

Kyushu Basho Summary

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Photos by Chris Gould*

Since I used the word serendipitous in the September summary, it's resting for now, even though it succinctly describes the key outcomes of the Kyushu Basho. But I think I have found a suitable substitute in "Lovely." That's because the melody for "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" started playing in my head around day 11 and is still going.

The events leading to "Lovely" began to unfold around day 4, when ozeki Kaio announced kyujo due to a painful calf-injury suffered during pre-basho keiko – and a battered elbow incurred when falling to a crushing defeat against Wakanosato. As often happens with Kaio, any kyujo induces a new round of intai rumors; but now they coincided with ozeki hopeful Ama blowing his golden opportunity for promotion by dropping his day 3 and 4 bouts against a maegashira and shin-komusubi, with all remaining sanyaku – including the yokozuna – still on his plate.



Ama



Kisenosato vs Baruto

Needing 11 or 12 wins to go up, his chances seemed bleak. Add to that yokozuna Hakuho's bumbling loss to Aminishiki on the opening day plus two more narrow escapes after that, and this basho seemed as appealing as cold, toasted mochi, especially with the other yokozuna, Asashoryu, absent through kyujo again. As if the melancholia needed a capper, barely 3,000 spectators were showing up each day in the Fukuoka Kokusai Center, despite numerous amenities added to make them more comfortable.

With Kaio gone and Ama floundering, ozeki fortunes got bleaker as Kotooshu wandered into day 10 with only three wins; and while Kotomitsuki and Chiyotakai were 6-3, neither of

these three had yet to face each other or Hakuho. One wondered just how many kadoban ozeki there might be in January.

But while the supporting cast struggled, the headliners sped back onto their game. Hakuho did not exactly sail but won, while Ama became reborn as soon as Kaio made his exit, which was lovely in retrospect. They both avoided further losses and after 11 days, it was Hakuho at 10-1 followed by Ama at 9-2. (Maegashira 7 Miyabiyama was also 9-2, but... you know...) With Hakuho and Ama scheduled to face each other the next day, it was about here that I started to hear the music play.

Had Ama lost to Hakuho, his

promotion prospects would have remained iffy and the yusho would have appeared all-but-decided – but were he to upset the yokozuna, those prospects would mushroom and the yusho race would be tied. And wouldn't that be lovely? Lovely it was, as Ama smothered Hakuho at the tachiai and secured a quick morozashi grip, spilling him immediately with a migi-shitatenage (right inside belt throw), leaving them both at 10-2.

Now if only those three remaining ozeki could somehow come through unscathed. Unbelievably, there was a glimmer of hope, as Kotomitsuki had surged to 9-3; while Kotooshu had somehow strung three wins, leaving him at 6-6 and Chiyotakai at 7-5. But Chiyotakai had to go through Kotomitsuki and both he and Kotooshu had yet to face Hakuho. Finally, Chiyo and 'Oosh' would meet on senshuraku and would have to avoid entering that day at 7-7 for both to elude kadoban. And even if that worked out, the 7-7 ozeki must win that senshuraku match. A nice little Rubik's Cube with three days to go, but doable with a pencil – and if done, wouldn't it be lovely?



Yokozuna Hakuho

I've never heard this expression but maybe I'll start one: "If you can do it with a pencil, you can do it on the dohyo."

On senshuraku, Kotomitsuki was still at nine wins, having lost to both Chiyotakai and Ama, leaving 8-6 Chiyo facing 7-7 Kotooshu; while the only thing obstructing a kettei-sen between an ozeki-in-waiting and the yokozuna was sekiwake Baruto and the suddenly hapless Kotomitsuki, respectively.

Kotooshu, check; Ama, check, Hakuho, check. Lovely, just lovely!

So the 13-2 Ama and Hakuho had their kettei-sen. Some have called it one of the great yotsu-zumo bouts. Sorry, but it was far from that. Ama had a great tachiai but couldn't get the quick win as on day 12. Instead, he let Hakuho get his left hand inside on the front of his mawashi and played 80 seconds of defense after that, finally succumbing to a Chiyonofuji-esque hidari-uwatenage (left overarm belt throw). Although he never really challenged Hakuho in the bout, both men appeared to have nothing left when it was over, which charged up the viewers and made the match seem more competitive than it really was. That said, it was nearly one-and-a-half minutes of great intensity, and left everyone believing that it's only a matter of time before Ama begins winning yusho.

Of course, as we now know, Ama won't EVER win yusho because he is now Harumafuji, accepting the new name chosen for him by his shisho, Isegahama Oyakata – the former yokozuna, Asahifuji. As for Hakuho, it was his fourth yusho of the year, and ninth overall.

