

Six of the best?

by Chris Gould

The promotion of Kakuryu to ozeki means that there are now six strong men at sumo's second rank. Hordes of sumo fans seem convinced that this figure is too high, and would rather give some of these six "six of the best" for not trying hard enough. But why the anger over the number? If the wrestlers are actually performing well enough, they have to be entitled to the rank, don't they?

The opposition to six ozeki seems to come from numerous angles. In one camp are the historians, who note that ozeki indeed used to be the highest rank in sumo. In fact even today, some 255 years after sumo's professionalization, ozeki has been the official highest rank for nearly 15 years longer than yokozuna ever has been. One expert on the sumo forum has even stated that ozeki is still officially associated with the highest rank, as the present-day rank of yokozuna is actually an abbreviation of "yokozuna-ozeki." It is therefore the continual association of yokozuna with ozeki

that the top ranks of sumo continue to be referred to as "sanyaku" (top 3) today, even though there are four of them on paper. If ozeki is still associated with sumo's highest aspirations, (and the media coverage surrounding Kotoshogiku and Kisenosato clearly suggested that, for most Japanese, it is), little wonder that historians are furious about six men claiming the status. Swelling of numbers merely serves to devalue the rank, it can be thought.

In another camp are the anti-haguro. These people remember what happened the last time sumo found itself with six ozeki, in 1986. To avoid overcrowding on the second rung, the sumo association made the unprecedented step of promoting the young Kitao to yokozuna despite his never having won a title, simply to make the rankings chart look more tidy. Kitao changed his name to Futahaguro, combining the kanji of two legendary yokozuna Futabayama and Haguroyama. It

was perhaps the greatest misuse of sumo kanji ever. Tempestuous Futahaguro simply crumbled under the weight of yokozuna responsibility, proved persistently unable to win a title, and eventually ran away from his heya after an altercation with his stablemaster, effectively being dismissed from the sumo association in disgrace. In 2012, there are understandably fears that the sumo association may seek to promote either Harumafuji or Baruto too soon to reduce ozeki numbers, and that they too may prove undeserving yokozuna at this stage in their careers.

Perhaps the time has indeed come to make sumo more exciting and introduce a special ozeki playoff among the six (keeping the Sadogatake boys separate obviously). After a round-robin format, the top three could keep their ozeki status, and the bottom three could return to sekiwake! Perhaps that'll make them more hungry!



Ozeki Harumafuji, Kisenosato, Kotooshu and Kotoshogiku