

琴光喜 Ozeki Kotomitsuki Retires 琴光喜

by Chris Gould

Ozeki Kotomitsuki, who retired acrimoniously on July 4th 2010, excelled at sumo from the moment he took to the sport. His loss to makuuchi, at a time when Japanese wrestlers of all ages are struggling to make an impression, will be a big one.

A winner of a record 27 amateur national sumo championships while at university, Aichi-born Kotomitsuki converted to the professional game in March 1999, just a couple of months after his fiercest rival, former Yokozuna Asashoryu. He reached juryo in November 1999 under the shikona of Kototamiya, and – after changing to the Kotomitsuki ring name – reached sumo's highest division in May 2000. After cruelly being deprived of his first makuuchi debut due to injury, the plucky Kotomitsuki, renowned for his steely determination, bounced back with aplomb, returning to makuuchi for November 2000 and finishing runner-up in the entire tournament with a scintillating 13-2.

September 2001 saw him go one better, claiming his first ever yusho with a 13-2 score in a basho heavily overshadowed by the terrorist attacks in New York. Critics have pointed out that in this basho Yokozuna Musashimaru was clearly injured and Yokozuna Takanohana did not compete at all, but nothing can diminish the fact that Kotomitsuki is the last maegashira ever to pick up the makuuchi yusho.

The top prize also earned Kotomitsuki his second stint at sekiwake, a rank he would hold for an impressive 22 basho, including



Ozeki Kotomitsuki

11 consecutive tournaments between November 2005 and July 2007. In early 2002, after posting 12-3 at sekiwake, Kotomitsuki seemed a genuinely hungry young contender for ozeki, and an incredibly bright future lay ahead of him. Alas, a combination of injuries and indifferent form meant that he would have to wait another five and a half years to make sumo's second rank.

After a string of 8-7s at sekiwake, Kotomitsuki finally burst out of his shell in May 2007, storming to a 12-3 and declaring he was now ready for his final assault on an ozeki birth. "If I don't make it now, I never will," he famously vowed, and sure enough, in the following tournament of July 2007 (in front of his home fans) he posted a runner-up score of 13-2. He was actually 13-1 going into the final day, and critics have lamented him for losing to Kisenosato when it really mattered, thus blowing the last recognisable chance for a Japanese man to collect the top

division championship (an event which has not been seen for 27 basho now).

Aged 31 at the time of his ozeki promotion, Kotomitsuki was hardly predicted to set the world alight, and he soon found himself in trouble in the winter of 2007, succumbing to an illness which required hospitalisation and entailed considerable weight loss. He returned for the January 2008 basho distinctly out of shape and was very lucky to post a final day 8-7. Alas, the after-effects of his hospitalisation were lengthy and failed to clear up before the 2008 March basho, which saw Kotomitsuki stumble to 2-6 come nakabi. What followed was one of the most farcical weeks in sumo history, with Kotomitsuki somehow overcoming six strong opponents to kachi-koshi – even felling Asashoryu for the first time in 29 encounters. A second consecutive 8-7 it may have been, but Kotomitsuki's reputation as an ailing ozeki was enhanced ten-fold.

May 2008 saw yet another final-day kachi-koshi as Kotomitsuki lost to four maegashira in the same basho. He desperately needed a boost and where better to obtain it than in his home prefecture of Aichi in the 2008 Nagoya basho. Spurred on by his home crowd, the gutsy ozeki bulldozed his way to 11-4, pushing Hakuho for the yusho right until Day 13. He repeated the feat the following basho, making 2008 an unexpectedly fantastic summer. A confident first 12 days in Kyushu suggested that fans could expect more from Kotomitsuki the following year, but another pre-



tournament injury ensured he dropped out of the Hatsu and only

just managed 8-7 in Osaka. A good start to the Natsu was then ruined by chronic loss of form, ensuring that he posted a fourth final-day kachi-koshi in just nine tournaments.

Nagoya 2009, again in front of his home fans, proved – in effect – to be Kotomitsuki's final dignified bow. Again he pushed Hakuho close for the yusho, even defeating the great Mongolian yokozuna en route to a 12-3. A stunning 7-0 unbeaten start to the Aki basho followed, but six defeats from his last eight brought him down to earth. In truth, it was all downhill from there on as Kotomitsuki barely reached kachi-koshi in Kyushu, dropped out of the Hatsu for the second-year running and saved his rank in Osaka only via bad judging in his match with Toyohibiki. The 2010 Natsu saw the gambling allegations surface



and they clearly affected his form in the final days, dragging him down to a customary lame 9-6. The sad truth is that even had he not been forced out for behavioural issues, he would no longer be in any position to do justice to the rank of ozeki.