

Nagoya Basho Summary

by Lon Howard

Since I missed seeing Days 2-9 of the Nagoya Basho due to a 'life happening', I can only hope the smoke and mirrors surrounding this report are tolerable, although the wonders of YouTube did help a little. That said, I don't think the dohyo activities of the lead actors need much embellishment. Yokozuna Hakuho – now fully recovered from his ankle injury – was as dominant in his zensho yusho performance as Asashoryu ever was; and since I remember that Tamanoshima once characterized Asashoryu's dominance as 'disgusting,' that's saying something.

The yusho race and other glamour topics began unraveling before the first musubi-no-ichiban. Maegashira 1 Aminishiki started it on shonichi with a carbon copy mauling of ozeki Kotooshu, effectively ending his tsunatori voyage while it was still parked at the pier. If one recalls, he delivered the ozeki's only loss in May by getting the jump at the tachiai and running him out. Comparing that tachiai with this one, the only difference was that in May, Aminishiki's hands were a little closer to the dohyo... Kotooshu has now lost six straight times to Aminishiki.

Two bouts later, Asashoryu made things even more interesting with a weakly showing against komusubi Toyonoshima, allowing himself to be twisted out by uwatenage, even as he was forcing Toyo to the edge. It was Toyonoshima's first win against the yokozuna in six tries.

Two days later, the squat komusubi obliterated any scant promotion hope still harbored for

Kotooshu, as he again maneuvered into a quick morozashi position and unleashed a mighty sukuinage beltless arm throw that dumped the ozeki in the middle of the circle. It was his fourth straight triumph over Kotooshu.



Toyonoshima - Mark Buckton

But it was maegashira 3 Tochinsonada who put the basho beyond repair on Day 5, as he outlasted Asashoryu in a match that confirmed that Asashoryu was in poor physical condition. The yokozuna had the veteran giant-killer on the ropes several times while denying Tochinsonada his favorite hidari yotsu grip, but simply didn't have the juice to finish the deal, and in fact ran out of juice at the end. With two losses on the books and Hakuho

calmly swatting all comers aside, Asashoryu pulled the plug and declared himself kyujo.

At that point, hardly anyone thought the yusho was in doubt. Sure, sekiwake Ama was also 5-0 and ozeki Kotomitsuki had a single loss but suspense was in short supply because of the way Hakuho was going. Sure enough, five days later, Ama had three losses and Kotomitsuki two, and by this time the basho sub-plots were the lead stories.

Curiously, none of those sub-plots involved ozeki, despite Kotomitsuki still being alive for the yusho. It was probably his Day 9 loss to the inept 1-7 maegashira 3, Futeno that caused us to ignore his presence on the leader board. The other ozeki were more or less pulling their weight so they weren't attracting vibes, positive or negative. Predictably, Kotomitsuki proved no match for Hakuho (oops, I actually typed in Asashoryu...) but still posted a fine 11-4, while the other three did their 9-6 (almost) duty. After Kotooshu's early tumble from relevance, the biggest ozeki story was that both Kaio, and new kadoban king Chiyotakai, both appear to be healthy enough to go on and on and on.

As for Kotooshu himself, it seemed that he entered the basho with all the expectations of a political candidate on his opponent's home turf. Reports surfaced that he had re-injured his right knee in practice, and his oyakata also admitted to some mental stiffening after discovering his shonichi opponent would be his nemesis, Aminishiki. It does seem that the condition of that injured

knee is his X-factor, but perhaps he should take a page from Aminishiki and Asasekiryu, both of whom have chronic knee conditions, but seem to have mastered the art of compensating for them, both physically and psychologically, to become most of what they could be, regardless.

Ama's second-half collapse spurred some suggestion that he may become another perennial sekiwake. Yes, his 10 wins disappointed those expecting an ozeki run, but his nine consecutive sanyaku appearances is no small accomplishment. That's not in Wakanosato's class yet, but better than Akinoshima and Kotonishiki, just to name a couple. I wasn't a believer before, but now I think he'll make it up there as he's still young – and growing, bit by bit – with better overall technique than any of those other men. His 4th gino-sho Technique Prize attests to that. His sekiwake counterpart, Kotoshogiku, unfortunately still seems to be suffering the effects of the knee injury he suffered this January, and will be a hiramaku in September with his 6-9.

After ten days, you had to dig down to the komusubi job site to find a story worth chewing on, the first being Toyonoshima. Already smartly outfitted with six wins, he sailed down the stretch with four more to claim his 2nd shukun sho Outstanding Performance Prize. And unlike his one prior stint at komusubi in May of last year (4-11 with one sanyaku win), this time he hoisted five sanyaku scalps, four of them in the yokozuna/ozeki camp. Based on recent offerings from the usual 'ozeki hope' suspects, you have to pitch him in there too.

