

## The changing face of ozeki

by Chris Gould

Kisenosato's promotion to ozeki was not only long overdue, but greeted with absolute elation judging by social media posts in both English and Japanese. Hanako Dosukoi's prediction way back in the February 2008 issue of this very magazine did indeed come true. The gachinko boy, the gentleman who never asked others to throw a match, had finally beaten the system and made it over the Great Barrier. Not wishing to restate what I wrote in my open letter to him on November 27th, I will tackle his promotion from a different angle here.

When I first started living in Japan in 2008, the ozeki situation was

very different to now. Back then, the definition of ozeki was "old, Japanese, and 8:30 (eight-win kachi-koshi every 30 tournament days)." Back then, some of us would roll our eyes every time senshuraku came around and two ozeki faced each other. On no fewer than 15 consecutive occasions between 2007 and 2011, did an ozeki on 7-7 win his match on the final day, a statistic funnily enough never reported upon during the entire match-fixing scandal. It seemed these ageing carthorses had everything on a plate: what they couldn't do by themselves, the fixture planners did for them, trying as hard as possible – and always succeeding – to avoid pitching two 7-7 ozeki

against each other. Ozeki matches also seemed to be happening unusually early in the tournament, sometimes on nakabi, conveniently giving them more time to calculate how many wins they needed and who they could afford to help.

Unsurprisingly, the trend developed where the ozeki who racked up a big score in the first week (whoever it was) could simply help out whoever he wanted to in the second week. Yes, these guys are stronger than most people. Yes, these guys are playing out a spectacle which draws blurred boundaries between sport and show. But their blatant back-scratching behaviour



*Ozeki Kaio*



*Ozeki Kisenosato*

mattered simply because many wrestlers, like the honest hardworking Kisenosato, did not do the same. It was these guys who were unfairly punished for too long; it is such a shame they have had to wait until now to get their fair crack of the whip.

The quickfire double-promotion of Kotoshogiku and Kisenosato should be celebrated for precisely this reason: that the days of complacent ozeki are, for the moment at least, gone. Whereas in 2008, three of the ozeki were over 30, in December 2011 none of them are. No longer does the front door of the ozeki lounge read: "honour they neighbour, ageing 8:30 specialists" but "don't rest on your laurels, young champions of

the future." Harumafuji has already shown twice that he can take yusho. Baruto has also posted 14 wins in a tournament, and always looks good for 10 or 11. Kotooshu, although hampered by niggling injuries, can more than match Baruto on a good day, and has also won a yusho. Kisenosato has also posted a series of double-digit scores in recent years and gone 3-3 with Hakuho over the past year. Lingering doubts remain over Kotoshogiku's ozeki credentials, but he has posted five consecutive double-digit scores, which is as good as anyone around him at the moment.

The real exciting time will come when Hakuho has to sit a tournament out through injury.

Under those conditions, the yusho is anybody's game and the race for the title will become the most exciting since the Waka-Taka-Ake-Maru days of the 1990s. However, when Hakuho does compete, the main goal for the ozeki, as former SFM Editor Lon Howard so often said, should be to challenge him for the title – preferably until the 14th day. With five men all 28 or younger, four of whom approaching their peaks, injecting much-needed new life into sumo's second rank, the next year could be far more exciting than the last two. At last, Asashoryu's vacancy – if not on the banzuke, at least in terms of sheer fighting spirit and derring-do – can finally be filled.