

The consummate performance Asashoryu at his Peak, 2007 Hatsu, Day 2

by Chris Gould

As a tribute to the man whose impact on sumo will be everlasting, Chris Gould offers a piece written during the 2007 Hatsu Basho, the scene of Asashoryu's 20th yusho.

Asashoryu Akinori is a showman to the core. Win or lose, on or off the dohyo, there is something about him that begs to be noticed. It was apt that for the four years preceding 2007, he nearly always appeared in the day's final bout, which is itself a spectacle built purely upon showmanship.

The closing bout of day 2 began, as always, with the banging of claves by the head yobidashi, who mounted the dohyo to do so before whining that Kimura Shonosuke had an announcement to make. After grandly pacing towards the shikiri-sen, the NSK's chief referee pointed his fan westwards and howled the name of Asashoryu's opponent – twice. Next he swept his fan eastwards and twice howled: 'Asashoryu.' He then dramatically warbled an eloquent and ceremonial sentence signalling that the next bout would be the last of the day.

The announcement presented an opportunity for Kimura Shonosuke to draw attention to himself, his vocal chords, his glitzy silk hitatare and – most importantly – his rank. When announcing the closing bout, he dramatically extended the tassels attached to his gumbai handle full-length, the long thin pendulum of purple leaving spectators in no doubt as to who was the yokozuna of gyoji.



While the shameless act of gyoji theatre unfolded, Asashoryu Akinori coolly sipped his power-water, wiped his lips, pinched sodium chloride with his left hand and squatted before his salt basket. Looking out towards the audience, he was motionless, his eyes fixed on an unknown spot deep inside the Kokugikan. His chunky right hand slapped across a thigh, the salt-filled left hand resting against his knee, Asashoryu bore the serious professional look of someone acutely focused on the task before him. His downward-arching chubby lips and eyebrows at

alternative heights suggested something vacant about him, his mind purged of nerves, his ears deafened to the sounds of the reality around him. He was looking to fill this vacuum with perfection, with a performance in which he called every shot.

As Kimura Shonosuke offered a pronounced bow to the spectators before him, many of whom applauded the announcement just made, the chief yobidashi retreated from the dohyo and banged his claves to signal commencement of the shikiri-naoshi. Right on queue Asashoryu

snapped out of his meditative trance, leaped to his feet, cupped his right hand to his black belt, extended his left arm skywards at a 45° angle to his shoulder and, with an elegant flick of the wrist, tossed the salt over the gyoji and onto the shikiri-sen. The salt descended in an umbrella shape, pattering onto the clay like icing sugar against a cake.

Two lame pats of the belt later and Asashoryu had advanced to the eastern edge of the dohyo – the very straw bale against which he had earlier performed his dohyo-iri. That was ceremony. This was work. He was now to enact chiri-chozu with a 154-kilogram foe facing him. This opponent, noticed by very few, was the

ocean-blue-belted Kotoshogiku.

His surprise victory of the previous day against Tochiazuma was not expected to be repeated. Even he did not expect to repeat it, toiling through his entire shikiri-naoshi with the stiff, tentative movements of self-doubt. Neither was Asashoryu expecting an upset; his movements were bold, grand and exuding confidence.

Chiri-chozu began and 12 junior yobidashi uncurled themselves from their ringside crouches and circumnavigated the dohyo, each unfurling a luminous kensho banner purchased by a sponsor. After completing a 270° dohyo march from south east to south west, they were replaced by 12

more yobidashi who unfurled equally luminous banners. The wrestlers were prevented from accessing the salt while the semi-circle of yobidashi filed past and chose to wait patiently rather than slap themselves into shape. Even the huge financial incentive of 24 kensho, each worth \$300, could not encourage Kotoshogiku to think positively.

Following the second salt-throw and shiko at the shikiri-sen, the combatants crouched onto the starter's lines and into their first close-range meeting of glares. It was not difficult to see who won. Asashoryu leaned far further forward into the crouch, almost provocatively. I'm not scared of anyone, least of all you, his protruding neck implied. And I'm not going to go away, his menacing eyes added just inches from those of his forlorn opponent. Asa's niramiai has always been thus: aggressive, intimidating, controversial, and a downright joy to watch. Kotoshogiku's podgy frame replete with drooping folds appeared dangerously vulnerable in the face of Asashoryu's pumped up, finely-toned torso.

The two wrestlers returned to the baskets for another toss of salt, Kotoshogiku clearly hoping for a better niramiai, Asashoryu perfectly content with proceedings, strolling to his corner with beautifully cyclical movements of powerful legs. Martial artists place much emphasis on circular movement of torso and limbs. Asashoryu was no exception. His willingness to stick out from the crowd magnetised the attention of professional photographers in the isles, whose cameras emitted strobes of blinding light.