Especially when you look at the other komusubi, Kisenosato, who was generally regarded as the leader of that pack. After impressive but grueling pre-basho preparations, he appeared to have left it all on the practice dohyo as

he was lethargic and powerless against the top-rankers at the outset, standing 3-7 after ten days and concluding at 6-9. Now back at square one in the ozeki hunt, he must be scratching his head at how to prepare for a basho.



Kisenosato - Carolyn Todd

To underscore how suspense-less the basho actually was, after Hakuho and Kotomitsuki, only four other men had double-digit win totals, all four with ten. With maegashira 5 Baruto – as one fan aptly put it – it seemed to be only a matter of time before he made sanyaku, and his 10 wins will place him on one of the vacant komusubi spots. He wasn't overly impressive, but with his size and brute strength, it was going to happen sometime. Now let's see how he does against all of the joi-jin, instead of only two of them. He will be joined again at komusubi by maegashira 2 Asasekiryu, who is now accorded joi-jin status, as he no longer struggles at those ranks. The other three 10 win men were maegashira 9 Kyokutenho, number 13 Toyohibiki and number 16 shin-nyu-maku Masatsukasa. Of the four makuuchi rookies, Masatsukasa was probably the one most under the radar but showed surprising overall technique for

one considered strictly a tsuki oshi rikishi. For Kyokutenho, no surprise here at this rank, and not really for Toyohibiki either, despite a four-basho slide after his grand 11-4 makuuchi entrance just one year ago. On his way out, he carried his second kanto sho Fighting Spirit Prize, and renewed hope for the future.

The only other real disappointment was that of maegashira 10 Kokkai, who was on his way back to sanyaku just two basho ago, having seemingly discovered the joy of conventional sumo. But after consecutive 3-12 and 5-10 showings, he now must simply prove that he's still makuuchi material. Various injury reports mention his right knee, back and neck as pain centers. Another major dive down the banzuke will be taken by maegashira 1 Wakanoho, who hit his first makuuchi wall with 4-11, but at this early stage, that's not a real disappointment. Remember that Kotooshu's first sanyaku outing produced the same numbers.

Hokutoriki (4-11) and Futeno (3-12) took their predictable tumbles from their maegashira 2 and 3 spots, and number 6 Tokitenku (7-8) will now have to re-earn his joi-jin card. Maegashira 4 Goeido's expected ascent to somewhere is still on hold with his 7-8 while number 8 Dejima (6-9) and number 12 Takekaze (7-8) continue their slow descents. Maegashira 11 Tamakasuga lost his first nine bouts, saying that nothing was wrong, but was declared kyujo for the final day only, finishing 3-12.

The rest of the mid-maegashira ranks did their usual re-shuffle with no one going anywhere they haven't been before. Besides Masatsukasa, two of the other three shin-nyu-maku will hang around (maegashira 12 Kimurayama at 7-8 and maegashira 16 Chiyohakuho at



Hakuho - Carolyn Todd

8-7), but maegashira 13 Koryu was lackluster at 3-12 and his prospects for return appear dim.

Besides Tamakasuga and Koryu, the only other rikishi sure to be in juryo in September is maegashira Tosanoumi (5-10), who goes down for the fourth time. Maegashira 15 Kakizoe (7-8) is on the bubble again.

Hakuho has now elevated himself to the point where only one person can challenge him when he's healthy, and we know who that is. He no longer feels that has to do any one thing in order to win, and so doesn't take chances. He just prevents his opponent from doing

what they want, and does everything in the flow of the match – nothing looks forced or contrived. A somewhat defensive style for one with the offensive dohyo-iri, but right now no one else has the power to overcome it. He also seems to know how to pace himself leading up to the basho – not over-practicing but peaking at the right time.

As for Asashoryu, the direct reason given for his kyujo was an elbow injury suffered in that last bout with Tochinsonada, but that's at the bottom of the pile of reasons given for his failure this basho. There were plenty of reports flowing from pre-basho keiko touting poor conditioning. His legs buckled on him several times during the basho, and it was obvious on Day 1 against Toyonoshima that he didn't trust his body, as he prematurely broke his fall with his hand, leading directly to his loss.

He now desperately needs another 14 or 15 win yusho to stop the battering he's taking about lack of preparation. He claims to be practicing on his trips to Mongolia between basho – and maybe so – but one thing's for sure, he's not



Asashoryu - Carolyn Todd

slamming into other sekitori while he's there, so how does he stay in sumo shape? And then there are the many business interests he has there; what part do they play in diverting his attention from sumo?

And finally, a 28-year old out-of-shape body doesn't recover quite the same as one that's 24 and honed by continual keiko. None of this talk will go away until he wins big again. As aware he must be of all this, it could be disastrous if he doesn't prepare for Aki in earnest, and then lays another egg, which would be the third in a row.

Hopefully, the wakeup call is already completed.