

Review of the Year 2010

by Chris Gould

The sumo world of December 2010 is vastly different to that of January 2010. Could we ever have predicted that so much could happen in so few months?

On the middle Sunday of the November tournament, Japan's state television channel NHK chose to screen a brief "highlights of the year" segment. In truth, it was laughably embarrassing. Most of it consisted of wrestlers tearfully bowing in front of cameras and saying "sorry" for various misdemeanors. The first year of the new decade will certainly have some lasting consequences for Japan's national sport.

January began with a vastly slimmed-down Chiyotakai somehow needing ten wins to regain the ozeki rank that he had held for more tournaments than any other wrestler. He knew himself that it was an attempt doomed to failure and, after being humiliatingly spun and thrown onto his back by 37-year-old Kaio on day 3, the best student of yokozuna Chiyonofuji finally hung up his sash aged 33. It was a seismic change at the top of the banzuke, cutting Japanese representation in the ozeki ranks from three to two. These two were also struggling, with an injured Kotomitsuki forced to go kadoban and facing demotion in March. Kaio, meanwhile, despite registering more makuuchi career wins than anybody with victory over Chiyotakai, struggled immensely and found himself 2-4 after six days. He only escaped kadoban by beating Hakuho for the first time in four years – a truly incredible upset.



Yokozuna Asashoryu

Victory for Kaio against Hakuho handed the January tournament to Asashoryu, the fiery Mongolian collecting his 25th top-division championship in the process. Alas, a mid-basho incident involving a pursuit and punches thrown outside a nightclub soon hit the press, and Asashoryu was accused of having committed one misdemeanor too many. The Kyokai were minded to fire him, but senior directors persuaded Asashoryu to walk away with a modicum of dignity by resigning himself, something he tearfully did on February 4th. Sumo's first Mongolian yokozuna, and most successful non-Japanese wrestler, had effectively been ousted at the age of 29. Tearful recollections from numerous rikishi followed, with Hakuho's appearing most poignant.

It was this man, Hakuho, who would dominate the year in a manner considered unimaginable in January. After posting three losses in the year's first tournament, he appeared

transformed following Asashoryu's retirement and easily collected the March tournament with a perfect 15-0 score. He was hotly followed by an equally transformed Baruto, who never managed to beat Asashoryu but recorded his first win against Hakuho in January and his first runner-up score in March: 14-1. This outstanding achievement earned him promotion to ozeki, ensuring that foreigners outnumbered Japanese on sumo's second highest rank for the first time.

Kotomitsuki, meanwhile, only kept his rank by an incredibly contentious judging decision which saved him from defeat against lowly Toyohibiki.



Ozeki Kotomitsuki

The smiley-faced ozeki would not survive for long, however. On the 13th day of the May tournament, news broke of Kotomitsuki having been involved in multi-million yen illegal gambling activities. Others were implicated, including Toyohibiki, Toyonoshima, Goeido, Okinoumi, Matsutani and Futeno, and various punishments meted out by the sumo association, but

Kotomitsuki was by far the highest profile and thus forced to retire. On the day the news broke, he wandered into his Kokugikan match sheepishly, like the boy who embarrassed himself at the school concert, and was embarrassingly thrashed by maegashira Kitataiki. On the final day of the tournament, he denied the allegations, telling fans: "I'm sorry for making you worry so much about me. Everything's ok." In July, he was a wrestler no more, the third high-profile departure from sumo in half a year. Only one Japanese ozeki now remained: Kaio.

This never-say-die veteran from Fukuoka had raised everyone's spirits on the final day in May by registering his 1000th career win, forcing out Kotooshu amid joyous Kokugikan scenes. Shortly afterwards, Hakuho collected his second successive Emperor's Cup with a 15-0 score by defeating Harumafuji, who failed to repeat his yusho-winning feat of the previous May. In July, both Kaio and Hakuho hit the headlines again. Kaio was injured on the 10th day against Kotooshu and deprived of the chance to wrestle on his 38th birthday (July 24th).

Three days' later, Hakuho equaled Taiho's record of 45 consecutive wins by downing Kotooshu, and surpassed it with an equally impressive win over Harumafuji the following day. His final-day



Yokozuna Hakuho

victory over Baruto was simply a party piece. Alas, none of the action was shown live – the first such incident since sumo TV coverage began in 1953 – as NHK decided it did not wish to cover a scandal-ridden sport.

NHK coverage returned for September, though, and Hakuho was again on top form, surpassing Chiyonofuji's 53-successive-win landmark on the 7th day and going unbeaten for the fourth tournament in succession. A demotion-threatened Kaio again struggled but produced some wily sumo to defeat Kisenosato and scrape a winning score on day 14. September also saw the emergence of the first two sekitori to be born in the present Japanese Emperor's reign, one of whom, Takayasu, would make a four-man playoff for the second division championship in November – his first tournament at that level.

November, of course, saw the inglorious end of Hakuho's long unbeaten run, Kisenosato ensuring that it stopped at 63 – six short of Futabayama's all-time record. Kaio, back on his home ground of Fukuoka, confounded all expectations to post a 12-3, leaving NHK commentator Mainoumi to exclaim: "I know it sounds like I'm being cruel to him, but it's simply a huge shock that a rikishi who only gets eight wins every tournament could still be in the title hunt come day 14!" The huge promise exhibited by rising Japanese star Tochiozan in September ultimately came to nothing at the year-end, but a 10-5 from Kisenosato and a 14-1 from Toyonoshima gave home fans some cause for optimism.

In addition to the three massive names who fell away, 2010 also saw the retirement of Iwakiyama, a balding giant from Aomori who frequently troubled the top rankers but suddenly quit due to a stroke in April. Fellow balding veteran Kitazakura, 38, also bowed



Kitazakura

out tearfully on the opening day in March after 22 years as a sekitori. Other notable retirees included ex-komusubi Kaiho (37), ex-maegashira Tamarikido (34), ex-juryo Daiyubu (27 – the only sekitori trained by the ex-yokozuna Onokuni) and 41-year-old Kimenryu. Big names falling from grace, and thus heavily in danger of retirement, include 262-kilogram Yamamotoyama – currently in the bottom half of makushita after an injury-hit 2010 – and Futeno, recently a makuuchi regular but now in mid-makushita.

Off the dohyo, the Sumo Association Chairman changed for the second time in two years in the wake of the gambling scandal, Musashigawa stepping aside for Hanaregoma. Musashigawa also transferred control of his stable to ex-ozeki Musoyama in the autumn and the name was changed to Fujishima. Kise-beya rikishi, meanwhile, were transferred to Kitanoumi beya after their stablemaster was found to have offered premium sumo tickets to leading yakuza. Chiyotaikai, Kitazakura, Iwakiyama and Kaiho all took up oyakata positions – Asashoryu and Kotomitsuki conspicuously did not.

Ex-yokozuna Takanohana, meanwhile, gave strength to sumo's reformist movement by winning election to sumo's board of directors at the tender age of 37.

On the dohyo, expect more of the same in 2011 as Hakuho attempts to emulate Asashoryu in winning all six tournament of a calendar

year. As NHK rightly commented, producing a second yokozuna next year will prove incredibly difficult. Kaio must surely retire at some point, while Kotooshu appears content to sit on his comfortable ozeki perch for an eternity. Harumafuji lacks size and is becoming injury prone while Baruto is incredibly strong but

lacks technique and guile. Surely sumo's main goal must be to produce the next Japanese ozeki in 2011, with Kisenosato and Tochiozan the leading contenders. Of course Goeido, probably the most skilful Japanese rikishi, and recent hero Toyonoshima are more than welcome to show what they have to offer.