

Natsu Basho 2010 Review

by Chris Gould

At 5.15pm on the tournament's final day, a crippled 37-year-old ozeki grabbed his beanpole opponent's sash, and with remarkably little resistance, registered the 1000th victory of his 22-year sumo career. In defeating Kotooshu (9-6) by force-out, bulging 175-kilogram Kaio became only the second man ever to reach a four-figure sumo win tally, and is now only 45 victories off the all-time record set by Chiyonofuji in March 1990.

The man who recently received a longevity award from Japan's Prime Minister, and who stars in a coffee commercial featuring sports stars past their prime, continues to defy the odds as the oldest post-war ozeki, and celebrates his 38th birthday on the 14th day of the next tournament.



Ozeki Kaio

The final day headlines were shared by Kaio and Majestic Mongolian Yokozuna Hakuho, who at 194 centimetres and 160 kilograms seems to have the perfect sumo frame. In winning this tournament, his first Tokyo

triumph since September 2008, Hakuho extended his winning streak to 32 matches, and became only the sixth post-war yokozuna to win two consecutive tournaments without dropping a bout. His combined record over the past nine tournaments stands an astonishing 128 wins, 7 losses.

Many laughed when Hakuho claimed he could beat his own record for yearly wins, especially after falling three times in January. But come the final day in May, all talk was of how long he could continue his winning streak. Hakuho neglected to mention the subject in the post-tournament interview, stating that his goal was to equal the 22 championships held by "Great Heisei Yokozuna Takanohana" and then the 32 championships claimed by Taiho. He conspicuously failed to mention Asashoryu, whose tempestuous sumo existence the sumo association seems determined to expunge.



Yokozuna Hakuho

Life without Asashoryu is not easy for the sumo association, though. First week ticket sales for the May tournament were highly

disappointing, and only picked up at the tail end of the second week. One big difference was the number of schoolchildren parties on every day of the action, the result of a wise NSK attempt to try and attract more younger fans to a sport with an ageing support-base.

Among the success stories in May was Aran, the Russian bruiser who was still in mae-zumo just over three years ago. A 12-3 performance filled with raw strength and aggression earned him his first Fighting Spirit prize, and his first jun-yusho. After a demoralising 1-14 against the big guns last time, Aran will look for a marked improvement in Nagoya in July.



Aran

Another happy face was that of fellow European Tochinoshin, who looks to have become Georgia's second komusubi (after Kokkai) following an 8-7 in the upper-

maegashira ranks. The 194-centimetre muscle-bound Georgian demonstrated his fast-increasing strength by overcoming four ozeki in the first week, a feat which earned him the Outstanding Performance Prize. Interviewed after his final-day win, Tochinoshin looked delighted and vowed to continue his improvement in Nagoya – knowing, of course, that he has raised expectations to dangerous levels.



Tochinoshin

One man who collapsed in the face of expectation this time was Estonian behemoth Baruto, anxious to establish himself as the leading yokozuna candidate following his amazing 14-1 in Osaka. Baruto did not disappoint in the first week, winning all of his seven matches, but came a cropper against his nemesis Kakuryu on Day 8 and lost confidence rapidly. As was pointed out by NHK, in matches against the yokozuna and ozeki he only managed a sole victory – against Kaio. A final score of 10-5 was not what he was expecting, and his goals of winning a yusho and becoming a yokozuna

seem much further away than a month ago.



Ozeki Kotooshu

Never, it seems, has the foreign influence at the top of the banzuke been so strong, especially after the surprise and sudden transformation of Mongolian Hakuba, who looks set to join Tochinoshin at komusubi in July. The slim and red-nosed Mongolian, who spent the last two years struggling in lower juryo, felled two ozeki en route to a 10-5 which became the source of much consternation among NHK commentators. “Sooner or later, the Japanese wrestlers have to reduce the number of foreigners in sanyaku,” said NHK’s main announcer, Mr Yoshida, during the final day sanyaku ceremony. He also mentioned that of the 32 tournament winners’ portraits hanging in the Kokugikan, only one is of a Japanese wrestler: the now-retired Tochiazuma.

Alas, of the current Japanese hopefuls, no-one seems anywhere

near destined for the top. Kisenosato barely scraped an 8-7, Kotoshogiku lumbered to a 9-6, while the rising star of three years ago, Homasho, lost all of his bouts before retiring injured on the seventh day. Kotomitsuki overcame a barrage of tabloid attacks to post a scarcely-deserved 9-6, while Kaio also registered a 9-6 of dubious merit. Tochiozan, meanwhile, disappointed with a 7-8, which would have been kachikoshi had he not absent-mindedly put his foot over the rope when forcing out Kotooshu.

The surprise winner of last year’s May basho, muscular Mongolian Harumafuji, struggled with a knee problem this year and was lucky to finish with 9-6 after dropping his two opening bouts. Interestingly, he now appears totally jinxed by Kotoshogiku, who crushed him yet again on day one. His defeat of Baruto on Day 11, though, was sublime, his high speed manoeuvres reminiscent of legendary lightweight Mainoumi, now an NHK commentator.

Final words of praise must be offered to 33-year-old Bushuyama, who returns to makuuchi after collecting the juryo yusho, and Kaio’s Brazilian stablemate Kaisei, who scored 5-2 at the top of makushita and will become only Brazil’s fourth sekitori in July. We also wait for news of 37-year-old Kaiho, who finally lost his salaried rank after over a decade and is expected to announce his retirement.

Join us again to see if Hakuho can extend his winning streak by another 15 bouts in Nagoya, and whether one of the ozeki can break free of inhibitions and set sumo back upon the path to a yokozuna duopoly.