

Hatsu Basho Summary

by Chris Gould

Before the seismic events of February 4th which rattled sumo to the foundations, the long-awaited retirement of legendary Ozeki Chiyotaikai meant that the January 2010 basho was about ozeki more than anyone else. In fact, since two Mongols topped the banzuke in 2007, every basho has been. Recent tournaments have clearly illustrated why sumo cannot be looked upon in the same light as western sports.

It is not the winners' scores which matter most. It is the image sumo projects to the Japanese people. Lest we forget (given that no Japanese has won the top division title for a record four years) sumo is still Japan's official national sport and must be seen to protect Japanese values, however much certain Mongols think otherwise. Therefore the Japanese must be seen to be good at it, particularly as they still benefit from government help and lengthy live slots on national TV.



Yokozuna Asashoryu

Only against this backdrop can we understand the pain caused to sumo by Chiyotaikai's retirement and the added responsibility placed on the remaining Japanese ozeki, the injured, weakening and beleaguered figures of Kaio and Kotomitsuki. Willed on by sponsors, fans, the sumo association, the Japanese public and the less scrupulous sides of their own persona, these two fading veterans, approaching 38th and 34th birthdays respectively, must evidently preserve their ranks at any cost.

Thus does Kotomitsuki have a massive rebuilding task on his hands when he takes to the dohyo in Osaka next month. The sweet-faced ozeki, winner of one makuuchi championship and favourite of Royal Princess Aiko, has suffered fluctuating form ever since being hospitalized due to sickness in the winter of 2007-8. Six defeats in his opening seven January bouts caused him to pull out of the Hatsu basho for the second year running, seemingly in no shape to compete at the highest level. Only through divine intervention will he avoid swiftly suffering the same fate as Chiyotaikai, who retired in January after losing his first three matches with a whimper. Having drummed up immense popularity through three yusho wins and a world-best 65 tournaments on sumo's second rung, the Japan Sumo Association clearly fears the impact of his departure, perhaps a lot more than it should do. After all, it can hardly be said that Chiyotaikai or Kotomitsuki were sorely missed during the January championship run-in.



Ozeki Kaio

For the vast majority of Japanese fans, Kaio's mere appearance on the dohyo at 37 and a half is cause for goggle-eyed adulation. Yet more wondrous, though, is his amazing ability to garner kachi-koshi in the most unlikely circumstances. Although his bouts against the rising stars show that he is a vastly weaker version of the force he once was, his scores have remained largely unchanged for three years.

Kaio's kachi-koshi results mostly follow the same pattern. He racks up wins against the rookies, has-beens and no-hopers in the first eight days, securing the magic eighth victory on Day 11 or 12 before losing heavily to the big guns. This time, though, the game plan went spectacularly to pot. Faced with crippled ex-ozeki Miyabiyama on day 1, Kaio blew his fairytale chance to equal the record for top-division wins (807) in front of the watching Japanese Emperor and suffered a lame oshidashi defeat.

He soon bounced back though. The next two days saw him break

Chiyonofuji's makuuchi win-record, poetically by defeating Chiyonofuji's protégé Chiyotaikai and enforcing the latter's retirement from sumo. However, days 4, 5 and 6 were disasters as Kaio looked ragged against the rising stars, crashing to defeats against Kotoshogiku, Baruto and Toyonoshima. With every ozeki and yokozuna still on his fixture list, kachi-koshi seemed impossible and Kaio's withdrawal inevitable. Hence the general shock when he turned up on Day 7, signalling his intent to see out the basho. Was it really the case that the man who never goes make-koshi over 15 days still saw some way of eking out eight victories in this most desperate situation? If so, he seemed deluded and ready to retire.



Chiyotaikai

But then, as ever with the fading Kaio, things took a dramatic and highly-implausible twist. His 7th-day opponent Tochinoshin seemed petrified of him and nervously succumbed within two seconds. On the following day Kakuryu, who has usually beat him of late, seemed hopelessly lethargic and was duly dispatched. Day 9 saw Kaio destroy the hapless Hokutoriki, who seems incapable of beating anyone above maegashira 10. But although the big ozeki had raced to 5-4,

Hakuho, Asashoryu, Kotooshu, Harumafuji and nemesis Kisenosato still had to be faced.

On day 10, Kaio flirted with the surreal by downing Harumafuji, the man who had beaten him in every tournament last year. It was one of only four defeats tasted by Harumafuji all January – his sumo was pretty formidable. Days 11 and 12 saw the pressure heat up as the form book regained control, Kaio being crushed onto his back by Kotooshu and then easily out-muscled by Asashoryu. The kachi koshi began to look impossible.

But then, on Day 13, credulity was stretched to the extremes. Kaio beat Hakuho. The invincible Hakuho. The man who had easily defeated him 17 times in a row. And the crippled ozeki didn't even rely on his favoured belt techniques, instead simply pushing the majestic Mongol out by oshi-dashi! It was Kaio's first victory over Hakuho since the final day of the March 2006, when defeat would have justly relegated him to the rank of sekiwake. Thus buoyed by his contender for upset of the decade, the veteran then flung down Kisenosato on Day 14 and crushed Kakizoe on senshuraku to salvage a kachi-koshi from the jaws of retirement. Having gone 2-4 against the supposed lesser foes of week one, Kaio went a jaw-dropping 7-2 against the alleged elite. It was one of the most bizarre and undeserved 9-6s ever witnessed.

