

SFM Review of the Decade

by Chris Gould

Ten years ago, the 90s seemed the most radical sumo decade Japan would ever witness. As a 1500-year-old sport ushered in the New Year of 1990, it did so in the knowledge that no non-Japanese had ever made its highest rank or won more than a single top-division championship. Although the last championship of the 1980s was captured by Hawaiian Konishiki, few believed such foreign exploits would be anything more than a flash in the pan. Of course, the following three years would not only see Konishiki claim two more yusho, but also see his younger compatriot Akebono become the first “gaijin yokozuna”. By the end of the decade, a second Hawaiian, Musashimaru, would also hold grand champion status, having collected seven yusho to Akebono’s nine. The face of Japan’s national sport had been changed completely.

And yet, amid the sound and fury of giant Hawaiian bodies clashing, the path was quietly being laid for an even more radical transformation of sumo between 2000 and 2009. In early 1992, a group of six men became the first Mongolians to enter professional sumo, allegedly against the wishes of many in the sumo elite. An unfazed Oshima Oyakata was convinced he could make something of them, and two of the six – Kyokushuzan and Kyokutenho – were in makuuchi by the end of the 90s. After the NSK ended a six-year ban on new overseas recruits in 1998, the success of Tenho and Shuzan encouraged younger Mongols to seek similar glories. Step forward a certain Asashoryu Akinori, who entered Japanese high school in

the mid-90s and joined Wakamatsu-beya in January 1999.

According to the eternally useful website www.banzuke.com, there were still only four non-Japanese in sumo’s top division at the turn of the millennium. (Two of them were the Hawaiian yokozuna). Fast forward to November 2009, and that number has become 16, with six foreign nations represented (namely Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Korea, Mongolia and Russia). Had not three Russians carelessly thrown away their sumo careers in 2008 that number would be far higher. Ten years ago many sumo fans would have dismissed this situation as pure fantasy. But, as with the Japan around it, the sumo world has taken some powerful blows from the forces of internationalisation. ‘Nihonjin ga inaku naru – the Japanese guys will disappear’ has become a popular lamentation of traditionalists worried by the impending retirements of Kaio and Chiyotakai. Who would ever have uttered such words in January 2000?

Back then, Wakanohana and Takanohana were proudly flying the Japanese flag on sumo’s highest pedestal, en route to collecting 27 tournaments between them. Just behind them Chiyotakai, Kaio and Musoyama all harboured realistic aspirations of becoming yokozuna. But the first cracks in the Japanese armour opened up in March 2000 when Wakanohana III retired due to injury. The Waka-Taka tag-team was physically broken up – having been emotionally separated for several years. When Akebono

also hung up his mawashi in November 2000, two giant gaps were left at the top of the banzuke, increasing the chances of those lower-down to post better scores. The sea change was about to begin.

January 2001 saw the entertaining makuuchi debut of Asashoryu, who offered tantalising glimpses of the technical brilliance which would shine through the decade. In May 2001, he staked a claim for future greatness by spectacularly downing the 220-kilogram Musashimaru with a shitatenage. By September that year, the 20-year-old Mongol was able to knock over Musashimaru and three ozeki in just five days in a deafening statement of intent that alarmed the Japanese press. It came as little surprise that he became sumo’s first Mongolian yokozuna in 2003, almost ten years to the day since Akebono became the first foreign grand champion.

Asashoryu ascended to yokozuna in the same tournament that Takanohana retired. Since that fateful day on which the Prince of Sumo lost to Aminishiki, Japan’s national sport has been left unrepresented by a champion from the homeland. Such a state of affairs seemed temporary in 2003 when Musashimaru brought sumo’s Hawaiian era to an end by announcing his own retirement, having failed to complete a basho for 14 months. With Asashoryu alone atop the banzuke and feeling the pressure (as the Shower Room Showdown incident with Kyokushuzan exemplified), it seemed ever likely that Kaio or Chiyotakai would earn yokozuna promotion (especially when

having won seven tournaments between them at this time).

Later in 2003, though, Asashoryu stepped up a gear and sought to smash all records in sight. The September basho was won with ease and the November basho almost followed, before the majestic Mongol began 2004 by winning 36 straight bouts and four consecutive tournaments. His domination was, of course, greatly aided by the retirement of long-term Japanese rival Musoyama. After a niggling injury in September, Asa then posted 13 more victories in November to take his fifth trophy of the year with a combined record of 78-12. The achievement earned the Sports Personality of the Year Award from Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who challenged Asa to win all six basho in 2005. Amazingly, Asashoryu did just that with a record annual tally of 84 wins and six losses. Koizumi famously presented the Emperor's Cup to him in Fukuoka and the great Chiyonofuji stated that the Mongolian maestro could win 50 yusho – injuries permitting.

