

Basho Review Nagoya 2010

by Chris Gould

The basho which the Sumo Association would rather forget turned out to be highly memorable for the magnificent grand champion Hakuho. The majestic Mongolian used every inch of his 192-centimetre, 154-kilogram frame to maximum efficiency, turning over 15 successive opponents for the third tournament in succession. It was a travesty indeed that he was not presented with the Emperor's Cup this time round, due to the Japanese authorities' decision not to have the Emperor's name associated with a scandal-hit tournament. If ever one of Hakuho's 15 championship trophies was particularly richly deserved, it was this one.



Yokozuna Hakuho

Few inside or outside sumo took seriously Hakuho's claim that he could surpass his record of 86 victories from 90 bouts in a calendar year, famously set in

2009. Even SFM's review of the March basho, which suggested Hakuho might go the rest of the year unbeaten, was meant more as a rallying cry for Hakuho's forlorn challengers rather than genuine expectation. And yet, two tournaments on, Hakuho has extended his winning streak to 47 bouts, putting him at 57 wins-3 losses for 2010 – exactly the same record he had amassed this time last year en route to posting his record. His win on day 13 against Kotooshu, where he downed the lanky 199-centimetre Bulgarian with a trademark deft change of balance, put him level with the 1960s legend Taiho on 45 consecutive victories.

Taiho's winning run was controversially ended in March 1969 when the ringside judges missed the fact that his opponent had stepped out first, and wrongly named Taiho as the loser. (The match was ultimately the catalyst for the introduction of the sixth shimpan in front of a TV monitor). Hakuho had no such controversy on day 14 in Nagoya, though.

Although given an almighty scare by plucky, comparatively slender, Harumafuji – who on a good day can push Hakuho for a minute or more – the grand champion whose skin literally seems to shine finished with a deadly scoop-throw that edged him ahead of Taiho. Only Chiyonofuji (53) and 1930s legend Futabayama (69) have secured more consecutive wins than Hakuho, who is now odds-on favourite to surpass them both.

The path to the record has

certainly been smoothed out by the glut of resignations at the top of the sumo ladder this year. At the start of the January tournament, nobody would have believed that Yokozuna Asashoryu, Ozeki Chiyotakai and Ozeki Kotomitsuki would all be gone come July.



Ozeki Kaio

The past Nagoya basho also saw Japan's only existing Ozeki, 175-kilogram Kaio, deprived of the chance to wrestle on his 38th birthday after a painful defeat to Kotooshu on Day 11. After seemingly getting his hand trapped when being thrown and fallen on top of by the Bulgarian, the big veteran gingerly walked back to the dressing room clutching his left wrist and withdrew from the basho thereafter. Given how central the wrists are to Kaio's belt-orientated techniques, it is difficult to see

how he will fashion a winning score in September, should he indeed even be able to return. Another ozeki retirement is heavily on the cards, but rest be assured, Kaio will rely on every ounce of guile to keep the rank which has earned him so much money.



Homasho

What must NHK's Mr Yoshida make of things? Alas, we were unable to find out due to NHK's blanket ban on live coverage of this July's tournament, the first time this had ever happened. (This is seismic – after all, sumo is NHK's darling; the first programme ever to be broadcast on the channel in 1953).

On the final day in May, Yoshida rashly claimed that the number of foreigners in the highest ranks needed to be reduced. Kaio's expected retirement this year will leave sumo with no Japanese yokozuna or ozeki, and Aminishiki's withdrawal on Day 13 in Nagoya meant that for the first time a top-division fight card

carried more foreign names than Japanese.

The Japanese hopefuls did their best to please Yoshida, especially Homasho who went the first 10 days unbeaten before crashing to predictable defeats against the bigger guns, Kakuryu and Kotooshu. He did, however, win impressively over Kisenosato, who – after posting 7 wins, eight losses yet again – seems intent on proving that he will never have what it takes to make ozeki, regardless of how many good fighters retire. Homasho eventually shared runner-up honours with Kakuryu and Aran, the latter winning his last 10 bouts and building a highly impressive winning streak of his own. He is not expected to extend it too far into the following basho, as he will be given a career-high seeding of sekiwake, thus guaranteed to fight only the best and receive a few poundings.

The question of who will become the next yokozuna remained no closer to being answered after Nagoya. Supposedly leading contender, 190-kilogram Baruto of Estonia, crashed to three defeats in his first seven and only limped home with eight wins. He was even defeated by Tochiozan, never one for shining against the big stars but who posted an impressive 9-6 at maegashira 1 and will join Aran on his career-high rank of sekiwake next time. Of the other ozeki, Kaio is kadoban while Harumafuji and Kotooshu posted acceptable but lame 10-5s.

The suspensions to the likes of Toyonoshima, Toyohibiki and Goeido mean that some big names will join the lower ranks for



Tochiozan

September, and are likely to post big scores – thus perversely having their prize-winning chances boosted as a result of their gambling 'punishment.' This time, nobody took the outstanding performance award but Aran and Homasho shared the Fighting Spirit Prize and Kakuryu collected the Technique gong. Juryo honours went to Masatsukasa (13-2), who will be one of the names replacing gargantuan Georgian Gagamaru in makuuchi. Gagamaru recorded his first ever makuuchi win on day 3, but his giant 180-kilogram frame ultimately slumped to 10 defeats and demotion. Veteran Jumonji will return to juryo having stormed to the makushita title 7-0, but suspended Futeno – so long a makuuchi regular – will amazingly fight from as low as mid-makushita in September.

Join us next time to see if Hakuho can surpass Chiyonofuji, and whether some big names in unfamiliar places can surprisingly challenge him for the yusho.