

Haru Basho Summary

by Chris Gould

All hail Ozeki Baruto. In the Osaka 2010 tournament, this incredible Estonian became only the eighth foreign-born ozeki in professional sumo's long and distinguished history – and only the second from Europe. After a tough couple of years in the late-2000s, the 197-centimetre 185-kilogram giant finally stepped up a gear to realise his potential, posting 47 wins from 60 bouts over four tournaments. His score in Osaka, 14 wins from 15 bouts, was a career-best and easily worthy of the tourney's runner-up honours. He also bagged the awards for Technique and Fighting Spirit for good measure.



Sekiwake Baruto

With tempestuous yokozuna Asashoryu departing the sport acrimoniously prior to the tournament, Osaka 2010 was always likely to be decided by the contest between Baruto and Hakuho, which came on Day 11. Until that stage, neither legend had even looked like losing. Baruto crushing opponents with his sheer weight and determination, Hakuho dispatching his foes with customary machine-like technical efficiency. On this occasion, as

happened in 11 of their previous 12 meetings, Hakuho's sheer hand-speed and technical repertoire proved too much for the less aesthetic approach of the Estonian, who was wheeled off his feet, driven to the ropes and dumped onto his back. However, an exceptionally strong frame which easily overpowers his closest rivals has produced outstanding results which clearly distinguish him as the leading challenger to Hakuho's dominance.



Yokozuna Hakuho

Following an incredible 2009 which saw him win an all-time record 86 from 90 bouts, Majestic Mongolian Hakuho boldly promised to post even better figures in 2010. After uncharacteristically slipping to three defeats in January, he now needs to win all his remaining matches to keep this promise – and set a new sumo record for consecutive wins in the process. On the evidence of Osaka, he has every chance of doing this, provided his concentration

remains intact. Not even Asashoryu, winner of 25 tournament championships, could dispatch opponents the consummate ease as the 194-centimetre, 155-kilogram Hakuho. Osaka 2010 brought him his 13th championship at the young age of 25, and the gulf between him and the ozeki looks big as ever.



Ozeki Kotooshu

Of those ozeki, Kotooshu now has some serious soul-searching to do. The towering 199-centimetre Bulgarian must ask himself why, after becoming Europe's first ozeki in November 2005, his progress has stalled so spectacularly. Five years ago, three divisions separated Kotooshu and Baruto, yet May 2010 will see them share the same rank. A lame 10-5 plus a convincing defeat to Baruto in Osaka 2010 again raised questions about Kotooshu's hunger for success, and whether his long-lasting knee problem will permanently prove a barrier to greatness.

Another ozeki in danger of

stagnating is Harumafuji, the muscular Mongolian who attained the rank in November 2008. Slender in sumo terms at 120-kilograms, Harumafuji currently looks a shadow of the force which captured his maiden championship in May 2009. After going 7-0 against the rank and filers in Osaka, Harumafuji capitulated against the elite – his losses to ageing Kotomitsuki and Kaio particularly disappointing. After finishing with a 10-5, his yokozuna aspirations are no closer to being realised than a year ago.



Ozei Kotomitsuki

Quite how Kaio and Kotomitsuki continue to hold ozeki rank despite advancing age and a spate of injuries is beyond most people. 37-year-old Kaio yet again scraped together the requisite eight wins after a nervy first 10 days which

saw him go 5-5 against those ranked below him. 33-year-old Kotomitsuki, meanwhile, posted a 9-6 to keep his rank after being at risk of demotion following an injury in January. He owes his winning score chiefly to some extraordinary events on Day 9, when Kotomitsuki was initially adjudged to have lost to struggling maegashira Toyohibiki. The judges questionably overturned the decision in favour of a re-match, which Kotomitsuki eventually won.

Osaka 2010 did see the retirement of one veteran: 38-year-old Kitazakura, famed for his receding hairline, large salt-throws and indomitable fighting spirit. In fact, he never missed a single match through injury during a sekitori career spanning more than a decade. Having slipped deep into the unsalaried third division, Kitazakura finally hung up his sash on the third day of Osaka 2010, and will now assume the sumo elder name of Onogawa oyakata.

The second division honours were taken by 174-kilogram ex-college champion Kimurayama, who now has another chance to establish himself at the highest level. The third division championship was captured by Aoiyama, 'the New Kotooshu,' a fearsome 23-year-old Bulgarian who is rapidly rising up the sumo ladder. The sandanme, jonidan and jonokuchi championships were taken by

Mongolian Sensho and Japanese pair Chiyonishiki and Sasakiyama respectively.



Kimurayama

The upcoming May tournament now throws up some intriguing possibilities. Should Baruto continue his irrepressible form, he will become top contender for promotion to yokozuna. His sudden rise to prominence has placed added pressure on Harumafuji and Kotooshu to challenge for the yusho more seriously. Meanwhile, Hakuho will be looking to extend his winning run, which now stands at 17 bouts. Excitement is sure to abound.