

Natsu Basho Summary

by Chris Gould

Harumafuji's spectacular playoff win ensured that the Natsu basho bolstered its recent reputation for producing ozeki winners. Few sumo fans will quickly forget Kotooshu's yusho triumph of last year, however much the underperforming Bulgarian seems to want the contrary. In 2006 and 2007, of course, the tournament belonged to Harumafuji's vanquished playoff foe, Hakuho, the first triumph coming on his ozeki debut, the latter coming on his ozeki swansong and earning him promotion to yokozuna.



Yokozuna Hakuho

This time, though, the hat-trick seemed destined to elude Hakuho. It was not that he put many feet wrong, least of all when leg-tripping Harumafuji. Rather, Harumafuji simply exuded confidence from start to finish, his expert-beltwork in a succession of matches suggesting that only fools would bet against this Spring Horse. That expert belt-handling was called upon again in the senshuraku finale, devastatingly used to send Hakuho spinning to

the floor after a lengthy tussle. The Isegahama man had fought Hakuho for around two minutes just two days earlier, and was desperately unlucky to lose that match, almost pulling the grand champion off balance on several occasions with his sheer strength and scintillating footwork.

By the time of Harumafuji's 13th-day defeat, the yusho-race had become the most open in recent memory, with Hakuho unbeaten, Harumafuji and evergreen contender Asashoryu on 12-1. Meanwhile, a rejuvenated Kisenosato had posted 11-2 having extracted considerable profit from his demotion to mid-maegashira and the weak opposition that came with it. Several sumo observers felt that the momentum lay with the most experienced campaigner, the man who boasts 23 yusho and, allegedly, the strongest fighting spirit. The form book pointed convincingly towards Hakuho, unbeaten since his 10th-day loss to Harumafuji in January (the Hatsu playoff defeat against Asashoryu not counting as an official match). But the previous 13 days had clearly shown that the artist formerly known as Ama possessed enough confidence, skill and equipoise to go the distance, despite the morale-crushing defeat to Hakuho.

The birth of Harumafuji, Tournament-Winner, took place on Day 14, the last two matches of which – as with the previous day – ranked among the tourney's very best. The penultimate contest of the penultimate day saw a sleepy-looking Kotooshu utterly destroy Hakuho in one of the upsets of the decade. As if reliving his defeat of Hakuho exactly a year previously

(the last time he even came close to defeating the new dai-yokozuna), Kotooshu executed an off-centre tachi-ai, latched onto the Mongol's mawashi with lightning speed, fenced with him, kept him at bay and downed him with a majestic air.



Yokozuna Asashoryu

It was Miyagino man's first defeat in 34 matches, and the stadium erupted, with so many zabuton tossed that one wondered what else would be thrown if Asashoryu also lost. In fact, several hundred zabuton remained in their masu-seki, and Harumafuji ensured they were needed for celebrations. Immeasurably buoyed by Hakuho's unthinkable collapse, and sensing that fate was on his side, the muscular 120-kilogram ozeki latched onto Asashoryu's belt with panache and, after surviving a couple of lift-out scares, toppled the ageing yokozuna with an outer leg-trip. The move was almost a carbon-copy of the technique Hakuho had deployed on him 24 hours previously, and showed the ozeki's

frightening ability to steal ideas from the very best. Asashoryu, meanwhile, was shellshocked, and took around 15 seconds to rise to his feet, his knee seemingly in considerable pain.

For Harumafuji, the last day could not come quickly enough and – after Kisenosato notched his 13th victory against Kakuryu – was doubtless fearing the possibility of a four-man playoff for the top honours. That possibility was dispelled by Harumafuji's efficient dismissal of Kotooshu, haplessly unable to dent a second yusho bandwagon in consecutive days. The championship-race was suddenly narrowed down to a twosome, with Hakuho the only warrior able to deny Harumafuji, and needing to beat Asashoryu in the musubi no ichiban to keep his hopes alive.

Although Asashoryu's performance in the basho's final bout dramatically bettered his last two, he was ultimately left to rue a third consecutive defeat to Hakuho in a regulation match. The stage was then cleared for Hakuho and Harumafuji to fight their second kettei-sen in four basho, and for Harumafuji to reverse the result of the Kyushu tourney and claim his first yusho. On most days, his physique and style completely resembled that of the legendary Chiyonofuji. He appears every bit capable of emulating his body double on sumo's highest rank.

The summer heat of Nagoya did for Kotooshu last July, and the upcoming media frenzy may ensure that Harumafuji suffers a similar blow to his yokozuna chances this year. Even if he somehow overcomes the unbearable pressure, promotion will be difficult to come by with two active yokozuna already at the helm, and a desperately poor January performance still lingering in the YDC's conscience. Nevertheless, most now seem

convinced that a third Mongolian yokozuna will materialise in the near future.

