is taking an eternity to return to the form which earned him a makuuchi berth two years ago. Sotairyu (5-10) and Tokushinoh (6-9) failed to impress on their juryo debuts while Toyozakura (10-5) and Sakaizawa (9-6) staved off embarrassing demotions to unsalaried domains. Okinoumi's 10-5 should also help establish him as a juryo regular.

In makushita, the championship honours surprisingly went to Gagamaru, whose spectacular improvement on recent performances brought him a perfect 7-0 score. The 177-kilogram behemoth becomes Georgia's third salaried sumotori, following Kokkai and Tochinoshin. With several of juryo's basement boys making kachi-koshi, only makushita 1 East Kotoyutaka (4-3) or makushita 2 West Miyamoto (5-2) will probably join him there. Veteran Kitazakura, 38 in December, posted 4-3 at makushita 6 and consigned

himself to a black cotton sash for the fourth time in fifth tournaments. College champion Fukao, a stablemate of Gagamaru, unfortunately buckled under the pressure of securing his first sumo salary, and slumped to 2-5.



Yokozuna Asashoryu

The sandanme championship was claimed by another Kise man, Aoki, while the jonidan honours were conferred upon Kokonoe beya's Okinoshita. The jonokuchi prize was interestingly taken by a Bulgarian, 23-year-old Aoiyama from Tagonoura beya. Time will tell if he is another Kotooshu in the making.

Thus ends the final Tokyo tournament of the decade with victory for Asashoryu, the 22nd time in succession that a non-Japanese has gripped the coveted Emperor's Cup. Hundreds of Mongols now cram into the Kokugikan on every Tokyo senshuraku, overjoyed at the prospect of seeing their men set records on foreign soil, throwing down the gauntlet for future Japanese stars to fight back. SFM will be watching eagerly to see if any more records are broken in Fukuoka.