

Kokugi Konnections Great Kyushu Moments

by Chris Gould

The Kyushu basho is certainly one to go through phases, encompassing both the extremes of boring predictability and worlds of the unknown.

In the 1980s, the tournament belonged to Yokozuna Chiyonofuji, who won the basho eight years running, a romantic tribute to his wife who was born a short distance from the stadium. The Wolf won his ninth Kyushu basho, and final yusho ever, in November 1990, and would have won 10 in a row had he not slipped up against lacklustre maegashira Ryogoku in 1989.

In the 1990s, the tournament veered to the other extreme with numerous surprise contenders staking claims to the yusho – and often succeeding in their pursuits. In 1991, with Chiyonofuji and Onokuni suddenly retired, and fellow grand champions Asahifuji and Hokutoumi struggling with injuries, the yusho race went down to Konishiki and Kotonishiki, the feisty sekiwake who had actually won the September 1991 tournament. Kotonishiki creamed Konishiki on day 14, but slipped up against Wakahanada on senshuraku, thus handing the Hawaiian giant the chance to claim his second Kyushu yusho – and rubber stamp his yokozuna credentials. Here is his final-day

match against Kirishima, his long-time friend and rival.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rskYYvmeyVg>

November 1992 and 1993 belonged to another giant Hawaiian Akebono, who staked his own claim to a yokozuna berth in the former tournament and then portrayed himself as a true champion in the latter. The following year saw him completely outclassed by a certain Japanese sensation named Takanohana, whom he faced in a classic final day encounter. Takanohana had won the previous tournament 15-0 and was already 14-0 in the present one. A final day party piece would guarantee what was perceived to be a belated promotion to yokozuna – and a party piece it truly was.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2itSyAO3Qs>

November 1995, of course, was the year of the infamous Waka-Taka yusho playoff, which many observers have doubted the legitimacy of. The bout marked the first occasion on which two brothers had fought each other in competitive sumo, let alone a playoff for the top-division championship. Although I have accessed the clip many times in the past, it does not appear to be on youtube at the present time.

Here's hoping it comes back soon.

1996 saw a five-man playoff for the title, taking the unpredictability of the basho to new extremes. Then, in 1998, maegashira Kotonishiki – by now a veteran – surprisingly returned to the yusho race. On day 13, he was pitted against Takanohana, a man who was beating him very regularly and was light years ahead in technique. And yet look how Kotonishiki, not particularly renowned for his beltwork, pulls off a magnificent manoeuvre to turn the match in his favour. From then on, the yusho was his.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YByGjh2egI>

In recent years, the basho has come to be dominated – as with all things else in sumo – by Asashoryu and Hakuho, 2002, 2004, 2005 and 2006 all belonging to the former, the last three years easily belonging to the latter. However, Tochiazuma did surprisingly break the mould in 2003 to take the championship, and Hakuho was run close by Chiyotakai in 2007 and Harumafuji in 2008. Will Kyushu's stardust have the desired effect on the pack of pretenders this time round? For sumo's sake, we hope so.