

What makes a “big” event?

by Chris Gould

Those who laid eyes upon the Kaio-Kotooshu pre-match build-up couldn't fail to “wakuwaku” (“boil over with excitement”). The atmosphere in the Kokugikan as the two goliaths took to the dohyo was incredible, at times spine-tingling, as Kaio prepared for his 1000th career win. In recent memory, only the cacophony surrounding the Asashoryu-Hakuho match in January 2008 contained anywhere near such

levels of excitement. But, as ever when emotions take over, the noise created was perhaps vastly bigger than what was actually at stake. An event is only big if the consequences of failure are huge. Kaio's match against Kotooshu did not satisfy this criterion.

Take this example. In 1990, the man who Kaio just emulated, muscular legend Chiyonofuji, took to the dohyo against fellow

muscle-man Kirishima in search of his 1000th win. Amid frenzied excitement he famously blew his moment of glory, losing to a spectacular Kirishima lift-out. Were this to have been his only chance to have registered 1000 wins, it would have been a monumental event. But of course it was not his only chance. Chiyonofuji simply came back the next day, performed a scoop-throw on Hananokuni and reached the milestone with minimum of fuss. No sumo wrestler would ever retire on 999 wins, even if crippled, so it is inevitable that they will get the 1000th win eventually, even if they have to try three, four, five times or more. Because a wrestler's 1000th win is inevitable, the match in which it comes about is not a big event.

Win totals are not sumo spectacles, but yusho certainly are. The last day of the 2007 Nagoya basho has probably been long forgotten but in retrospect marks one of the biggest events of the decade, if not the century. Not only did this particular senshuraku play host to Asashoryu's final match before becoming the first yokozuna to receive a two-tournament suspension. It played host to a match between Kotomitsuki and Kisenosato which had massive historical consequences.

In unexpectedly losing to a man who never goes down lightly, Kotomitsuki slipped to 13 wins and two losses and missed his great chance to take the makuuchi yusho race to a playoff with Asashoryu. Had he won the Kisenosato match, and taken advantage of Asashoryu's jangling nerves in a playoff, he would have



Ozeki Kaio

been the first Japanese to collect the top division championship for nine tournaments. With the exception of Kisesnosato in May 2009, no Japanese has even come close to winning the yusho since that day. As of June 2010, a staggering 26 tournaments have passed since the top prize in Japan's national sport was claimed by homegrown talent – easily a record, and a source of increasing despair in the Japanese media.

Judged against this context, Tochiazuma's crushing defeat of Asashoryu in January 2006, delivering him the makuuchi yusho, must go down as one of the biggest sumo moments of the last decade – the only time in 34 tournaments that a Japanese man won the top honours. Kaio's 1000 wins seem a paltry achievement when placed side-by-side, far less eventful than the day which saw him claim his fifth yusho in September 2004, the last Japanese before Tochiazuma to win the makuuchi championship.

Matches irrelevant to yusho races may also become huge events if their results stand little chance of being repeated for an eternity. Recently, Kakizoe defeated Iwakiyama for the first time ever, after losing their first 16 encounters – a noteworthy statistic by any standards. Kotomitsuki defeated Asashoryu several times at the outset of his career, but his victory in March 2008 was simply monumental – his first triumph over Asashoryu after 28 successive defeats! Alas, the dubious manner in which he gained that victory takes most of the gloss off the achievement. The same can be said for Kaio's last



Ozeki Kotomitsuki

two victories over Hakuho, which came nearly four years apart.

The lower divisions, of course, are filled with big events, like the 30-something makushita who has his first – and possible only – chance to break into juryo after 16 years in the sport. However, perhaps the most telling big events are the “firsts” – especially the first time a rikishi takes to the ring as an ozeki

or yokozuna. How many great yokozuna have lost their first match at the rank? Chiyonofuji, holder of more career wins than anyone, actually lost both his first match as an ozeki and as a yokozuna. Such “firsts” may mark incredibly rare occasions when even the sumo masters show chronic nervousness, and stand out for years – if not decades – to come.