

Osaka Basho: Bite-sized Makuuchi Review

by Chris Gould

The first Osaka basho in two years started on the assumption that the main story would be Baruto, and finished with all pre-basho predictions being proved spectacularly wrong. The giant Estonian's first tournament victory in January had injected newfound excitement into Japan's national sport, with sumo figures even hinting that as few as 12 wins in Osaka could see him become Europe's first yokozuna. It was not to be however.

An early loss to feisty Mongolian Kakuryu, who started out as the slimmest of bets for ozeki promotion (needing a staggering 12 wins in order to achieve it) set Baruto into panic mode. To his credit, he showed enough mettle to scrape through the next six days unscathed. But a painful yorikiri defeat to Kotooshu on Day 11 plus an even more futile effort against Kotoshogiku on Day 12 saw him down to three losses even with three days still to play. A 13th day victory over Harumafuji proved to be his last, as Kisenosato humiliated him on the belt on Day 14, and Hakuho simply destroyed him for the second time in a row in the tournament finale.

How Hakuho needed that final-day win, by the way. Until the final minutes of the basho, he had



Yokozuna Hakuho

actually been trailing Kakuryu, who had recovered from an early loss to Kisenosato to defeat him en route to posting 13 wins from his first 14. The most unlikely yusho for many a year seemed in the making. And yet, a plucky, skilful man from Saitama proved his undoing.

Goeido, born in Osaka, gave his local fans the biggest Japanese cheer for many a sumo year by upending Kakuryu with just minutes of the basho to go, allowing for the cool and collected Hakuho to force a playoff by outmanoeuvring Baruto. Come the playoff, Kakuryu looked beaten even during the warm-up, and Hakuho completed the most amazing of comebacks by overpowering him when it really



Goeido

mattered.

Kakuryu got his ozeki promotion, continuing the tradition of rikishi posting unusually large scores in the final basho before they reach ozeki. He showed some superb sumo along the way, especially against Kotooshu on Day 14. But the real credit, as ever, must go to Hakuho, who has now tied Takanohana's record for 22 yusho – and more than deservedly so. He went into the final day faced with the daunting prospect of needing to beat both giant Baruto and scintillating Kakuryu. He ended it having done just that!