

The Ozeki Jobsite

by Lon Howard

In this first update of The Ozeki Jobsite since it was launched in the last issue, I thought I would focus primarily on our four current ozeki, and try to put their careers into some historical perspective.

If you were to ask most fans what kind of job Kotomitsuki has done in his seven ozeki basho, I'm guessing most would say, "Hmm, ok... yeah he's done ok." Well, taking only our grading system into account, he's done a lot better than that – he's been spectacular. In fact, with the two points he scored for his yusho challenge in Aki, he moved from 7th place up to 3rd, trailing only Kotokaze and Takanonami.

The grades for all ozeki studied so far are found [here](#), and the method for calculating the grades is found [here](#). Also, for a sense of the thought process used to construct the grading method, please refer to An Introduction to The Ozeki Jobsite, found [here](#).

But this is the only yusho he's challenged for as ozeki – how could that be spectacular, you could ask. Well, when you consider that it was only the third yusho challenge by an ozeki (not a future yokozuna) in the past two and a half years – including Kotooshu's bewildering yusho in May – that might start to explain it. In addition, he's scored points in four of those seven basho and since he's yet to record a make koshi, he hasn't lost any of those points back. This very much mirrors the beginning of Kotokaze's ozeki career, and since it's obvious that Kotomitsuki is now peaking while the other ozeki are erratic and/or aging, I'd have to say that he's poised to become

one of the all-time great ozeki – as long as he doesn't mess up by getting promoted.

If Kaio had retired in mid-2006, his grade would be roughly equal to Kotokaze's, but it keeps slipping because he has scored points in only five basho since Kyushu 2004, while losing points in six basho, with no yusho challenges. So far he's only down to 7th place, but the longer he just hangs on without winning at least 10 bouts, the further he'll fall. Regardless, there's no question that he's one of the greats, and so – as I pointed out in August – no grading or ranking system is perfect, it just gives you another reference point. Kotokaze's lofty grade was preserved when he lost his rank abruptly due to an injury at age 28 at a time when he was kadoban anyway, so comparing his grade with Kaio's isn't necessarily that telling.

Chiyotakai is currently ranked 8th, just below Kaio, but conversely, if he had retired in mid-2006, his rank would have been exactly the same as it is now, with just a slightly lower grade. This is because he's had at least 10 wins on four occasions during this span, as well as a yusho challenge, so he's been more competitive. Both of their grades have suffered due to their high make koshi rate (both roughly 25 per cent).

The only thing separating Kotooshu from being a basho away from a negative grade is his shocking yusho in the Natsu Basho, and that's even with a very modest make koshi rate of 12 per cent. In other words, outside of being a 203 cm Caucasian, so far he's one of the more forgettable

ozeki in history. His ozeki grade of .235 is 20th of the 32 ozeki studied so far.

In summing up our four ozeki, Kotomitsuki's body of work is just beginning, while Kotooshu's is a laborious work in progress. It's Kaio and Chiyotakai who are compelling. While it's fair to hold Kaio in higher regard than his grade reflects, it should be noted that Wakashimazu and Konishiki were also hangers-on for a considerable period at the end of their careers, as were nearly all ozeki to some extent. Kaio has just managed to persevere longer than the others while being uncompetitive.

Chiyotakai is more intriguing because while most see Kaio far more favorably, they still rank right next to each other. There's a lot to be said for him relative to Kaio because he's been ozeki longer and stayed more competitive, all with a decidedly slimmer skill-set.

Both of these ozeki have taken their share of potshots in recent years, but even with their defects, it's clear they have done their jobs far better than almost all who came before. In the larger picture, it's very telling to quantify just how meager most historical ozeki were in their direct impact on yusho. Except for a handful, the majority of ozeki careers were spent doing exactly what Kaio and Chiyotakai have done only recently – hang on. A sense of this can be gathered by examining the ozeki careers on The Ozeki Grade spreadsheet [here](#). Note the many -1 and 0 entries for the non-yokozuna, even notables such as Takanohana and Kiyokuni. It's

been said that these two suffered due to Asashoryu's dominance but I can't agree with this. They didn't suffer because of Asashoryu. They 'suffered' because they weren't yokozuna material – no more or less than all of the other competent ozeki who didn't have the goods to go all the way. That's not a bad thing at all, because in the end, all veteran ozeki able to defend their rank have shown they

could do one thing that only they and the yokozuna can do – and that's consistently achieve kachi koshi while fighting everyone at the top in virtually every basho. If you see anyone else doing that, you're looking at a future ozeki.

It's hard for me to know since I can't read the Japanese press, but I hope that Kaio and Chiyotai kai are receiving the public acclaim

they deserve now, while they are still giving their all on the dohyo, instead of having to wait until they retire for those stories to be written. During their careers, they have both raised the ozeki bar – something very few of them can say – and very much deserve to be held up as heroes in their own time.