Despite a whirlwind 2005, there were signs that potential challengers to Asashoryu's domination would emerge. Two of his six defeats that year came to a handsome Bulgarian by the name of Kotooshu, who overcame the disappointment of throwing away the yusho in September by becoming Europe's first ozeki in November. At that time a 20-year-old Hakuho was rising fast but a niggling foot injury seemed destined to wreck his chances of achieving greatness. Also in 2005, Russian duo Roho and Hakurozan – otherwise known as the Brothers Baradzhov – earned the honour of being the first non-Japanese siblings to compete in makuuchi. Their success spurred east-European youngsters Tochinoshin and Wakanoho to enter sumo before 2005 was out. At the same

time, slowly but surely making his mark was another large Georgian, Kokkai, who trounced Asashoryu in Nagoya before crushing him the following new year in Tokyo.

That same tournament of January 2006 saw the sumo world received another shake-up. Ozeki Tochiazuma became the first Japanese for eight tournaments to collect the makuuchi yusho as Asashoryu crashed to four defeats, including one to the then-little-known Ama. At the time, this was the longest period that the Emperor's Cup had ever remained outside Japanese hands. And yet, depressingly for the home nation, 23 tournaments have now since passed without another Japanese emulating Tochiazuma. Hakuho also hit the headlines with a 13-2 in Hatsu 2006, and a further 13 wins in March before a spectacular playoff defeat to Asashoryu helped him join Kotooshu on the rank of ozeki. His first championship followed in May, a basho which saw Estonian blond bombshell Baruto hit an eye-catching 11 wins on his top-division debut. In July, Hakuho very nearly achieved yokozuna promotion by turning in 13 more victories, including a final-day dispatch of Asashoryu. Alas, his failure to win that tournament caused the Yokozuna Deliberation Committee to delay what many felt was a much-deserved promotion.

Hakuho was not to be denied though and despite going kadoban through injury in November 2006, he hit back strongly in 2007, winning successive yusho in March and May and ensuring that two Mongolian yokozuna headed the banzuke for the first time. He then enjoyed astonishing good fortune as Asashoryu earned a two-basho suspension for an infamous footballing incident, and collected the September and November championships virtually unopposed. Other major banzuke changes involved Tochiazuma retiring in April on

health grounds, his ozeki slot ultimately being filled by Kotomitsuki after he won 25 bouts in May and July. At the same time, Chiyotakai and Kaio began to falter and the first questions surrounding their retirements surfaced. Alas, 2007 will also be remembered for two highly unsavoury incidents: the tragic death of 17-year-old novice Tokitaizan during a June training session (leading a host of youngsters to cancel their sumo applications), and the invasion of the dohyo by a drunken woman in September. Sumo's deference to Shinto tradition forbids women from taking to the combat ring, and the incident allegedly marked the first time in 1500 years that a female had touched the dohyo!

January 2008 saw Asashoryu make his grand comeback, and a feverish Kokugikan saw what was unquestionably the basho of the decade. The yusho race was in the balance right until 60 seconds into the musubi no ichiban. Eventually, Hakuho won in imperious fashion, much to the delight of the Japanese media who had started to bill the contest as Good versus Evil. In May that year, an astonishing capitulation by both yokozuna enabled Kotooshu to become the first European makuuchi yusho-winner, only to blow his promotion chances with a nervy 9-6 in July.

The same tournament saw rumours of Asashoryu's retirement intensify after the sluggish-looking yokozuna pulled out with two defeats in five days. Then, after controversially organising the inaugural Mongol jungyo in August – a defining symbol of the direction which sumo seems to be taking, Asashoryu also withdrew from the September basho. His absence from Kyushu for the second year running left his supporters fearing the worst. Meanwhile Roho, Hakurozan and Wakanoho were dismissed from

the NSK for alleged possession and/ or consumption of marijuana in a scandal which ultimately claimed the weary head of Sumo Chairman Kitanoumi. A promising Japanese rikishi, Wakakirin, was also shown the exit door for the same reason in early 2009, leading to outrage among the Japanese public (which still indirectly sponsors sumo via its tax payments).

The final year of the decade will go down as Asashoryu's unexpected fight-back, the yokozuna generally showing determination and dedication deemed to be lacking in previous years. Amid frenzied scenes in January, sumo's senior yokozuna overcame Hakuho in a

playoff and, choking back the tears, cried out: 'I have returned!' March saw Hakuho bounce back with a perfect 15-0 score, while an injured Chiyotaikai bizarrely failed to withdraw and posted the worst ever ozeki score: 2-13. May saw Chiyotaikai dramatically retain his rank with three wins in the final three days, and a thrilling four-man rusho race produced a maiden yusho for Harumafuji. July belonged to Hakuho before Asashoryu spectacularly wrested the championship from him via another playoff in September – the first time he had completed an Aki basho in three years. The decade ended with revenge for Hakuho, who posted a perfect 15-0 score in Fukuoka and set a new record for

annual victories: 86.

Quite how the next decade will pan out makes for fascinating debate. Asashoryu cannot be expected to play a large part in it, but Hakuho clearly can. The most fascinating question is surely: can he last the distance? Can he still be a yokozuna at the age of 34 in January 2020? For now, we look forward to the following questions being answered in the 2010s. How many records can Hakuho break? Will we see the first European yokozuna? When will Kaio finally retire? And when will we see the next Japanese yokozuna? SFM will, as ever, use its watchful eyes to relay the news as and when it happens.