

Aki Basho Summary

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The Aki Basho, traditionally the party piece of the sumo calendar, has recently become renowned for memorable sumo moments. Among those, the senshuraku of 1989 and 1999 saw Onokuni and Wakanohana III become the only yokozuna to achieve make-koshi over fifteen days. A zensho yusho in 1994 marked the jump-start of Takanohana II's yokozuna promotion push; 1991 and 2001 saw two rank-outsiders from Sadogatake-Beya (Kotonishiki and Kotomitsuki) claim the makunouchi yusho, while 2005 saw a third Sadogatake man, Kotooshu, fall short of becoming Europe's first makunouchi yusho winner by one well-directed shove.

In 2007 though, with so many happenings off the dohyo – including spectators trying to get on it – the Aki Basho struggled to hold centre stage like many of its predecessors. Events on a Mongolian football pitch ensured the build-up to the tournament was dominated by someone who would not compete in it. The first week was overshadowed by a prime ministerial resignation; the second by the search for a successor. A crucial bout on Day 11 had the sting taken out of it by extraordinary events which culminated in Nishikido Oyakata wrenching a deluded spectator from the dohyo. Even the exciting end to the basho was eclipsed by a revival of the Tokitaizan story, and the subsequent firing of the oyakata from the Kyokai.

Behind the flurry of external activity, several rikishi had autumnal points to prove. Hakuho, as the NHK interviewer incessantly reminded us, was

'yokozuna hitori,' attracting increased attention for being alone at the top. Kotomitsuki, his bandages seemingly increasing by the basho, was the oldest shin-ozeki in sumo history. Kakizoe, having endured a turbulent summer, was forced to peer nervously at juryo from the position of maegashira 16.



Goeido

Goeido, seized upon by the jingoists as Japan's latest greatest hope, faced the makunouchi heat for the first time at the age of 20. Meanwhile, Baruto, a young makunouchi debutant himself in 2006, found himself dumped in juryo for the second time this year; a frustrating situation for someone of upper makunouchi

quality – and indeed for the no-hopers having to face him.

Hakuho's debut match as a lone yokozuna was an uncomfortable one which resulted in compatriot Ama swinging him down by the neck. Although Hakuho responded by winning the remainder of his bouts in week one, it was lightweight sekiwake Aminishiki who surprisingly topped the scorecard on nakabi, having polished off eight consecutive opponents. His blazing start was in stark contrast to that of ozeki Kaio, who withdrew on Day 6 after four losses from five bouts. Faced once more with chronic lower back trouble, the Tomozuna giant will need all of his determination to realise his dream of celebrating 20 years as an active sumotori in March 2008.

With two-thirds of the basho elapsed, the makunouchi yusho race had been narrowed down to six sumotori. Kakizoe, evidently worth more than his lowly rank, abandoned his title pursuit on Day 11 with defeat to an improved Yoshikaze, who went on to achieve ten wins and a bumper promotion. Takekaze, Aminishiki and that Chiyotakai mimicked Kakizoe in posting their third defeats on Day 11, the latter due to a disgraceful henka by Kotoshogiku. The crowd fully expected Hakuho to tie for the lead with Goeido in the day's final bout. However, plucky Toyonoshima – his Tokitsukaze toils seemingly cast aside – had other ideas, spinning the yokozuna off balance before shoving him into aghast audience members.

Goeido's phenomenal winning run

earned him some tougher matchups in the tournament homestretch and unfortunately left him with his first major makunouchi scars. Ama attracted criticism from NHK announcers for aggressively beating him by okuri-tsuri-otoshi on Day 12 while Chiyotaikai roughed him up considerably with an immaculate tsuppari on Day 13. In the meantime, Hakuho coolly swept aside Aminishiki and Kotomitsuki, thus crucially giving him 11 wins to Goeido's ten at the time of their penultimate-afternoon encounter. For all the goodwill shown to him by the crowd, I believed Goeido would be lucky to last three seconds against the silky-smooth yokozuna. In the event, he lasted four, allowing Hakuho to make sumo look easy in front of the watching Prince Naruhito, Princess Masako and Princess Aiko.

Aminishiki's second-week collapse coupled with meagre resistance from the ozeki ensured that the only possible final-day challenge to Hakuho could emanate from a maegashira 12 Kyokutenho. It was



Kyokutenho

an unlikely challenge at best. The baby-faced Mongol, relishing another stint in the lower ranks after suspension, required victory over Tamakasuga and a Hakuho defeat to force a playoff for the title. He did his best to settle the affair early, allowing Tamakasuga to dominate their match for long periods, before finally establishing a winning belt-grip and posting his 12th victory. While wrestlers of similar rank readied themselves for post-tournament celebrations, Kyokutenho remained in his black mawashi for the remainder of the afternoon, anxiously awaiting the result of Hakuho-Chiyotaikai. His wait, which included a long spell before a shitakubeya TV monitor, was ultimately fruitless. Chiyotaikai, suffering from a combination of injury and sickness, was in no mood to compromise his future earning power by overexerting himself and succumbed to Hakuho's thrusts in a matter of seconds.

Kyokutenho could at least console himself with the Fighting Spirit prize, predictably shared with Goeido, who bundled out Yoshikaze to finish the basho with 11 wins. Several rikishi staked claims for the Outstanding Performance prize, with sekiwake Asasekiryu particularly unlucky to miss out after felling three ozeki. Ultimately, the prize was awarded to the two conquerors of Hakuho, Ama and Toyonoshima, who also boasted ozeki scalps. With the closing days tarnished by numerous hikiwaza – Roho and Hakurozan in scintillating form – saddened judges preferred to let the Technique prize rest unclaimed. A final moment of comedy was reserved for the yusho presentation ceremony which, for the first time, took place on the same day the government elected a new leader. The Prime Minister's Cup, however, had to be signed off before the tournament and was presented in the name of departed PM Shinzo Abe. It was an

ignominious end to an ignominious premiership, with Abe's name being laughed at by an entire sumo arena on live television.