Only one of the remaining sanyaku did not survive – that was GJH (Great Japanese Hope) Goeido, who endured the procedural shin komusubi initiation at 5-10. After

upsetting Ama on day 4 for his first win, he didn't win again until day 11. It was probably just an education, but now he has to come back strong to quell fears he could be the next Futeno.

Baruto (9-6) will slide from west to east to take Ama's sekiwake slot, downing two ozeki along the way. Maybe he's gradually becoming scary, now that he's learned how to manage his injured knee. The remaining sanyaku positions could be occupied by komusubi Aminishiki (8-7), maegashira 1 Toyonoshima (9-6), maegashira 3 Kotoshogiku (9-6) or maegashira 4 Kisenosato (11-4). There could be three komusubi or even three sekiwake (but not both).



Miyabi-yama

The bolt from the blue in Kyushu came from perennial makuuchi underling Yoshikaze (11-4), who didn't fall out of yusho contention until he lost to Kotoshogiku on senshuraku. Of course he said he wasn't thinking about the yusho, but the new opponents he'll face in January after a sizable promotion from maegashira 12 will give him plenty to think about. The reasons given for his emergence generally revolve around his frantic tsuppari now becoming more 'focused,' and – perhaps – the frenzied backing of his hometown fans from

Fukuoka.

After his 9-2 start, Miyabiyama predictably skidded home from there but his 10 wins will be enough to make him upper maegashira again, along with maegashira 6 Kyokutenho and number 8 Takekaze (9-6). Maegashira 14 Takamisakari won't be a joijin but his 10 wins will salvage his makuuchi career for now and keep the kensho flowing. The other nine-win maegashira were number 11 Kokkai and the bottom-rung number 16s Tosanoumi and Chiyohakuho.



Bushuyama

Both maegashira 10 shin nyumaku were pleasant surprises with their 8-7 kachi koshi, especially Bushuyama, who is the fourth oldest shin nyumaku in history. The Russian Aran showed surprising technique for one with only 11 hon-basho under his belt, although at this stage, hataikomi appears to be a constant first option.

Even with his nine wins, Kokkai was a disappointment, having now completely abandoned the straight-ahead yotsu-zumo that returned him to the brink of sanyaku just six months ago, and returning to his old chaotic self, making up everything on the fly. Whether that's due to injury, I can't say; but he has changed his style so many times that the only skill he's honed is unpredictability.

The biggest disappointment record-wise was the 7-8 posted by former GJH Homasho, who was clearly hobbled by his surgically fixed left wrist that caused him to miss all of the Aki Basho. Still, it may have been enough to secure the last makuuchi spot for Hatsu, but it's not a certainty.

Maegashira 9 Tokitenku put himself on an inauspicious leader board, becoming the fourth rikishi in history to post six consecutive make koshi in a calendar year, alternating six- and seven-win basho, beginning in January. Amazingly, he still has room on the banzuke to add more.



Tokitenku

The maegashira posting the fewest wins were number 4 Tochinoshin (3-12) and number 14 Kitataiki (2-13). The latter's left knee remains severely injured and Tochinoshin was simply out of his depth. Both will bounce back, I believe.

Speaking of disappointments, what may be the biggest of all surrounding the Kyushu Basho was that maegashira 2 Toyohibiki was kyujo, having had surgery on

October 31st for a detached retina. This is a career-threatening injury, and it's not yet known if he will even be medically cleared to resume sumo. Naturally, everyone wishes him the best. Maegashira 6 Kakuryu and number 12 Kasuganishiki also couldn't complete the basho due to injury, but Kakuryu's 5 wins will keep him in the top division.

No one else really stood out, but keep your eye on Dejima. Beginning 6-0, he easily lost all of his remaining bouts while showing no signs of a new injury. His well-chronicled bum legs could now be his last legs.



Ozeki Kaio

In the last basho summary, I mentioned that new rijicho Musashigawa's blunt venture to get tough with the two hands down tachiai would be forgotten in about a year. After watching repeated violations of the mandate during Kyushu with no intervention, I think I'll revise that to three basho. A few matches were stopped several times but they appear to have been selected at random. The shimpan have figured out

where the fans want to go, and they are rapidly falling in line. I would think the tachiai behavior at the Haru Basho will be indistinguishable from that of 2007; and that the new emphasis will no longer be discussed, either publicly or privately.

Now that the ozeki ranks are

revitalized with the ascension of Harumafuji, the focus in January will be on the missing – but not forgotten – yokozuna. After three consecutive kyujo and an endless torrent of negative press, he will enter Hatsu under more pressure to succeed than perhaps any yokozuna in history. Or perhaps it's we pundits who are fabricating

pressure to build drama for our own devices. For the most part, Asashoryu himself has seemed oblivious to the customary emotional weight of his position; but one thing is certain, regardless of how or what he feels, it's hard to imagine that the outcome will not be a watershed moment of some kind.