

Hatsu Basho Review

by Chris Gould

The lame end to a tedious basho suggested that the winds of change were blowing across sumo – as ever, in carefully-managed Japanese fashion. Harumafuji's disastrous final-day showing against Kisenosato handed the latter his tenth win, an Outstanding Performance Prize and an outside chance of ozeki promotion in March. Fellow third-ranker Kotoshogiku went one better with 11 wins and the Technique Prize, ensuring he will also be gunning for promotion in Osaka. The hunt for the next Japanese ozeki, it seems, is over – conveniently just at the time that Japan's only existing ozeki, 38-year-old Kaio, is ready to hang up his sash. Sumo, it appears, will narrowly avoid the calamitous situation of no host nation talent in the top two ranks.



Kisenosato

Finding a Japanese ozeki may seem like one problem solved, but making the existing ozeki perform better appears an intractable one. Muscular Harumafuji, recently celebrating both a wedding and a

baby (only just in that order) staved off his demotion threat by the slimmest of margins, stuttering to a paltry 8 wins, 7 losses (8-7). Clueless against Kisenosato, pushed around by Kotooshu, beaten for the sixth time in succession by Kotoshogiku and also found wanting against Baruto, it was impossible to believe that Harumafuji had been a tournament winner just 20 months before. Through injury or otherwise, he appears in desperate trouble and can count himself extremely fortunate not to fall to the sekiwake rank his current form merits. Even his eighth win, a two-second knock-down of Kaio, looked richly undeserved.



Kotoshogiku

Giant Estonian Baruto, on the other hand, raced out of the blocks and displayed some decent power-sumo to register eight wins from his first nine matches. However, outwitted by Kotoshogiku and Kaio, and outclassed by Hakuho and Kotooshu, Baruto proceeded to lose five of his final six matches

and finished with a disappointing 9-6. It seems that since his 14-1 in Osaka last year, higher-level opponents have been actively thinking up ways to overcome his raw power and bulk, either by sidestepping or getting underneath him to destabilize the high hips. Baruto must now devise a plan to counter his increasingly wised-up opponents, or face never realising his dream of a yusho win.



Ozeki Kotooshu

Kotooshu, while still refusing to wholeheartedly put his body on the line, looked a little better than in recent basho with a solid 10-5, including a good performance against Hakuho and a real return to form against Baruto. Alas, his ridiculous 14th-day defeat to Kaio

took the gloss off his achievement, and poses further questions as to how a man so tall, muscular and strong can frequently lose to an ailing Japanese some 11 years his senior. It is nearly three years since his yusho win, and he still looks unlikely to get another on current form.

Kaio, meanwhile, buoyed by his stupendous 12-3 in Fukuoka, lost his chance of the world's unlikely yokozuna push early on, but still finished with a creditable 9-6, defeating both giant Europeans Kotooshu and Baruto on the way. Quite how those spectacular wins could be sandwiched by a two-second loss of balance against Harumafuji is beyond anyone but the most cynical, but the bottom line is he has survived to celebrate 23 complete years in active sumo at the next tourney. With his ozeki position guaranteed until May, we shouldn't expect any retirement announcements yet, especially as he is just 10 wins away from equalling the all-time sumo record for career wins.



Yokozuna Hakuho

The title, of course, went to Hakuho for the sixth time in a row,

leaving the majestic Mongolian just one short of compatriot Asashoryu's record set between November 2004 and November 2005. So long as he remains injury free, the Miyagino maestro should easily surpass Asashoryu's milestone in May and continue his tournament-winning streak far beyond that. A second consecutive loss to Kisenosato notwithstanding – curtailing his latest bout-winning-streak at 23 – Hakuho is still very much King of the Ring, head and shoulders above the rest in both confidence and technique. He collected his 300th makuuchi win during this basho and has now posted an astonishing 88-2 over the past six tournaments – both defeats, of course, coming to the same man.



Okinoumi

Other big news saw baby-faced maegashira Okinoumi win 11 of his first 13 matches, only to flounder against higher-level opposition in the final two days. He was consoled by his first Fighting Spirit prize and his best-ever score at top division level – the perfect recovery from his embroilment in

the baseball gambling scandal. Vertically-challenged Toyonoshima, meanwhile, followed up 28 wins in the past two basho with one of the most bizarre 8-7s ever recorded. January saw him post one win, seven straight defeats and then seven straight wins. Conveniently for the sumo association, his steady ascent up the ranks somehow continues.

Big news at the bottom of makuuchi sees bearded Georgian Kokkai drop out of the top division for the first time in over seven years. His miserable form on the dohyo was allegedly compounded by events off it, with media reports suggesting he and compatriot Gagamaru had argued in an Indian curry house and broken some lighting. Makuuchi is guaranteed to have two completely new faces in March with Tochinowaka and Brazilian Kaisei both doing enough to break out of juryo. Popular Korean Kasugao will also return to makuuchi but the most eagerly anticipated promotion is that of Takayasu, who is aiming to become the first top-division rikishi born in the current Emperor's reign. At the moment, his fate hangs in the balance and depends on whether the sumo association sees fit to demote Kimurayama from makuuchi, or give him a compassionate stay of execution.

One big name who will certainly be absent from Osaka is Tosanoumi, who retired on the opening day of the January tournament at the age of 38. It is hoped that the next tournament will really signal a changing of the guard, with two feisty Japanese sekiwake seeking higher echelons and new makuuchi faces anxious to wreak havoc with the elite. Whatever happens, it's got to be more exciting than January!