Kotomitsuki, never one to provide fireworks, was typically sturdy and dependable in his first basho as an ozeki, achieving a respectable ten wins through sheer hard graft. At 31, he isn't expected to set the world alight as an ozeki and appears focused on surviving a respectable couple of years in the position. Of particular worry was his capitulation to the ailing Dejima's charge on Day 10, which made him look as weak as superman with kryptonite around his neck. Kotomitsuki spent several minutes shaking his head in disappointment after that defeat, wondering whether his powers of strength, judgement and recovery had reached their limits. Even he will be happy with eights and nines in the year ahead.



Toyonoshima

His ozeki stablemate, Kotooshu, continued to disappoint in the Aki with a measly eight wins. One wonders if the large bandage on the Bulgarian's right knee is responsible for his lost appetite for yokozuna status. At present, he

remains fully content to do the bare minimum to keep rank, even at the scene of his most memorable sumo hour: an Aki Basho playoff with Asashoryu in 2005. Although Kotooshu is seven years younger than Kotomitsuki, it is genuinely questionable which of the two will depart sumo first. In his senshuraku match, Kotooshu fought with a lifelessness befitting a man who would rather be elsewhere. In resigning to an Aminishiki force-out, Kotooshu contributed to the most impressive image of the basho, that of a makunouchi lightweight outmuscling a foe far taller, far heavier and far more muscled.



New Tokitsukaze oyakata

Goeido and Yoshikaze were joined on the list of surprise packages by Korean Kasugao, whose ten victories – including a defeat of

Kotooshu – moved him ever closer to his first shots at the joi-jin. He will be joined in the uppermost reaches of maegashira by Miyabiyama, still unconvincingly seeking to regain the sekiwake status he lost in January. Another wrestler on the rise is Terao's protégé Homasho, whose eight wins should be enough for a first ever sanyaku grading. In terms of Japan's hopes, Homasho is the most reliable, already holding his own with the sekiwake and registering a morale-boosting victory over Kaio. Goeido will never rise higher than sekiwake; Kisenosato continues to struggle against higher-level opponents; Tochiozan went make-koshi once more due to second-week burnout syndrome; Kotoshogiku needs to avoid sanyaku batterings; Toyohibiki desperately needs more time to develop. In terms of past masters, Wakanosato had little to cheer other than a ginboshi gift from Kotooshu, while Dejima's surprise kachi-koshi at maegashira 4 puts him in an uncomfortably high banzuke position for the following tournament. Safety nets should be held at the ready.

Meanwhile, Tokitsuumi's 15th-day triumph over Tochionada proved to be his last in sumo. With the troubles at Tokitsukaze resulting in the oyakata's departure from the Sumo Association, 35-year-old Tokitsuumi assumed the Tokitsukaze reins himself on October 9th. Tokitsuumi's retirement may be excellent news for either Ryuo or Kitazakura, one of whom may be spared (re-)demotion to juryo as a consequence.

September's juryo division contained fewer surprises than makunouchi, with Baruto (13-2) winning the yusho at a canter for the third time in eighteen months (42 wins from the previous 45 juryo appearances must be some sort of sumo record). Only injury, it seems, is holding this strapping Estonian back from the upper

echelons of sumo's top division.

Juryo's big improver, as evinced by his 12th day demolition of Baruto, was Wakanoho. The 19-year-old Russian has bulked out considerably over the course of 2007, and his additional weight and strength has been supplemented by technical improvements. Ten wins at juryo 1 – pure fantasy earlier in the year – have handed him his first tilt at makunouchi in Kyushu, and some interesting match-ups against close friends Roho and Hakurozan. Most of juryo's lower rankers (Ryuhō and Tamarikido sorrowful exceptions) made their majorities, meaning that Kasugano-Beya's 20-year-old Georgian sensation, Tochinoshin, will probably endure another galling wait to enter the salaried ranks despite posting an impressive 5-2 at makushita 6.



Hoshizakura

The remaining four divisional yusho were all captured by perfect 7-0 scores, with sandanme's Tosayutaka being the only Japanese title-winner. Tosayutaka's success provided the thinnest of silver linings for the clouds gathering over Tokitsukaze-Beya. The makushita championship went to Mongolian



Tamawashi

Tamawashi of Kataonami-Beya,
while fellow countryman

Hoshizakura, of Hakkaku-Beya, claimed the jonidan title. The jonokuchi yusho fell to the 20-year-old South Korean Kinryuzan of Matsugane-Beya.

Overall, the basho went down as the crucial occasion on which sumo proved its entertainment value without the brilliance of yokozuna Asashoryu. As spectators departed the Kokugikan for the final time in 2007, I was surely not alone in wondering whether our next afternoon in the arena would be graced by the yokozuna's return. If the Kokugikan vending booths were indicative of wider developments,

such a return appears unlikely. Ever anxious to cling to past glories, the booths treated Aki onlookers to Tochiazuma bento boxes even though the ozeki was five months retired. Asashoryu's bento box, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen – despite his remaining an active sumotori. The official line was that space needed to be created for Kotomitsuki, whose newfound ozeki status entitled him to a bento meal. We wait with baited breath to see if sumo's greatest wrestler of the 21st century will ever win that space back.