The grim reality for defenders of national pride is that while the Japanese ozeki are scrapping for every cheap victory they can get, the Mongols are continuing to set records. January 2010 saw Asashoryu capture his 25th – and final – makuuchi yusho. Upon winning the Emperor's Cup, Asashoryu quipped that it was nice to win the yusho for Makiko Uchidate, his famed ferocious critic who was stepping down from the Yokozuna Deliberation

Council. Few could have imagined that within 11 days, Asashoryu would be retiring too. The man once nicknamed 'Genghis Khan' retires with one more championship than '70s legend Kitanoumi, and thus occupies third position on the all-time yusho-winner's list. However, much as one still admired Asashoryu's hand speed and sudden flashes of brilliance in January – the bout against Baruto on Day 11 the best example – the yusho regrettably did not go to the strongest man.

Hakuho smashed Asashoryu once again on Day 15 for the seventh senshuraku in a row, despite already knowing that he had blown his fourth successive Tokyo yusho pursuit. The man who set a record 86 victories from 90 bouts last year was first narrowly beaten by a genial Baruto sukuinage on day 7. Whereas losing to brilliance is excusable, his loss to Harumafuji on day 12 was simply unforgivable, allowing himself to be drawn into a hot-tempered boxing match which ended with the ozeki leaping to the side and nudging him out from behind.



Baruto vs Toyonoshima

The shikiri-naoshi was feisty, suggesting some kind of feud, and it was simply extraordinary that a yokozuna of Hakuho's elegance would succumb to rage and lose

concentration so spectacularly. This new petulant streak was also evident in his single-second demolition of Takekaze on day 11, by an Asashoryu-style harite at the tachi-ai – something he has not been seen doing before. Petulance aside, it was the inexcusable defeat to Kaio on day 13 which ensured that, as far as the yusho was concerned, the best man definitely didn't win.



Toyohibiki

Baruto was once again among the impressors in January, nailing his second consecutive 12-3 in Tokyo, felling three ozeki and gaining his first ever competitive win over a yokozuna. The latter event was so gleeful for him that he literally laughed all the way back to the dressing room. Eleven wins in Osaka should see him crowned Europe's second ozeki, and rightfully so. The Estonian giant has heroically overcome his knee problems of 2008 to add muscle to his 180-kilogram frame and become a fearsome fighting force. January 2010 saw him collect another Outstanding Performance Award too.

The Fighting Spirit gong went to maegashira 16 Toyohibiki, who responded to the threat of demotion to juryo by posting a magnificent runner-up score of 12-3, and returns to upper

maegashira for Osaka. This is magnificent news for a man whose career was almost ended early in 2009 by a detached retina. The third of the sansho, for Technique, was conferred upon Aminishiki, who outscored stablemate Harumafuji with a 12-3 at maegashira 6 and probably returns to komusubi. A possible opening day encounter with Hakuho in Osaka will be eagerly anticipated.

Chiyotaikai's retirement and the negative scores of komusubi Kakuryu and Kotoshogiku presumably mean that maegashira 1 Toyonoshima (8-7) will occupy sekiwake west in Osaka. The komusubi positions will probably go to Aminishiki and a Kisenosato who experienced five straight wins and five straight defeats before romping home with a 9-6. Lower down, Aran and Tosayutaka, rivals since jonokuchi, are in line to face the big guns in March, the latter for the first time. Dropping out of the top division will be Koryu (3-12) and Tochinonada (5-10), whose 35-year-old frame is dramatically weakening. Shotenro's 3-12 at maegashira 9 also places him heavily in relegation trouble. (This is the same Shotenro who defeated Hakuho in September!)

Excitingly, there will be three completely new faces in makuuchi in March. The first is 26-year-old Mongolian Tokusegawa, who has risen meteorically from makushita in less than a year. He will be joined by fellow makuuchi newbies Sagatsukasa, of Irumagawa beya, and handsome Okinoumi of Hakkaku beya, who were also in makushita last year. The juryo yusho this time went to giant Georgian Gagamaru (12-3), fighting in only his second tournament as a salaried wrestler.

He will be seeded at the very top of

juryo in Osaka. Ex-makuuchi regular Futeno, meanwhile, appears in freefall, posting a 4-11 at juryo 3 and parachuting perilously close to the unsalaried ranks. Leaving juryo will be debutant Myogiryu, who went kyujo after two days; ex-makuuchi man Jumonji; and hapless Hoshikaze. Replacing them will be makushita 1 Tokushinho, makushita 2 Kurosawa and makushita 3 Sadanofuji. The retirement of Chiyotaikai has created an extra sekitori place, to be filled by a fourth makushita promotee: Nakanishi.



Aminishiki

The makushita yusho was claimed by 22-year-old Sadanoumi, who hopes to become the latest Japanese star to emerge from Sakaigawa beya. Sandanme went to 24-year-old Hitachigo, jonidan was taken by 21-year-old Karatsuumi and jonokuchi surprisingly went to Minezaki-beya's Kozan, who was featured in the SFM heya peek of February 2008.

Join us again in two months' time to see if Goeido can make a successful homecoming to Osaka, as sumo shakily prepares for life without its biggest marketing asset: the formidable, and never to be forgotten, Yokozuna Asashoryu.