

# Aki Basho Review 2010

by Chris Gould

Is there anyone, or anything, that can stop Hakuho? The first few days of September's tournament bore out the hope that some level of pressure would expose his human side, that the monotony of his effortless dispatch of opponents would somehow be drawn to a sensational and cacophonous end. None of this materialised. The majestic Mongolian's record-breaking unbeaten run carries on: stretching to 62 victories, past Taiho, past Chiyonofuji, and within seven of the longest unbeaten run of all, that of Futabayama, posted between 1936 and 1939. Since Asashoryu ingloriously retired on February 4th, the great Hakuho has not lost a single competitive match.



*Yokozuna Hakuho*

Many people in Japan believe that Hakuho's winning run would not have lasted half as long had Asashoryu remained. And they are correct. Although Hakuho was

beating Asashoryu consistently at the end of the latter's career, the absence of challengers for yusho supremacy post-Asashoryu has left Hakuho with far fewer concentration worries than he might have had. No-one should underestimate the nervousness that creeps in when a fellow grand champion and fierce rival is watching every step of your progress for years on end from the closest ringside seat, openly praying for you to slip up and waiting for the slightest opportunity to pounce. All that pressure is now gone and even the weight of continuing a tremendous winning run seems not to measure up to it.

Last year, in May, it looked as if yusho-winner Harumafuji would emerge as the number one contender to Hakuho, sticking close to his trail every basho. Sure enough, Harumafuji put up by far the best performance against the nigh-invincible yokozuna this basho, careering into him with an almighty thwack on the final day and moving him backwards for the first time in the entire tournament. What followed simply underlines the gap between Best and Rest, Hakuho simply steadying his balance, bulldozing back, diving under Harumafuji's defences and easily shunting him out of the ring. Hakuho 15-0 (again). Harumafuji 8-7.

Short of Baruto's towering 14-1 in Osaka this year, no-one has even come close to plucking the yusho from Hakuho's vice-like grasp. Runner-up this time was Takekaze (12-3), a stubby, podgy tsuppari veteran with no hope of troubling the top rankers. The ozeki were



*Takekaze*

simply nowhere to be seen.

Baruto (9-6), a leading yokozuna contender just four months ago, now appears in a crisis, recklessly experimenting with very novice-like tsuppari as never before. He seemed to have planned this technique especially for Hakuho without stopping to calculate whether it would work on everybody else. It didn't, and the fellow ozeki made a mockery of him, especially Kaio and Kotooshu. He suffered the ignominy of being pushed out from behind and knocked onto his stomach again and again, having his manner of losing compared to a fifth division rikishi by the NHK commentary team.

It will be interesting to see whether he seeks to improve his thrusting before Kyushu, or whether he returns to the belt-work which has brought him by far the best results. Kotooshu, despite thrashing Baruto in a final day party piece, also disappointed with a 10-5 (losing to nemesis Aminishiki again), while Kaio, nevermore likely to figure alongside the words 'yusho araso', posted a customary 8-7 to escape

demotion for the umpteenth time.

Takekaze and Oguruma stablemate Yoshikaze shared the Fighting Spirit honours after collecting 23 victories between them. The Outstanding Performance Award went unclaimed while Hakuho remained undefeated, but the Technique Award recipient, Tochiozan, gave the Japanese new hope that someone from their ranks will eventually replace Kaio as their highest-ranked wrestler.



*Yoshikaze*

The young sekiwake from Kasugano beya, still only 23, has grown ever stronger in recent tournaments and has now regularly started to beat the ozeki – something considered unthinkable even two years ago. Years of training with several fellow sekitori in Kasugano-beya, as well as getting beaten up left, right and centre by Asashoryu, have toughened him up considerably more than Kisenosato (7-8), who make-koshi'd yet again and continues to disappoint.



*Goeido*

The rikishi involved in this summer's gambling scandal were wisely demoted to juryo this tournament, thus preventing them from achieving good scores from the lower end of makuuchi and staking candidatures for the fighting spirit prizes (thus seemingly benefiting from their punishment). Toyonoshima stated he wanted a perfect score and nearly achieved it, returning 14 wins from 15 bouts. The score was identical to that on his last visit to juryo exactly five years ago. Miyabiyama and Goeido (both 12-3) also scored highly and will return to makuuchi in November, while Okinoumi (10-5) also performed strongly. Toyohibiki, meanwhile, overcame a nightmare 0-5 start to remain in juryo with a 7-8.

Some big names continue to toil away in makushita, though. Futeno was actually demoted again after posting a 3-4 while former makuuchi man Kiyoseumi's winning score was not

enough to earn promotion back to a salaried level. The makushita yusho went to 19-year-old Takayasu, who will now become the first sekitori born in the Heisei era (1989-). The second Heisei-born sekitori will be seeded just below him in November; Masunoyama, who posted 5-2 from makushita 3. Congratulations to both of them.



*Miyabiyama*

Special congratulations are also in order for Georgian Gagamaru and Chinese Sokokurai, who both achieved their first makuuchi winning scores. The next tournament will surely bring tougher tests for them. At the top, meanwhile, Hakuho is set to push Japanese pride in their national sport into meltdown. Only two komusubi and six maegashira stand between him and the post-war consecutive win record that was thought to be unbeatable. After beating Harumafuji on the last day in September, he smiled warmly. He knows it's already in the bag.