

Nagoya Basho Summary

*Text by Lon Howard
Photos by Carolyn Todd*

Those who asked my buddy C.W. (conventional wisdom) to forecast the 2007 Nagoya basho can't really criticize the results. C.W. started by saying that Hakuho would be tired because of the festivities and social obligations cast upon new yokozuna. He added that the three ozeki wouldn't challenge for the yusho, but would all squeeze out kachi-koshi because of Hakuho's fatigue and because of the weakness in the lower sanyaku ranks. All that – he said – would allow yokozuka Asashoryu to return to the winner's circle after a two-basho absence. Finally, C.W. said that sekiwake Kotomitsuki would be a nervous wreck at the end of the basho, after seeking the 11 or 12 wins necessary to make ozeki.



Yokozuna Hakuho

True, true, true, true, and *definitely* true. And the best part was that C.W. knew when to shut up, because if he had gone on, he would've said that Kotomitsuki

would succumb to his nerves and blow his 'last shot' at ozeki, one more time. Good thinking there old buddy, because the sekiwake we affectionately call 'Mickey' first blasted and finally wended his way to a 13-2 surprise. In the big picture, the only thing he really 'blew' was the yusho on senshuraku. More on that later.

So how did Kotomitsuki do it this time, after fumbling all the other times? Since I can't divine the answer, I'll just surmise that he focused his way *through* the jitters, but not *around* them – how's that? He whaled and bullied his way through his first 10 opponents with the grave, lip-pouting intensity of someone studying a chess move that would decide someone's life. The grim stare he wore every day wasn't directed at his opponent, but just locked him in his own private solemn world. I remember thinking this guy is going to mentally wear himself out before the basho's over because this level of intensity is just not natural for him.

That corrosion started on day 11 against Asashoryu, when the fissures lurking inside his newborn stone face worked their way closer to the surface with every trip back to the shikiri-sen. By the time the two met, he was visibly chasing oxygen. Asashoryu then controlled every aspect of their match as he shifted at the tachiai to force both men into a hidari-yotsu position and, except for an unsuccessful maki-kai attempt, Kotomitsuki spent the rest of the 40-second encounter passively waiting for Asashoryu to take him down or out. After a few tries, Asa

finally finished him off with a sudden migi uwate-nage arm throw – his 27th consecutive conquest of the sekiwake.

Kotomitsuki rebounded nicely the following day against Chiyotai kai but still needed to beat M6 Homasho on day 13 – or get one



Kotomitsuki

more win somehow – to nail down his promotion, and on this day his façade vanished completely. He seemed confused about where to place himself on the shikiri-sen and called two matta before they actually clashed. His tachiai was slow and lunging, but he got away with it because Homasho was just as tense, and made like a statue. Kotomitsuki, being the stronger of the two, was able to work him to the edge and then over, finishing with a late Asashoryu-

like shove. The realization that he had finally achieved his goal was overwhelming, and he was seen holding back tears on the way to the shitaku-beya, and then shed them for real when he got there.

Now emotionally spent, on day 14, he struggled against M9 Tochinonada before winning while retreating, grimacing at himself after the match. Then on senshuraku, being tied with Asashoryu for the lead at 13-1, he was utterly turned off and tuned out, his face mellowed and eyes wandering all over the arena while waiting for his match against M6 Kisenosato. He got the better of the tachiai but with no steam left, he was pushed all around the dohyo before finally getting slapped down. He appeared crushed at his loss, but then recovered while hopefully waiting for Asashoryu to lose, which would force a playoff but, as expected, Asashoryu easily downed Hakuho to claim his 21st yusho.

But the numbers were there, and the string of 10, 12 and finally 13 wins in consecutive basho meant that Kotomitsuki had somehow conquered his demons, to become the first Japanese rikishi to be promoted to the rank of ozeki since Tochiazuma in January 2002. At 31 years and 3 months, he was also the oldest rikishi to be promoted to ozeki since the beginning of the six-basho-per-year system in 1958. Besides his ozeki promotion, he also took home the Kanto-sho Fighting Spirit prize and Gino-sho Technique prize. Despite how the basho ended, this is a monumental achievement for him, or for anyone in that position.

What about the future? Can he continue to yokozuna? Really, seeing the emotional toll this experience imposed on him, I can't imagine how he could endure it again, especially with two powerful yokozuna ahead of him, and seemingly incapable of solving his

Asashoryu riddle.

UPDATE: On August 1st, Asashoryu was suspended for two basho (Aki and Kyushu) after being seen playing in a charity soccer game in Mongolia. This, after he had submitted a request to be excused from the August jungyo because of a bad back. Asa's absence may have a calming effect on Kotomitsuki, at least going into the Aki basho, but since he has always been his own worst enemy, it may not matter in the long run.

