

Kokugi Konnections

Makuuchi Match of the Decade

by Chris Gould

In what will surely become the most-hotly debated Kokugi Konnections ever, Chris Gould attempts, for the first time in history, to compile a list of contenders for Makuuchi Match of the Decade.

This issue sees KK select one contest from each of the years 2000 and 2009 as a contender for Makuuchi Match of the Millennium. Sinful omissions will undoubtedly have been made, but what fun is life without debate? The following ten matches have been chosen not purely on the basis of technique or skills on display, but also on their significance to the sumo world and the passions they generated among the audience. Crucially, they also provide an affirmative answer to this question: will they be replayed for years to come?

As ever, the SFM Letters Column is ready to collect your opinions. Let the quest to find Match of the Millennium begin!

Match of 2000: Musashimaru v Akebono, Kyushu, Day 15

Two Hawaiian giants, a combined weight of 450 kilograms, faced each other for the final time in a packed Kokusai Centre in Fukuoka. Little did this frenzied crowd know that it was about to witness Akebono's last ever professional sumo match. There is also the small matter of the yusho being at stake, with Akebono poised to collect his 11th Emperor's Cup – an all-time

record for a non-Japanese at that time. Musashimaru also has a point to prove after being heavily criticised for an alleged lack of defensive sumo skill. Those criticisms certainly looked ill-judged in the light of this epic struggle.

<http://www.banzuke.com/~movies/kyushu2000/151100mov.html>

Match of 2001: Takanohana v Musashimaru, Natsu, Day 15 Playoff

This match has already been replayed for several years, and most Japanese seem to have seen or heard of it. Takanohana, Japanese legend and proud defender of the national sumo tradition, faced Musashimaru, a 220-kilogram man mountain anxious to distinguish himself as a non-Japanese yokozuna. On day 13 of this basho, Takanohana became injured and exacerbated the problem with a crushing defeat to Maru's stablemate, Musoyama, on day 14.

He entered the ring on senshuraku barely able to walk and needing to defeat Musashimaru to capture his 22nd yusho. The two first squared off in the musubi no ichiban which Maru won inside two seconds. Despite facing calls from the shimpan to quit, Takanohana returned for the playoff and hoped he could somehow summon up something magical. Rarely have sumo emotions run so high.

<http://www.banzuke.com/~movies/natsu2001/150501amov.html>

Match of 2002: Takanohana v Asashoryu, Aki, Day 11

Few on the day would have billed this match as a transfer of power between sumo generations, but this highly spirited contest proved to be the last time that Asashoryu and Takanohana fought each other. After missing seven consecutive tournaments through the injury sustained in match (2), Takanohana was enjoying a fairytale return to the ring and still in with a chance of a comeback yusho on day 11. Asashoryu, only 21 at the time, was also enjoying a dream basho on his ozeki debut, and entered the match one win ahead of Takanohana. In one of the most patriotic atmospheres imaginable, Takanohana looked to teach the young upstart a lesson, no matter how much of a battering he himself took in the process. The result... pandemonium!

<http://www.banzuke.com/~movies/aki2002/110902mov.html>

Match of 2003: Asashoryu v Takamisakari, Nagoya, Day 8

With Takanohana retiring and Musashimaru persistently sidelined, matches between the superstars were non-existent in 2003. But there is one match that is consistently replayed and lauded by all Japanese who watch it. Takamisakari was fast-becoming Japan's most popular sumotori, more due to his zany pre-bout antics than his record inside the ring. Asashoryu was 5-0 up on 'Robocop' in previous encounters

but was showing signs of injury in the Nagoya heat. The path was paved for the first, and only, even match between sumo's most popular wrestler and sumo's finest. The two met on nakabi, just three days after a very fiery encounter between Asashoryu and compatriot Kyokushuzan. The result of the Takamisakari match, the only time Robocop has ever beaten the Blue Dragon, allegedly led to the infamous 'Shower Room Showdown' between a disgruntled Asashoryu and Kyokushuzan.

<http://www.banzuke.com/~movies/nagoya2003/080703mov.html>

**Match of 2004:
Asashoryu v Kotonowaka,
Nagoya, Day 8**

In the mid-2000s, with Asashoryu's dominance reaching unprecedented heights, genuinely classic (or even) musubi no ichiban were hard to come by. However, due to the sheer controversy and athleticism on display, Asashoryu's double-header against veteran Kotonowaka is surely of most interest. On paper, it's the classic mismatch: a 23-year-old yokozuna in his prime against a 37-year-old maegashira whose body is giving up on him. However, strange occurrences are abundant whenever Asashoryu travels to Nagoya, and this match serves as a fine example. Watch for the contrasting crowd reactions too!

