

Kyushu Basho Summary The Last Tourney of the Decade

by Chris Gould

In the eyes of Japanese youngsters (the group that sumo so desperately needs to attract), the events of senshuraku were vastly overshadowed by the all-Japanese world title boxing match between Koki Kameda and Daisuke Naito. Barely four hours after Hakuho's outstanding zensho yusho triumph in Fukuoka, Japan's youngsters were applauding 23-year-old Kameda for his victory over a 35-year-old opponent, hailing it as a triumph for Youth over Experience. For the first week, the Kyushu sumo tournament promised Japanese Youth similar feel-good emotions as the established names toiled. A highly interesting 2010 seemed in the offing. But, alas, events of the second week ensured that the Hatsu Basho will – deeply regrettably – not be nearly as exciting as it should be.



Bushuyama

The most gripping point of the

Kyushu basho appeared to be Day Six when balding maegashira Bushuyama, fighting in his highest ever banzuke position, surprisingly chopped down Ozeki Kotomitsuki. The professional careers of these two men have been remarkably divergent, with Bushuyama in makushita as recently as May 2008. However the two were evenly-matched university rivals in the early 1990s and Bushuyama was thus totally unfazed by the faltering ozeki. That slap-down left Kotomitsuki on 3-3 along with fellow ozeki Kaio and Harumafuji. It seemed inconceivable that all these men would kachi-koshi, and the prospect of a cut-throat kadoban atmosphere in January was as realistic as it was mouthwatering.

But then the winds of conservation set in. Kaio, through extensive reliance on arm-pulling, incredibly won his next four matches. Kotomitsuki won his next three. Harumafuji continued to falter and after a catastrophic nakabi slap-down at the hands of Takekaze actually found himself on 3-5 with two yokozuna and every ozeki still to face. Somehow, though, the erratic Mongol raised his game to not only defeat three ozeki and an in-form Toyonoshima but end the 11-match unbeaten run of grand champion Asashoryu. Sure enough, come senshuraku, and yet another Kaio kotenage in front of his home fans ensured that he (8-7), Kotomitsuki (8-7) and Harumafuji (9-6) all safely preserved their ranks.

But this is not a case of all living happily ever after. The main

responsibility of an ozeki is to challenge the yokozuna in the yusho race. This is patently not happening often enough. Chiyotaikai became the first ozeki to count the cost of this situation in Kyushu, finally losing the ozeki rank he had held for a record 65 tournaments (including every single basho of the current decade).



Ozeki Chiyotaikai

However, he only lost the rank five matches from the end of the year, despite having registered just 30 wins from 85 encounters up to that point. (Some fans are now wryly dubbing him 'Chiyo-intaikai,' a play on the word 'intai – retirement.') The failings of the current demotion criteria have rarely been more cruelly exposed. The problem is that the past four years have given rise to a culture of

8-7 ozeki and last-minute kachi koshi; Kaio's final-day victory this time marking the 12th successive occasion on which a 7-7 ozeki has won on senshuraku. It is hoped that 2010 will see this culture change and inject new life into sumo's stultifying second rung.



Yokozuna Hakuho

Fixture adjustments will certainly help. Ozeki matches on nakabi are simply too early in the basho to generate any excitement. The decision to pair weakening veterans Kaio and Chiyotakai on Day Eight in Fukuoka was simply startling given nakabi's supposed status as a day of spectacle. True, Kaio's easy dispatch of his crippled foe was followed by a beautifully poignant facial expression which read: 'We've been through a lot together and this is probably the end.' But, rare expressions of emotion aside, this match did nothing to enhance excitement, spice up the yusho race or provide Kaio with a suitable nakabi test. At times when even shonichi in Kyushu reveals unsold seats, searching questions about acceptable ozeki performance and fixture scheduling have to be asked.

Admittedly, finding ozeki to challenging Hakuho is no easy task. This basho proved beyond all doubt that he has gained

permanent ascendancy of Asashoryu. Fifteen wins from fifteen matches not only delivered him his 12th makuuchi yusho but also the record for victories in a calendar year – 86 from 90 encounters. It should have been more; the defeats to Shotenro in September and Kotooshu in May seemed easily avoidable. That said, against Asashoryu – the second strongest athlete by a sumo-sized margin – Hakuho was impeccable, winning all six of their senshuraku encounters of 2009. In fact, Asashoryu has not defeated Hakuho in a regulation match since the two almost came to blows on the dohyo in May 2008.

