

The rise and fall of Kaio... in six short days

by Chris Gould

A violent thud of blubber against clay, three thousand roars of amazement wrapped up in ecstasy, and a rotund smiley-face puffing with relief. It was the moment many sumo fans had craved, and perhaps an equal number had dreaded. Ozeki Kaio, all 38 years and 354 days of him, had – at the fourth attempt – equaled the record for sumo career wins at the 2011 Nagoya Basho. Vertically-challenged and pot-bellied Toyonoshima would go down in history as the defeated opponent.

The custom when any sumo landmark is equaled is for the person equaling the record to seek out the old record-holder (assuming he's still alive), shake his hand, and apologize profusely for stealing his glory amid a barrage of camera flashes. Prior to the last tournament, the record-holder for sumo career wins was legendary grand champion Chiyonofuji, some of whose 1045 victories were featured in our last [issue](#).

For three consecutive days of the basho just gone, a 56-year-old Chiyonofuji waited patiently in the stifling press area for the coveted handshake, only to see his time consistently wasted as Kaio was annihilated on a nearby TV screen time and again. It was only on the fourth day that Toyonoshima tumbled and the Kaio-Chiyonofuji handshake finally took place, with Kaio looking distinctly sheepish at having kept the great man waiting in the heat for so long. Despite the 17-year age difference, Chiyonofuji looked the younger with his well-kept black hair and tight-fitting short-sleeved shirt. And he looked infinitely fresher than Kaio's

exhausted drooping figure.

The fact the handshake took an eternity to materialize was glaring proof that Kaio's powers had declined considerably since his last competitive outing in May, which even hit such heights as to include a final-day win over majestic Yokozuna Hakuho. And yet, despite his spent frame being in no position to deserve Greatness, Kaio soldiered into day 5 of Nagoya 2011 to face Kyokutenho for the chance to surpass Chiyonofuji's win total. Many Japanese seemed distinctly uneasy about this prospect, wondering if it really were appropriate to class an increasingly average ozeki above an imperious grand champion in the record stakes. For some reason, the sumo association saw no problem with this and let play continue. True, Mongolian Kyokutenho is a 193-centimeter powerhouse who remains frighteningly strong despite his nearly 37 years of age. But yet, whenever he has faced Kaio in recent years, his strength has seemed miraculously to disappear. So it proved again in July.

Amid frenzied shouting in the arena and even more frenzied commentary, Kaio grappled viciously with Kyokutenho before once again securing his favored belt-grip, triggering that oft-heard buzz of expectancy that precedes his winning advance. Thus came the charge, Kaio bulldozing, head down into Kyokutenho's chest, driving, straining, growling, before rounding things off with an emphatic shove to the upper body. The desperate get-him-over-the-rope-any-which-way ending merely added to the drama of a

great TV moment, giving the impression that Kaio was fighting as if his life depended on it, as if he no longer had confidence in himself to win that vital extra match should this chance go begging. More whoops of delight from the patriotic crowd followed, as did more big puffs of relief from the battered veteran, and another flash across the top of the screen: "Ozeki Kaio overtakes Chiyonofuji's record. 1046 wins."

As the NHK commentator took his feverishly-high pitch down to more respectable levels, he proudly eulogized: "And that's really the textbook version of Kaio's sumo, isn't it!" It was indeed a classic Kaio grip n' charge technique, and the comment was deliberately inserted to remind viewers that this is how the big man would love to be remembered. For after this magical moment (the crowd providing more magic than Kaio, it must be said), Kaio's textbook sumo was never to be seen again. The following day saw Kaio put up a valiant fight against a Kisenosato some 13 years his junior, but ultimately ran out of steam after trying to give him the run-around. His look to the heavens as tactic after tactic failed spoke sumo-sized volumes. A crush out of Aminishiki the following day, who never seems to have forgotten the apparent favor that Kaio did him in September 2008, proved to be the Fukuokan's 1047th and final success on a competitive dohyo.

A poignant moment ensued on day 8 when Kaio faced the man destined to take over his ozeki berth, stocky sekiwake Kotoshogiku. Wearing exactly the

same colored belt, Kotoshogiku looked across at his markedly older opponent almost with a sense of pity. Here he was at the peak of his powers, faced with a man at the absolute limit of strength, a man he had respected for so long, a man who was even born in the same town. Here was a man who had ritually beaten him up in practice when he was younger, and yet had declined to such an extent that he stood no hope of laying a glove on Kotoshogiku now. The crowd sensed the eerie atmosphere on the dohyo and almost fell silent before the match began, before having their fears confirmed as Kotoshogiku easily seized the belt with his dangerous left hand and humiliated Kaio thereafter.

Even that paled into insignificance on day 9 when Kaio was unexpectedly hammered by an

inexperienced Wakakoyu, a man two divisions below him not three years earlier. Even 18 months ago, Kaio would not have batted an eyelid at the shots Wakakoyu threw. But in the basho just gone, the shots hit home hard and Kaio was completely bamboozled. If he hadn't made up his mind to quit after beating Kyokutenho, it was surely made up now.

All that was left was for a final intriguing match-up against more esteemed opposition on day 10 – in the form of gigantic Bulgarian ozeki Kotooshu. With legitimate questions raised about numerous ozeki going easy on each other in the recent past, it was refreshing to see the Kaio-Kotooshu match resembling anything but. Gone were the sturdy-looking orthodox techniques in favor of improvisation and blind panic, with both men lunging,

sidestepping and slapping each other with a lack of control befitting of 10 year-olds. Understandably, Kotooshu's muscular 203-centimeter frame easily won the school-playground-style scrap, reducing Kaio to seven losses from 10 encounters and the certainty of a losing-score over 15 days for the first time in eight years. Worse still, Kaio lost the match in particularly undignified fashion, being shoved into the fourth row of the audience, staggering, a doddering geriatric. He didn't deserve that.

Hence, out-muscled by Kotooshu and Kotoshogiku, out-boxed by Wakakoyu, out-run even by the bloated frame of Kisenosato, and with his only successes coming against three maegashira either ageing or crippled, Kaio enacted a deed more honorable than any record he ever posted. He retired.