The Yokozuna

<u>RANK</u>	<u>RIKISHI</u>	<u>GRADE</u>	<u>YAO*</u>	<u># OZEKI</u> <u>BASHO</u>	
1	Asashoryu	2.333	2002	3	
2	Chiyonofuji	2.333	1981	3	
3	Taiho	2.200	1961	5	
4	Takanohana	2.091	1993	11	
5	Kitanoumi	2.000	1974	3	
6	Wajima	2.000	1972	4	
7	Kashiwado	2.000	1960	7	
8	Wakanohana I	2.000	1956	10	
9	Takanosato	1.889	1982	9	
10	Kagamisato	1.833	1951	6	
11	Chiyonoyama	1.833	1949	6	
12	Hokutoumi	1.800	1986	5	
13	Tochinishiki	1.625	1953	8	
14	Hakuho	1.571	2007	7	
15	Musashimaru	1.515	1994	33	
16	Kitao	1.500	1986	4	Y Futahaguro
17	Wakamisugi	1.500	1977	8	Y Wakanohana II
18	Asahifuji	1.471	1987	17	
19	Asashio	1.364	1957	11	
20	Akebono	1.250	1992	4	
21	Onokuni	1.231	1985	13	
22	Yoshibayama	1.200	1951	10	
23	Wakanohana III	1.138	1993	29	
24	Sadanoyama	1.118	1962	17	
25	Tamanoshima	1.050	1966	20	Y Tamanoumi
26	Kitanofuji	0.857	1966	21	
27	Tochinoumi	0.800	1962	10	
28	Kotozakura	0.656	1967	32	
29	Mienoumi	0.333	1976	21	

* YAO: Year Attained Ozeki

The Ozeki

<u>RANK</u>	<u>RIKISHI</u>	<u>GRADE</u>	<u>YAO*</u>	<u># OZEKI BASHO</u>
1	Kotokaze	0.818	1981	22
2	Takanonami	0.784	1994	37
3	Kotomitsuki	0.714	2007	7
4	Wakashimazu	0.643	1983	28
5	Kirishima	0.625	1990	16
6	Konishiki	0.615	1987	39
7	Kaio	0.551	2000	49
8	Chiyotaikai	0.466	1999	58
9	Yutakayama	0.429	1963	35
10	Kiyokuni	0.393	1969	28
11	Hokutenyu	0.386	1983	44
12	Takanohana	0.360	1972	50
13	Kitabayama	0.355	1961	31
14	Tochihikari	0.318	1962	22
15	Ouchiya	0.286	1955	7
16	Tochiazuma	0.269	2002	26
17	Dejima	0.250	1999	12
18	Mitsuneyama	0.250	1953	8
19	Daikirin	0.240	1970	25
20	Kotooshu	0.235	2006	17
21	Wakahaguro	0.154	1959	13
22	Asashio	0.111	1983	36
23	Asahikuni	0.095	1976	21
24	Kotogahama	0.071	1958	28
25	Musoyama	-0.037	2000	27
26	Kaiketsu	-0.111	1975	9
27	Shionoumi	-0.200	1947	5
28	Masuiyama II	-0.286	1980	7
29	Maenoyama	-0.300	1970	10
30	Matsunobori	-0.467	1956	15
31	Miyabiyama	-0.500	2000	8
32	Daiju	-0.600	1973	5

* YAO: Year Attained Ozeki

Ozeki Grade Calculation

Points are awarded to each ozeki every basho, depending on what was accomplished (points in highest category only, of course):

Points	Category
-1	Make Koshi
0	Eight or Nine Wins
1	Ten or More Wins
2	Yusho Challenge
3	Yusho

There are four ways in which to

earn a yusho challenge in a basho:

1. Lose a kettei sen
2. At least 12 wins
3. 11 Wins and still in the yusho race on day 14
4. 10 Wins and still in the yusho race on day 15

Each ozeki is assigned a grade, but calculated this way: After awarding the ozeki his points for each basho (-1 to 3), just add all the points awarded during his

ozeki career (positive and negative) and divide the total by the number of his ozeki basho. The resulting grade is simply the average number of points awarded per ozeki basho, expressed in decimals.

So far, no ozeki who was never promoted to yokozuna has averaged 1 point per basho; even those who won multiple yusho with many yusho challenges.

An Introduction To The Ozeki Jobsite

A portion of the inspiration for this comes from David Shapiro, the occasional color sidekick on NHK's English language sumo telecast. In addition to providing the most voluminous analytical minutiae among the color guys and gals, David never fails to remind us at least twice in each of his appearances that the ozeki's job is to challenge yokozuna for the yusho.

Another oft-repeated job requirement for ozeki is that he should win at least 10 matches in a basho. After hearing this for many years I finally began to wonder if ozeki had ever been directly measured and compared in these terms, so I thought I'd give it a go.