As for Asashoryu, after inadvertently stepping out on day one against komusubi Aminishiki, he looked like his old dominating self again. Who knows what his physical or mental state will be like when (or if) he returns to the dohyo for the 2008 Hatsu basho? Hakuko seems to be the man to beat now but he'll have to re-establish momentum. He looked invincible for the first nine days but then won only two of his final six matches, and confirmed C.W.'s prophecy by announcing after the basho that yes, he was tired. His 11 wins don't raise eyebrows this time but in September, if he's out of the yusho hunt on day 14, the Shiranui dohyo-iri jinx talk will start in earnest.



Kaio

Ozeki Kaio cinched his kachi-koshi on day 11 against Homasho by twirling at the edge; and then appeared to catch a double bad break the next day against Hakuho, when the shimpan called a tori-naoshi in a bout he looked to have won. Having badly injured his thigh when the two fell off the dohyo, he had nothing in the re-match and was declared kyujo the next day, recording 8-5-2. Still, you can't feel too sorry about his result, as this basho provided further evidence that his career is now only in survival mode. In his 11 days on the dohyo, he displayed several overly creative tachiai and won many bouts by backing away and/or slapping down.

As for the other two ozeki, neither Chiyotakai nor Kotooshu seem capable of challenging for a yusho as both etched 9-6. Chiyotakai looked especially sluggish, losing to three non-sanyaku opponents. As for Kotooshu, he added two more henka to his growing bagful and had the full knee wrap back on for the entire basho. If his injured knee hasn't repaired itself by now, it probably never will. Although he's never suffered make-koshi as ozeki, I'm about ready to predict that he'll retire with no yusho (whenever that may be).

One thing that may be said with conviction about all three ozeki that participated in Nagoya is that none of them are capable of ascending to their rank anymore, even though they all can somehow hold onto it.

The only thing certain about the sanyaku ranks in Aki is that Aminishiki will be a sekiwake... no typo: Aminishiki will be a sekiwake! Before giving him no chance to hold on to komusubi, perhaps I should have first asked, "If not Aminishiki, then who?" With Kotomitsuki's promotion and Miyabiyama's slide, what's really in free-fall here are the sanyaku and upper maegashira ranks. Aminishiki's 8-7 record and upset



Aminishiki

of the yokozuna not only brought home another Shukun-sho Outstanding Performance prize, but will also promote him to Se, while the 7-8 performance by Tokitenku will demote him from komusubi. Since the only other kachi-koshi by any of the joi-jin was M1 Asasekiryu's 8-7, Ama's 7-8 make-koshi might actually be good enough for him to stay at Sw, with Asasekiryu taking one of the vacant komusubi slots. If not, then Asasekiryu will be the other sekiwake. Confused yet? The remaining komusubi spot will be taken by Kisenosato, whose senshuraku beating of Kotomitsuki nailed down an 11-4 'comeback of the basho' showing.

Homasho will get another crack at M1 as he started 9-1 and then dropped all his remaining bouts. It's obvious that he feels very out of his depth against sanyaku foes, losing to all four he faced, some badly. With that, unless Kisenosato can follow up in Aki, one must say that at this time, there are no new young hopes or new old hopes. All of those thought of in that way have so far been disappointments. Aside from the aforementioned Ama, Tokitenku, Homasho and Kisenosato, here's further depressing news from Nagoya: M1 Kotoshogiku 5-10, M2 Wakanosato 5-10, M3 Takekaze 4-11, M3 Roho 3-1-11 (left with back injury), M4 Toyonoshima 7-8 (still

limping on injured knee), M7 Tochiozan 4-6-5 (left with shoulder injury), M7 Futeno 5-10, M8 Ryuo 5-10, M9 Kokkai 6-9 and M12 Satoyama 2-13.

Maybe we *could* reach a little and call M8 Kakuryu a light hope in view of the 9-6 he assembled in Nagoya, but at this point I would be more inclined to just label him as a makuuchi keeper. He'll be at his highest rank in Aki, is steadily adding weight and has shown a wide-ranging skill-set. So at the tender age of 22, he does at least have an up side.

Miyabiyama though, appears to be a man with no more up sides, as the Blobster could not get his kachi-koshi at M5, and appears to have lost his fire. His 7-8 record here in such a weak joi-jin gathering does not bode well. It was somewhat depressing watching his tsukebito hold a picture of his recently deceased mother in the hanamichi for him during the shikiri-sen of his bouts, as he struggled his way through the basho. Now 30, he is still someone most are rooting for, and I hope he has another comeback left.

