

# Hatsu Bashi Review

by Chris Gould

And so it came to pass that a European was champion again, giving an emotional championship interview just yards away from his watching family. Kaido Hoovelson, better known as the 199-centimetre, 188-kilogram Ozeki Baruto, captured his first Emperor's Cup on Day 13 of the Hatsu Bashi, thus becoming the first blond-haired man to do so. He also, for the first time, became the leading contender for promotion to sumo's highest rank of yokozuna. Osaka will decide his



*Ozeki Baruto*

immediate fate and, at first glance, the omens look fantastic.

The last time he, or anybody else, was there – remember last year was cancelled due to match-fixing – he posted exactly the same score as he did in the basho just gone: 14-1, his only defeat on both occasions coming against Yokozuna Hakuho. But, as fellow ozeki Harumafuji and Kotooshu will be able to remind him, success in one tournament is no guarantee of success in the next one. The pressure on Baruto in Osaka will be as enormous as his own girth. Even the toughest heads can crack under such circumstances.

Does Baruto's success mark the beginning of a European surge for domination of Japan's national sport? Well, Georgian giant Gagamaru did share the runner-up honours from a lower rank, and Kotooshu did come back stronger this time. And the Mongolian grip on power has looked considerably diminished since Asashoryu left Hakuho to hold the fort alone exactly two years ago. Of course, in terms of titles won, Hakuho (with 22) is the undisputed king. But in terms of numbers in the upper ranks, Europeans are making themselves more noticed. With the best of muscular Georgian Tochinoshin presumably yet to come, who knows how Europeanized the upper echelons of the banzuke may become?

Japan's power, at the moment, seems as diminished as it has ever been. Kisenosato, as many expected, grabbed the gauntlet of ozeki promotion with both meaty hands, exhibiting a more relaxed, efficient, sometimes brutal form of



*Gagamaru*

sumo which gets results – 11 wins to be precise. Kotoshogiku, on the other hand, continues to look out of his depth at Ozeki level – his final day match with Harumafuji (by which he gained a *kachi-koshi*) simply a standard ozeki farce. At the moment, he is beginning to manifest all the ills of a system which refuses to admit its own faults by promoting him too fast (out of mere convenience) and thus forcing itself to help him too much to stay there.

There was further disappointment for the Japanese on the final day when Tochiozan jousted with Gagamaru for the right to the



*Tochiozan*



*Ozeki Kisenosato*

Fighting Spirit Prize. He was easily defeated. The giant Georgian has developed a very jovial Japanese tone in his interviews and admitted that whereas he was nervous to face the big boys in November 2011, he definitely won't be so nervous next time. It also seems that the next ozeki will not be Japanese either. Kakuryu posted yet another double-digit score at the third rank with some powerful and agile belt-

sumo, and even earned his first competitive victory over Yokozuna Hakuho. Twelve wins in Osaka (a big ask, but not impossible) should see Kakuryu over the ozeki finishing line, leaving the sumo association with rather too many bodies at the second rank.

It is a situation which they have been expecting, it seems. They have made it very clear through the media – with those inimitable Japanese big hints – that they are actively seeking to promote someone to yokozuna to ease the ozeki congestion and – at the moment – it looks as though that somebody will be Baruto. It is very interesting that whenever NHK's commentators – tightly connected to sumo insiders – make strong predictions about something, it always seems to happen. They made two zany predictions about Kotoshogiku beating Hakuho (at a time when Hakuho was 27-1 up in their rivalry) and sure enough... he did! They bigged up Kisenosato's ozeki challenge in Fukuoka and sure enough he was promoted even without garnering the supposedly requisite 33 wins! And in this past basho, they started interviewing Hakuho about the possibility of a new yokozuna – something they hadn't done before. It seems, as ever, that Japan's national broadcasting company knows something that we don't.

Let that not be taken as a call to write off Hakuho, though. Far from it. He destroyed Baruto on



*Yokozuna Hakuho*

senshuraku and made a mockery of claims that the Estonian was moving into permanent ascendancy over him. Their duel will be a fascinating one for years to come. And sumo looks set to get more exciting. Remember, four years ago, when Baruto was hobbling around on a busted knee, some of us even laughed at the thought that he might become an ozeki – even though some fans passionately asserted that he would.

We would never have expected Kakuryu to rise so far, so quickly, and we would never have expected 25 wrestlers to be forced out, thus opening the door for Gagamaru and Takanoyama to enter makuuchi. As a bonus, the faltering Takamisakari – by far the most popular wrestler – is still in the ring, even if the man who symbolizes the Japanese spirit better than most, Tochinonada, no longer is. Let's hope the excitement continues into March.