

Hatsu Basho Summary

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Pictures by Chris Gould*

At least the pundits got a couple of things right about the Hatsu Basho: that yokozuna Asashoryu would be the center of attention if he decided to enter, and that this would be a turning point in his career. Beyond that the entire lot of us were speaking babble.

How could we have got it so wrong? We thought Asashoryu was a mere enigmatic legend slightly beyond our comprehension, but in January we found that he has moved beyond that and is now simply indescribable – something like the reference point for the beginning of the universe.

After failing to finish three straight basho – missing the last one altogether – and getting pounded in pre-basho keiko by yokozuna counterpart Hakuho, there was general agreement that he should sit the basho out and allow his debilitated left elbow to further heal, since he continued to favor it both on and off the training dohyo. It was predominantly assumed that a poor performance in Hatsu would mean the end of his career – a forced retirement if necessary. By entering this basho, he was risking a sorrowful end to an epic journey.

About the time he finally announced he would enter, there were media reports that at times he slept with an electrical stimulus attached to his elbow, and other times with acupuncture needles stuck there. His harshest critics said he had no heart left for sumo while the media goaded him daily, perhaps stockpiling some print worthy red meat to be flaunted when his anticipated-retirement

was later announced. And then there was a death threat deemed credible enough for the arrest of the perpetrator. We looked and saw a physically crippled anti-hero being assailed from everywhere, and even those hopeful for him predicted the end. Finally, his public demeanor suggested that he was himself dubious about his own prospects.



Yokozuna Asashoryu

The first few days of the basho confirmed everyone's fears (or hopes, as the case may have been), as there were a series of narrow escapes; an eventual collapse seemed inevitable. But to escape is also to win, and as the escapes mounted, some said the speed was back but not the power while others said the reverse; some said his ring sense was rusty while others claimed that that was what was saving him. Some said he was favoring his elbow while others said the opposite. By about day 10 though, everyone was in agreement: there were no more escapes, just total domination.

Asashoryu was back in his own skin, pummeling his foes with post-bout extra shoves and wild swipes in the air, and some 'what was that all about?' stink eyes at his vanquished rivals.

The throngs of fans in the sold-out Ryogoku Kokugikan were literally 'buying in' to Asashoryu's return to glory with a raucous energy that had been sorely missed – some with their support and some with their censure, but there they were. Among sumo's power brokers, there were few complaints with behavioral issues – at worst, a grudging acceptance among some oyakata that if sumo was to thrive in these trying times, then the good was worth the bad.

But the exuberance surrounding Asashoryu's return would not have lasted had Hakuho been unable to challenge him (a situation never likely to occur). In fact, in the first week while 'Ryu' was finding his way, it was Hakuho who was large and in charge. But from day 10 on, the roles were reversed, with Hakuho being dumped by new ozeki Harumafuji (the former 'Ama') and appearing vulnerable after that, despite avoiding further losses.

So the iffy Hakuho took his 13-1 record into senshuraku, needing two wins over the undefeated and now rolling Asashoryu to claim his fourth consecutive yusho. Although the fans got the kettei-sen they wanted, the actual bouts between the two were a bit of a downer. In the musubi-no-ichiban, Asashoryu was smothered by a morozashi at the tachiai and powered directly out, later asserting he thought it was a

matta. But he got it right in the kettei-sen, quickly frustrating Hakuho by getting a firm left-inside grip and blocking the younger man's own left hand from getting to the mawashi. From there he used superior leverage to simply push Hakuho toward the edge and then gently lift him out. As in the first bout, there was little drama and no contest, but the fans still clamored, as Asashoryu later accepted his 23rd Emperor's Cup while gleefully reminding them what they already knew: "Asashoryu is back!"



Yokozuna Hakuho

Beyond that, the gap between the two yokozuna and everyone else was never more stark, and as usual, the ozeki offered scant excitement or hope for the future. Harumafuji established a new standard for consecutive losses at the start of an ozeki career: four. Apparently suffering from a large case of nerves, the slim one finally righted from a 1-5 start to get his kachi-koshi on day 14, but his senshuraku loss to sekiwake Baruto was a palpable example of why his yokozuna hopes are just as slim – he gets pushed around far too often to generate any real momentum toward the top. Kaio and Chiyotakai both got off the mark well and reached seven wins on day 11, but then struggled and ended with matching 8-7s.

Chiyotakai eluded kadoban on senshuraku against maegashira 3 Goeido, while the already kadoban Kaio avoided major late drama by locking up his kachi-koshi on day 12 and then limping home.