<http://www.banzuke.com/~movies/nagoya2004/080704mov.html>

**Match of 2005:
Asashoryu v Kotooshu,
Kyushu, Day 13**

Asashoryu and Kotooshu fought three very exciting battles in 2005, even excluding their playoff for the yusho (which, despite its significance, turned into a damp squip). In Kyushu, Kotooshu was in pole position to become Europe's first ozeki, and knew his chances would be helped no end if he made Asashoryu taste defeat for

only the sixth time in 12 months. Back then, before his unfortunate double knee-injury in Osaka 2006, Kotooshu's sumo was becoming highly aggressive, his Herculean efforts arguably worthy of yokozuna status. This match serves as a wonderful case in point.

<http://www.banzuke.com/~movies/kyushu2005/131105mov.html>

**Match of 2006:
Asashoryu v Hakuho,
Haru, Day 15**

Four days before this match-up, Hakuho upended Asashoryu for only the second time in his career to state his yokozuna credentials. A farcical senshuraku saw both Asashoryu and Hakuho tamely succumb to needy ozeki, and thus enter a yusho playoff. Their disappointing performances in the afternoon's regulation bouts were immediately cast aside as the two Mongols served up one of the most epic belt-battles witnessed – and the first of many between them!

<http://www.banzuke.com/~movies/haru2006/150306mov.html>

**Match of 2007:
Asashoryu v Hakuho,
Natsu, Day 15**

Asashoryu's suspension deprived sumo fans of much drama in the last third of 2007, and truly gripping matches were at a premium. The match fought on the Natsu senshuraku was not the best served up by the Mongolian maestros, but its significance was ever-lasting. Hakuho had already won the yusho, and a win against Asashoryu would guarantee him a perfect score and promotion to yokozuna. Should such a promotion occur, the sumo banzuke was to have two foreign and no Japanese yokozuna for the first time in its 250-year history!

Emotions came forth and multiplied...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFNWK1ka82M>

**Match of 2008:
Asashoryu v Hakuho,
Hatsu, Day 15**

The year saw an incredible number of memorable matches as sumo fully reaped the benefits of internationalisation. Asashoryu was at the centre of the memorable action, contributing to several Match of the Year entries in the January Basho alone, namely against Kisenosato, Toyonoshima, Tochinonada and Ama.

Toyonoshima was also present in several possible Matches of the Year, including three against Asashoryu and a true epic with Miyabiyama. Meanwhile, in Fukuoka, Aran and Kakizoe served up one of the greatest tsuppari battles in years. But, amidst all the sound and fury, only one match will be replayed for years to come.

That match took place on the final day of the Hatsu Basho.

Asashoryu was 13-1. Hakuho was 13-1. The former was returning after a six month suspension, and desperate to prove wrong the critics who had written him off. Hakuho had won four of the past five yusho and was looking every inch a yokozuna in his prime. The media had billed the match as a contest between Good and Evil for weeks and were deeply disappointed by the pre-tournament Yokozuna Souken, which saw Asashoryu beat Hakuho five times out of seven. The atmosphere inside the Kokugikan was electric, buttressed by several hundred Mongols. The shikiri-naoshi alone was heart-stopping. And the match... a classic!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-BPFcYLZQA>

**Match of 2009:
Hakuho v Baruto,
Natsu, Day 14**

The last year of the decade also played host to many great matches as rising stars sought to dismantle the old guard. There were many strong contenders for Match of the Year, including the two Asa-Haku

playoffs, the two Haku-Harumafuji matches in May, and the Asa-Harumafuji match in May. (The Natsu was quite some basho!) But, when significance, skill, strength, power and excitement generated are all taken together, the Match of 2009 Award goes to... Hakuho v Baruto on day 9 of the Hatsu Basho.

Giant Estonian Baruto, some 180

kilograms, entered the Hatsu showdown with Hakuho having never beaten a yokozuna competitively. His good form that basho had delivered him seven victories in eight days – including several over the ozeki. Hakuho, meanwhile, was perfect at that point, tying for the lead 8-0 with Asashoryu. If ever there was a time for Baruto to prove his yusho credentials and stake his claim to

become Europe's second ozeki, this was it. What followed was some of the highest drama imaginable.

<http://www.banzuke.com/~makuuchi/hatsu09/09.html>

Enjoy... and then let us have your votes at editor@sumofanmag.com.