There is one new name on the horizon, that of M14 Toyohibiki, a young, burly bull-rushing shin-nyu-maku from Sakaigawa-beya. His 11-4 was impressive enough to share the Kanto-sho Fighting

Spirit prize with Kotomitsuki. Since he begins his tachiai from well behind the shikiri-sen and goes into it in a headlong run, he'll have to learn how to handle the many slick and slimy tachiai his future opponents will throw at him – surely they won't let him keep getting away with that. I'm not confident about a follow-up from him in Aki, especially at this early point in his career.

Another duo of note from Nagoya was the 'Out with the New' and 'In with the Old' show from M14 Baruto and M15 Kaiho. Back in makuuchi after his 14-1 juryo yusho in May, Baruto's injured knee collapsed on opening day against M13 Tosanoumi and he was done for the basho. In fact, he has only been able to show up for battle for a total of four days in his last three makuuchi basho. That means he's missed work 41 out of 45 days in sumo's corner office! It's said he's never learned how to fall properly because he rose through the ranks so fast.



Kaiho

Whatever the case, since he can't stay on the makuuchi dohyo and keeps re-injuring the same knee, his sumo career is now officially in jeopardy. As for Kaiho, he was the best 'feel-good' story we've had in some time, as he worked his way back into makuuchi after fracturing his ankle in the 2005

Nagoya basho. For a 121 kg lightweight to accomplish something like this at age 34 should be enough to keep anyone's heart in the game, regardless of the bad press sumo has had lately. Then, to reel off a 10-5 record in this return basho was astounding. Regardless, he was sent home sans san-sho, which didn't sit well with many.

So who's left? The no-surprise club includes M2 Dejima 5-10, M4 Takamisakari 3-12, M5 Tamanoshima 6-9, M9 Tochinonada 10-5, M10 twins Kasugao 7-8 and Hokutoriki 10-5, the M11 duo of Tokutsuumi 8-7 and Kitazakura 6-9, M12

any rate the ex-college yokozuna who has spent the better part of the past three years in the joi-jin ranks is almost certain to slide to juryo for the first time since he came to the top division four years ago. It will definitely be a tough ride down for him. I hope for his return.

Ultimately, there was only one upset in this basho that had any meaning, and that was when a lifeless Kotomitsuki succumbed to Kisenosato on senshuraku – so there is my Upset of the Basho this time. Asashoryu's surprising step-out against Aminishiki on day 1 was alarming, but Aminishiki didn't really do anything to

we might as well dub Aki the 'Clean Slate Basho' before it even begins. But then there's Kotomitsuki, right? OK, some would call this the chance of a lifetime for him, what with all his momentum and his nemesis conveniently absent. But if he thinks what he went through in Nagoya was nerve-wracking, what's it going to be like if he starts Aki with say, eight in a row? C.W. says he just can't keep it up, regardless of the competition, and of course I would never doubt my old pal.

Finally, by the time this finds its way online, of course we'll know more about the situation with Asashoryu. To be perfectly frank – at this moment – no one who *can* or *will* read this is in any position to know anything. I just want to say that I'm rooting for Asashoryu to successfully complete his probation period – and make no mistake about it, that's exactly what it is. At the end of last issue's Natsu Basho Summary, I alluded that we might be ready to find out if he was capable of handling hard times. I've wondered about that for a long time because he's never actually had any yet – sumo-wise. Boy, I had no idea how hard they would be. Be that as it may, I'll be altogether disappointed with him if he's out of sumo by the end of this year. Some have said that if he returns, he'll be somehow 'scarred' for the rest of his sumo career. Maybe... but if he does go on and then retires with 35 yusho, any scars that might be visible on that journey will be nothing compared to the ones that he'll deal with for the rest of his life if he just slips away.

But whatever happens, I intend to enjoy the Aki basho, especially since I'll get to see some of it live myself... not a front row seat, but a seat nonetheless. I'll miss Asashoryu for sure, but I hope it's only for a few months.



Yokozuna Asashoryu

Hakurozan 6-9, M13 boys Yoshikaze 6-9 and Tosanoumi 8-7, M15 Tamakasuga 8-7, M16 Hochiyama 6-9 and M17 Otsukasa 6-9.

The last name to be mentioned is NOT in the no-surprise club because M16 Kakizoe was expected to work himself back up the makuuchi banzuke after falling all the way from M3 due to his 0-12-3 record in Natsu. It was mentioned during this basho that he had right knee surgery following the Haru basho, but that event was unbeknownst to this reporter. At

achieve it, and it didn't change the yusho race either. There were one or two other important bouts, but they didn't produce any upsets.

So since C.W. has proven himself a worthy prognosticator, what's he got to say about the Aki basho? Well, about the only thing he's willing to throw out at this point is that there'll be no need for a "Please don't throw zabutons!" announcement, such as the one made on day 5 in Nagoya. With Asashoryu missing, Hakuho still without portfolio and not much of anything expected from anybody,