Goeido

Ozeki Kotomitsuki had no pre-basho keiko due to a bad case of gout, which he may have carried into the basho, displaying neither instincts nor energy. He persevered with just two wins through 11 days and then went on kyujo, suffering his first make koshi as ozeki. As for Kotooshu, he showed signs of the good form displayed last May and the bad before and after. It all came out to 10-5, and so we continue the three-year-old refrain, "Well, he's still young..."

Baruto solidified his hold on sekiwake at 9-6, downing four ozeki along the way, although he did have a few early escape wins of his own. On day 14, he showed how dire the prospects might be for his opponents, as he spurned his predictable soft, reaching tachiai and went straight after maegashira 2 Miyabiyama with a deadly tsuppari attack and beat the ex-ozeki at his own game. If he continues to vary his attack like this, it will soon get very crowded in the ozeki ranks unless someone up there retires. He'll probably be

joined at sekiwake by komusubi Kisenosato (8-7), who continues to look like a disappointment, even as he moves up.

Both of the remaining sanyaku men departed with kyujo after suffering injuries. Sekiwake Aminishiki re-injured his ever ailing knee on day 8 against Asashoryu while komusubi Toyonoshima was kotenage'd by Kaio on day 7, resulting in what is apparently severe ligament damage. His status for Haru is unknown.

Although Kyokutenho has always been a frequent joi-jin, his 9-6 showing at maegashira 1 was a genuine shock, which will send him to sanyaku for the first time in nearly three years. Joining him will be Goeido, who appeared to cross a threshold in his development with 10-5. His tachiai was sharper than ever before and was probably why he was given the Gino-sho (Technique prize). Once again, big things are expected from him.



Kyokutenho

As often happens, there were many make-koshi in the upper and middle maegashira ranks, so those few that did do well will be kicked far up the banzuke – most notably no. 7 Hokutoriki and no. 8 Kakuryu (both 9-6), followed by

no. 10 Tokitenku (9-6) and no. 12 Tochiozan (10-5). With that, Tokitenku stopped his six-basho make koshi streak, though looking most unimpressive.

As for Tochiozan, he continued his knack for thrashing the division cellar-dwellers but being makushita-like when facing the rest. Maegashira 15 Tamanoshima and no. 16 Homasho halted their juryo-bound slides with brawny 11-4 presentations, with Homasho earning the Kanto-sho (Fighting Spirit prize). He still had a heavy wrap on his surgically-fixed left wrist but appeared to have full use of it.



Homasho

The man-mountain makuuchi newcomer, 248 kg Yamamotoyama, eked out an 8-7 at no. 15, but said he was physically spent at the end. Although agile for his size, he's

still relatively slow and too often wins by being reactive and just too big for others to move. He'll need a larger tool kit as he moves up, as well as more conditioning. Maegashira 6 Aran suffered his first ozumo make-koshi at 6-9 while over-relying on sidestepping and pulling; generally showing wussy tachiai even when moving forward. Perhaps Goeido can explain to him what he has apparently just learned.



Ozeki Harumafuji

Two promising but injury-riddled youngsters will have to rebound from juryo. Maegashira 14 Toyohibiki (5-10) was keiko-deprived due to surgery for a detached retina and showed it, while his no. 14 counterpart Masatsukasa (4-11) was just hurting too bad to compete. Also certain to fall out of makuuchi are no. 6 Bushuyama (2-13) and no. 13 Koryu (5-10). Everyone else will

stay and re-shuffle.

After the basho, Asashoryu returned to Mongolia for a breather, and after he left, both he and his shisho, Takasago Oyakata, received a public dressing down from Musashigawa Rijicho; this for the yokozuna's excessive display of elation on the dohyo just after his yusho clinching win. According to translated accounts, the Rijicho said 'bad things will happen' if the behavior continues.

More will be known by the time this is read, but it's hard to imagine the Rijicho, Rijikai, YDC or any other authority pressing to remove him from the dohyo based solely on this 'new development,' just as fans and viewers are now being re-energized.

But if there's one thing we know about Asashoryu, and all that surrounds him, it's that he's an indefinable, unpredictable, living mythical figure. His career has been a continuing melodrama of bizarre and bewildering events, reminiscent of Muhammad Ali. He has thumbed his nose at men dressed in mawashi, black Shinto hats and black kimono, and those in business suits; and so far has left them all shaking their fingers and heads, and finally accepting him on his own terms – not theirs. He may not be invincible nor have the final say about his future; but we have finally learned that it's a mistake to predict that future using conventional models. All we can do is wait and watch in wonder.