

# Aki Basho Review

by Chris Gould

There are times, after a tournament, when fans simply have to ask: what is the point? Having witnessed the events which led to the unveiling of a new Japanese ozeki, now would be a good time to ask such a question. It was universally known before the tournament that Japan needed a home-grown ozeki; the sumo rankings chart was without one for only the second time in 250 years. It was universally known that the sumo association were desperately hoping to promote Kotoshogiku in July, to stave off the ignominy of having no host-nation representation in the sport's uppermost ranks. So why, if they were so determined to promote him, did they make him – and the fans – wait until September, and risk yet another farce?

In September, it was clear from day 1 that even if he injured every bone in his body, it had been decided that pot-bellied Kotoshogiku from Fukuoka was going to become an ozeki come what may. Kotoshogiku's early



Gagamaru



opponents crumbled with pitiful resistance, some even going down like flies. The ease with which he recorded his second successive – and much-needed – win over Grand Champion Hakuho was simply lamentable, with the latter treating the match as mere *butsukari-geiko!* Refusing to make even one forward move, the finest wrestler on the dohyo by a country mile simply allowed the Japanese to crash full throttle into his mountainous chest, drive him backwards and effortlessly shove him over the rope.

Such farces could easily have been avoided if the sumo association had promoted Kotoshogiku in July. He needed 33 wins from 45 bouts to go up and had racked up 31 from 42 in the summer heat of Nagoya before two unexpected

defeats ruined his promotion push. Twelve wins in September, some of which were clearly not deserved, eventually delivered him to 33 wins over three tournaments, but – according to Japanese TV channel NHK – this is still the lowest score posted by anyone recently promoted to ozeki. Kotoshogiku's colleagues in the top two ranks – Hakuho, Baruto, Kotooshu and Harumafuji – all posted 34 wins or more. However sizeable the relief surrounding a Japanese ozeki, one fact will not go away: this was a scrape-through by the narrowest of margins, and the most recent tournament did precious little to enhance Kotoshogiku's credentials. All eyes will be on him when he returns to his hometown of Kyushu for the coming November tournament.



His fellow second-ranker Harumafuji, meanwhile, staked his claim for the worst-ever yokozuna candidacy with an absolutely dismal follow-up to his unexpected tournament triumph in July. Guaranteed promotion to sumo's highest rank if he could claim the top prize this time around, he instead looked hopelessly out of sorts, crashing to seven defeats and being hopelessly outclassed by compatriot Hakuho on the final day. He may have shone in the Nagoya sunshine but the fact remains that in two of the last four tournaments he has posted scores of 8-7 and cast severe doubt over his own physical conditioning.

Similar doubts were held over

Hakuho given the ease with which he lost to Baruto on the final day of the July tournament, his elbow heavily taped. However, the 26-year-old maestro appears to have fully recovered and easily claimed the tournament title this time round. Both his defeats came at the chunky hands of Japanese sekiwake who the sumo association desperately needs to win, and so should not be taken seriously. He was on good form and has now captured the Emperor's Cup on 20 occasions – a very significant milestone. Further victories in Fukuoka and in the following Tokyo tournament will put him level with Japanese legend Takanohana, while extrapolation of his fine form next

year will see him overtake Asashoryu as the foreigner with most tournament title wins. Watch this space!

Japan may have a new ozeki, but Hakuho's latest triumph means that it now has no representation among the 32 tournament winners' portraits which hang from the rafters of the Kokugikan arena. (The first time such a situation has occurred). No Japanese has won the top honours since Ozeki Tochiazuma in January 2006, meaning 33 tournaments have now passed since that momentous occasion. Kotoshogiku and Kisenosato both defeated Hakuho, shared the Fighting Spirit Prize and finished runner-up with 12 wins in September, but neither seriously looked like grasping the Emperor's Cup. Unless Hakuho retires, it is unlikely they ever will.

Harumafuji may have disappointed in Tokyo on two occasions this year, but his plight is nothing like that of Bulgarian ozeki Kotooshu, whose dismal September display prompted him to withdraw from a Tokyo meet for the second time in four months. It remains to be seen quite how badly injured he is, but the two-metre-plus giant is in dire trouble and faces a day of reckoning in the



*Ozeki Harumafuji*

coming tournament. Fellow European ozeki Baruto, meanwhile, continued to play hit and miss, registering only 10 victories. Since storming to 14 wins in Osaka last year to gain his ozeki promotion, he has failed to record more than 11 victories since, and his current form is – on paper at least – worse than newly-promoted Kotoshogiku. He did, however, teach Kotoshogiku a painful lesson on the final day in September, brilliantly throwing the lighter man down at the rope.

One of Baruto's defeats came to

giant Georgian Gagamaru, who posted 11 wins and earned his first fighting spirit prize at a weight of some 200 kilograms. The technique prize went to Kotoshogiku, whose pay packet must have risen considerably!

Among the top division's new faces in November will be Myogiryu, who won the second division title for the second time in succession with a score of 13-2. Special congratulations should be reserved for Bulgarian Aoiyama, who sat out the first two days due to injury but then won 10 of 13 bouts to put

himself within touching distance of the top division.

Immensely popular Robocop Takamisakari, meanwhile, falls further with a 6-9 at juryo 7, and is now dangerously close to the unsalaried ranks. But at least there was further Japanese cheer in the lower four divisions, with every championship going to the host nation. Perhaps that Japanese tourney-winner's portrait will come sooner than we think?