His promotion prospects will be considerably enhanced if Asashoryu's body continues to suffer. The senior yokozuna certainly lacked much appetite for certain matches in this basho, even neglecting the signature pummelling of his belt prior to the final salt throw against Takekaze. Although he was capable of lifting some opponents, doubts over the condition of his left arm are intensifying and he is clearly not enjoying his sumo to the maximum. The remainder of 2009 will be very interesting indeed for the top of the banzuke.



Kakuryu

It seems strange that whereas there are no fixed targets for an ozeki promotion to yokozuna, there are fixed targets for an ozeki demotion. Unfortunately for the integrity of sumo, the May basho suggested as never before that these targets should be abolished. Once again, three ozeki barely scraped together an 8-7, while Kotooshu – Day 14 excepted – continued to look lethargic on 9-6. It somewhat stretches belief that an ozeki can be allowed to keep a prestigious rank via two matches against human punchbags and a henka. It is also somewhat

anticlimactic when an ozeki can keep rank while persistently losing his last five matches, or by repeatedly making 8-7s, often on the final day. It is surely time for influential people to consider the image of ozeki that fans wish to see, rather than doggedly rely on criteria that were ill-designed for a group of battle-weary men growing old together.



Kisenosato

With neither yokozuna being defeated by anyone below ozeki, the Outstanding Performance Award remained unoffered on the final day. Kisenosato deservedly collected the Fighting Spirit Award, and will now face rising levels of expectation again in the Nagoya microwave. Kakuryu, despite occasional reliance on henka, secured the Technique Award after a tremendous performance in his first basho as a sanyaku member.

Nagoya will certainly see some big banzuke changes. Sekiwake Baruto, a colossus of April's pre-basho souken, crumbled to a 4-11 and may ironically find his yusho chances boosted when fighting at mid-maegashira next time. Goeido also disappointingly lost his sekiwake berth, showing both inexperience and faltering confidence in posting a 6-9. He will surely lose his place to

Kisenosato, with Kakuryu replacing Baruto at sekiwake east.

The komusubi positions vacated by Kakuryu and a dejected Tochiozan (6-9) will be filled once again by Kyokutenho (8-7) and Kotoshogiku, the latter of whom burst back into form with a 10-5 at maegashira 6. Russian powerhouse Aran will taste joijin action for the first time after an 8-7 at maegashira 4, but will likely struggle to avoid the fate of the man he replaces at maegashira 1, Homasho, whose doomed left arm reduced him to pitiful 1-14.



Kotoshogiku

Big banzuke tumblers will include the injured pairing of Toyonoshima and Aminishiki (both 5-10), diminutive Yoshikaze (4-11), Hokutoriki (4-11) and Kimurayama (5-10) – the latter two losing their makuuchi status. Toyohibiki, meanwhile, will return to upper-maegashira following an

impressive 11-4, a sign of considerable recovery from his detached retina injury.

Three wrestlers look set to earn elevation from juryo. Mokonami (11-4) was generally outstanding this time and will become the latest Mongol to enter sumo's top division. Wakakoyu (9-6) and Tosayutaka (8-7) will join him there, both tasting the top flight for the first time, the latter finally stumbling over the makuuchi hurdle after three basho in upper-juryo. He is the next big hope to hail from the Shikoku city of Kochi, following Tochiozan, Toyonoshima and – light years ago – Tosanoumi.



Toyohibiki

Okinoumi (3-12), meanwhile, surprisingly exits juryo just four months after taking the makushita yusho with notable ease. He will be followed through the trapdoor by Sagatsukasa (7-8) and possibly Hoshihikari (6-9). Such demotions should mean that 37-year-old Kitazakura's 4-3 at makushita 1 will be enough to earn a return to juryo, much to the

delight of the sumo faithful.

Kitazakura will be leapfrogged by another Mongol, Tokusegawa, who romped to the makushita yusho with a 7-0 from makushita 2, and ensures that Kiriya-beya is represented in sekitori circles. Seiro of Shikoroyama captured the sandanme crown, while the jonidan and jonokuchi accolades were both bestowed upon Japanese: Oonomatsu beya's Tenroku and Dewanoumi-beya's Nakanoumi.



Ozeki Harumafuji

Because the Natsu basho generally tears up the form book, it is premature – if also tempting – to suggest that May 2009 was the month in which sumo came to be dominated by three men, not two. That said, three-man domination of sumo will surely be made impossible by either of two outcomes: the inconsistency of Harumafuji or the fatigue of Asashoryu. The question of which outcome prevails will make for fascinating viewing in the months ahead.