Forever one step ahead, Asashoryu clearly glanced at Kotoshogiku even before returning to the shikiri-sen, anxious to score a psychological blow before the next scheduled niramiai. Kotoshogiku



deliberately ignored him, anxious to shield the uncertainty in his eyes. Asashoryu waited for Kotoshogiku to crouch first, the eyes cast upon his every movement. While glaring downwards, Asashoryu posed again, ceasing to adjust his sagari in mid-movement and cocking his left foot behind his right, like a footballer shaping for a glorious free-kick.

How dare you ignore my most menacing glare! his towering figure implied before joining Kotoshogiku at sonkyo level, still refusing to remove his deadly gaze from the younger man. Traditionalists have accused Asashoryu of disrespecting opponents in the warm-up. On this day, 'Asa' was taking their musings with a pinch of sumo salt. The mean-looking black of his belt said it all. He played meanly to win.

Despite a handful of jingoistic fans exiting early to avoid the gruesome sight of a dominant foreign yokozuna, the arena remained generally transfixed by the bout. Conversation, cheers and general noises were such that Kimura Shonosuke's barks of 'kamaete!' were drowned out.

The buzz grew louder at the final niramiai. Kotoshogiku finally became animated in the crouch, tensing his biceps, clenching his fists, moving them up-and-down alternately as if practicing curls with dumb-bells. There was still an element of retreatism in the gesture, with Kotoshogiku instinctively leaning backwards during the meeting of glares. Asashoryu lurched forward in the crouch as ever, then bolted upright into a squat, his left hand briefly resting on his wide knee.

Crowd members watched that hand intently, knowing that within seconds it would be aggressively deployed on Asashoryu's signature gesture before the final salt-throw:

an ostentatious, swivelling upper-body movement leading to a thunderous, reverberating slap of his belt which spurred him into action. Whether on TV or booming through the canopy microphones, the visual and audio qualities of the belt-slap make it the most impressive warm-up gesture in pro-sumo. I had never seen a sumotori demonstrate such

belligerence, such assuredness during their shikiri-naoshi, and felt concerned for any opponent faced with an Asashoryu so sure of his divine right to win.

Whereas Kotoshogiku shuffled into the corner with several mouse-like paces, Asashoryu transferred himself from shikiri-sen to salt basket in two giant



strides. He lunged for the blue flannel held by the yobidashi, his feet reluctant to leave the ring – the ‘zone’ – in which he would rapidly polish off a hapless opponent. While Kotoshogiku’s flannel delicately dabbed his moist facial skin, Asashoryu buried his cheeks in blue fabric and made several violent cleansing movements. His biceps tensed into more menacing shapes than Kotoshogiku’s while his shoulders became as spherical as heavy cannon balls.

After the flannelled baptism of fire came another signature gesture, the brushing of his meaty right hand across his mouth while eyeing a mystery spot in the audience. Were the gesture made a fraction lower, it would resemble the mime for the cutting of someone’s throat. That someone tried to stem Asashoryu’s momentum with a delaying tactic, taking too long over his feeble final salt-throw – a time-honoured ploy designed to anger a foe and destroy their concentration. Hardly ever, if at all, do the greatest sumotori fall for it.

Kotoshogiku never looked like dictating the final seconds of the warm-up. Asa did not slow down

for him. Instead, he sped up and caused Kotoshogiku’s pace to quicken, impatiently waiting for him at his starter’s line, the eyes once more burning into the lower ranker’s anguished face.

Down into sonkyo Asa darted; up into the tachi-ai he roared. Kotoshogiku did not look, but merely charged head first into the yokozuna’s pectorals of steel, desperately striving for an inside right-hand grip while trying to bounce him off balance. Asashoryu, possessing the fastest hand-speed in the business, shaped to dive inside for a left-hand grip but ultimately settled for an outside one. ‘Inside’ was always preferable but ‘outside’ was perfectly fine for a wrestler of Asashoryu’s skill and power, stabilizing the action, slamming the brakes on Kotoshogiku’s advance, the ripples in his stomach shuddering to an eventual standstill.

With both wrestlers possessing one-handed grips and standing square, the lower ranker tried to drive his superior backwards as he had done to Tochiazuma the day before. Alas, his bulldozer qualities had disappeared overnight, replaced by a likeness

to a puppy trying to shove a locked door.

Asa’s firm head, full of thoughts while propped up against Kotoshogiku’s right shoulder, calmly instructed him to deliver a second hand to the belt. Mission accomplished, he showed his despondent foe how to drive, unbalancing 154-kilograms with a force which caused Kotoshogiku’s left leg to shoot a metre from the ground. To widespread shrieks of amazement, the Majestic Mongol ploughed into his opponent, moving him effortlessly to the ring’s edge.

Professional photographers went into overdrive, snapping three or four shots a second, once more showering ringside with the Sumida River’s glittering effect. Amid camera-induced fireworks, Asa hurled Kotoshogiku leftwards and off the dohyo, as if tipping slurry down a sink. His head bobbed as he marched to the dohyo’s eastern extremity, as if stepping to groovy music. He had every reason to feel groovy: 12 seconds of complete domination had earned him 24 kensho envelopes, and further proof that he was living the childhood dream of becoming a wrestling great.