Asashoryu's now habitual collapse in the home straight can be explained in one simple word: temperament. Although his power is definitely waning, his sheer handspeed and trickery are still able to guarantee him ten wins. Against opponents with tactical awareness, though, his rusting armoury is no longer always enough. One defeat and his uncontrollable rage takes over, blinding him to positive thinking and leading him to impetuous mistakes – the 14th-day defeat to Kotooshu a classic case in point.

The formerly invincible Mongol, who suffered the heartbreak of seeing his seemingly unbeatable yearly-win record broken, went from 11-0 to 11-4 with an alarming lack of resistance. And the signs of his inadequate temperate were abundant. The victory over Tokitenku was followed by a petulant and highly aggressive roundhouse more appropriate for the school playground. Similarly, his nakabi treatment of Tochiozan – getting behind him, but refusing to push him over the rope, instead holding him for five seconds before throwing him – was a calculated act of humiliation presumably rooted in one of their many training sessions together. One wonders if in such moments

of pure rage he is even thinking about sumo at all.

The jun-yusho honours were unexpectedly shared by maegashira 9 Miyabiyama and maegashira 8 Tochinoshin, who both posted 12-3 and earned Fighting Spirit Prizes. Vertically challenged Toyonoshima followed them with 11 victories and a Technique Award, including a trouncing of 10-5 Kotooshu – by far his best performance of the year. Fukuoka-born Kotoshogiku will also motor up the banzuke with 10 wins from the maegashira 2 position.



Tochinoshin

For January, Chiyotakai's demotion means that he must occupy sekiwake West, while Baruto will retain sekiwake East after a (lame) 9-6 kachi koshi. Technically-skilled Kakuryu will lose sekiwake after a 7-8 showing, and both komusubi (Kisenosato and Goiedo) will also be demoted despite both destroying Kaio in brilliant displays. Kotoshogiku and Toyonoshima's performances are worthy of the third rung and it will be interesting to see if the sumo association opts for four sekiwake next time. Should that happen, Tochinoshin and Miyabiyama will presumably make komusubi – the former for the first time.



Ozeki Kotomitsuki

At the other end of makuuchi, four men look certain to be demoted. Kasugao and Kimurayama crashed to 3-12 and 4-11 respectively at maegashira 14, while the injury-prone Yamamotoyama and Tamaasuka will certainly join them in juryo. (Incidentally, Yamamotoyama's ridiculous weight of 260-kilograms has started to draw criticisms even from the normally reticent NHK commentary team). Juryo promotees will likely include Mongolian Hakuba (who returns to makuuchi for the first time since May 2008) and veteran Tochinonada who scored 8-7 in his first juryo basho for 12 and a half years. 10-5s for Kitataiki and Koryu may also prove enough to

propel them back to makuuchi. Okinoumi and Tokusegawa look set for their highest banzuke rankings to date having posted 8-7 and 10-5 respectively. Dropping out of juryo are Daishoumi (4-11) and Kotoyutaka (4-11). Of the big names fallen on hard times Chiyohakuho, Tosanoumi and Kasuganishiki all made kachi koshi in lower juryo, while four wins from his last four bouts saw juryo's Georgian debutant Gagamaru somehow keep his rank. The juryo yusho this time went to Kitataiki, who edged a three-way playoff with Tokusegawa and Koryu.

In makushita, Sokokurai and Miyamoto are primed to make their juryo debuts in January, each posting 5-2 at makushita 1. 38-year-old Kitazakura, meanwhile, slumped to a miserable 2-5 at makushita 6 and increased speculation over his retirement. College champion Fukao also continued to struggle with a 1-6, while Kotokuni – a juryo regular in 2009 – went kyujo for two matches and slides to mid-makushita. The yusho went to Oonomatsu beya's Kurosawa, the 21-year-old from Aichi. In sandanme, Takanohana beya enjoyed its first yusho success in the shape of Mongolian Takanoiwa. Jonidan saw 21-year-old Bulgarian Aoiyama capture his second yusho in a row and



Ozeki Kaio

continue his meteoric rise up the banzuke. The jonokuchi honours went to another Oonomatsu man, 24-year-old Terashita.

And finally, a special word for ozeki Kaio, who celebrated his 22nd Kyushu homecoming by hauling himself just one bout short of the record for makuuchi career wins (807) held by yokozuna Chiyonofuji. Although many Japanese struggle to accept that a fading ozeki will dislodge a legendary grand champion atop the career-victories chart, Kaio is at least paying spectacular homage to the Japanese tradition of lengthy overtime.