In mulling over the criteria, I thought about the ozeki discussions we've had online. When we talk about the job ozeki are doing, we are usually interested in the here and now, and our memories are short. Regardless of how they performed when they were 'strong,' or when they weren't injured, or when their

competition was weaker, we demand that they do the job today; and if they don't, we let them hear about it. If they not only fall short of the ozeki mission but also register another kadoban, we make a big fuss over it: "Kadoban... again? Why doesn't he just retire?" With this in mind, I thought it was best to include every ozeki basho and not cherry-pick parts of a career.

I tried to make the measuring as simple as possible, awarding points to each ozeki every basho, depending on what they accomplished. Starting with the minimum 10-win requirement, one point was awarded if they won at least ten matches, which means that if they won eight or nine, zero points were awarded since they didn't really accomplish anything. Simple enough so far. But ten wins doesn't usually challenge for a yusho, so it follows that more than one point should be awarded if one does challenge. But then sometimes ozeki actually win yusho and of course an actual yusho should earn more points

than a yusho challenge. So that's what led to awarding one, two and three points respectively for 10 wins, a yusho challenge and an actual yusho.

Then there's the difference between kachi koshi and make koshi. That's a huge deal for ozeki since make koshi could lead to a loss of rank and prestige on a far greater scale than for any rikishi ranked below them, and the more kadoban an ozeki compiles, the larger the detraction from his overall body of work. So that led to the step of subtracting a point for a make koshi.

Not too complicated so far. Except for one thing, which I'm sure hasn't escaped your eye. Of course it is this: How does one qualify for the prized two points awarded for a yusho challenge, or to put it more bluntly - how do you tell when an ozeki has challenged for - but not won - a yusho?

The answer of course is similar to the Elevator Rules - with nothing to go on, I had to make something

up!

The most obvious way of challenging for a yusho is to lose a kettei sen. That's as close as one can get without actually winning but it doesn't happen very often so there should be other ways to record a challenge. It has always seemed to me that if an ozeki shows up for work on day 14 still in the hunt, he's leaning on the leaders in a serious way, and has 'done his job,' even if he then falls out of contention. I think I've even heard David say so.

So with that, the minimum criteria for an ozeki challenging for a yusho is to not be eliminated from yusho contention when day 14 action begins. That sounds very reasonable, except for one thing. Were this applied exclusively, it's possible that an imposing 12-win ozeki performance would not earn the two points for a challenge. As a practical matter, if this has ever actually happened, it's been infrequent enough to be inconsequential; so I thought it both simple and eminently fair that two points for a challenge be automatically earned when an ozeki records 12 wins.

The thing that still bothered me was the fact that the minimum of 10 wins could earn not only one point, but two; so I decided to raise the bar for a 10-win showing by requiring that the ozeki still be in the yusho race on senshuraku, instead of on day 14.

So with this, the yusho challenge criterion actually shakes out into four categories:

1. Lose a kettei sen
2. At least 12 wins
3. 11 Wins and still in the yusho race on day 14
4. 10 Wins and still in the yusho race on day 15

I'm still a little itchy about awarding the two points for a ten win performance, but in the end I felt that... well, if you're in the hunt you're in the hunt. It's only happened nine times, going back to 1949.

Each ozeki is assigned a grade, calculated this way: After awarding the ozeki his points for each basho (-1 to 3), just add all his numbers (positive and negative) and divide the total by the number of his ozeki basho. The resulting grade is simply the average number of points awarded per ozeki basho, expressed in decimals.

I thought about possibly accounting for longevity in some way but decided to just list the raw grade; and include the number of basho alongside so that each person can write in their own asterisk if they wish.

In constructing the Excel database spreadsheet, I color coded the cells containing the numeral '2' for the four separate categories of a yusho challenge, as well as the cell containing the numeral '3' for an actual yusho. It's not just for informational purposes, but it also makes it easier to quickly identify which ozeki most often won or challenged for yusho. In addition, it allows for easy recognition of those era that had a greater or

smaller degree of ozeki excellence. The legend for the color codes is near the top, at the very beginning of the spreadsheet.

Since I had to dig out and interpret the data, basho by basho, I won't swear that it's mistake-free, but I will say that the number of errors would not be great enough to move anyone up or down the list more than a couple places. Any errors that do exist would most likely relate to the lavender-colored numeral '2' cells (11-win challenge), or to the absence of them. I will periodically go back through the spreadsheet to check for any errors and report them when/if I find them.

The grades of the current ozeki will be updated with each future issue, and incorporated into the overall listing(s). Also, I'll go a little farther back in time until reaching a point that makes further comparisons silly due to a limited number of basho and/or number of bouts per basho. I'll also try to glean a few items of interest from the spreadsheet each time, such as Chiyonoyama being the last (and possibly only?) ozeki to win two consecutive yusho and not be promoted (he eventually was promoted four basho later).

I'll be the first to admit that this isn't a perfect system but without something from the NSK that defines or even suggests what a yusho challenge is, I'm going to go with it. I'm also open to your comments as well, so don't be shy.