

Kaio: What keeps him going so long?

by Chris Gould

Chris Gould reports on the seemingly neverending phenomenon of a dogged veteran.

People who matter have tried tirelessly to promote the fact that this year's sumo is about winning streaks and unparalleled levels of perfection. And yet whenever a certain 38-year-old ozeki takes to the stage all the above fades into the background - drowned out amid cacophony. Deep in the hearts and minds of the sumo community, barely papered over even by the brilliance of Hakuho, is the fate of Kaio, a true legend, feared to be the last great Japanese sumo warrior.

The evidence every basho is that he should have retired long ago. He is always beaten at least six times, usually seven, is often humiliated by lower rankers, and looks simply pitiful when facing the very best. All the records he is destined to accumulate through sheer longevity are widely believed to be undeserved. Many of his matches do not even appear to be performed in textbook sumo spirit. And yet his popularity continues to soar, seemingly increasing with age, and hitting new levels now that he is the only Japanese representative in sumo's top two ranks.

Such is the appeal of the struggle he symbolizes, carrying 100 per cent of his country's sumo pride on his bull-like shoulders, that the unbridled passions he generates erase any conception of how far his dignity has actually tumbled. Kaio is, put crudely, the final bulwark against the foreign onslaught. Even if he wanted to retire, there would be an



overwhelming obligation not to.

For all his faults and limitations, to dismiss Kaio would be a lapse of judgement akin to arguing with Asashoryu in a nightclub. The September 2010 basho illustrated exactly why, leaving him in a better light than for a long, long time.

What Kaio does better than anyone is recognize the battles he can and cannot win. He knows that there is little point in exhausting himself pursuing 10 wins when only eight will do. He also knows full well, all things even, which opponents he has a fair chance of beating and which opponents will probably cream him. Every basho is thus an act of acute calculated planning: knowing which opponents to target and which opponents not to lose sleep over. His incredible run of kachi-koshi stretching into his late 30s proves just how successful a tactician he is.

There is also a genuine hunger

about Kaio which is sorrowfully lacking from the new generation of sumo recruits. Ozeki has become part of Kaio's identity to the extent that he guards the rank with his own life. He explicitly said before this tournament: should he post a losing-score, he would definitely retire. He cannot even imagine an existence bereft of his Ozeki title. He will do anything to keep this rank and his mind is thus constantly occupied with possible methods of retaining it. Critics jeer that 8-7 every basho is unbefitting of an ozeki, but consistently posting 8-7 at Kaio's age and in his ailing condition is certainly no easy life.

Many criticisms are justifiably levelled at Kaio but they all overlook one key point: that he is still capable of beating many top division wrestlers without trouble, and that he is still genuinely feared by the likes of Homasho and Kisenosato – supposedly two of Japan's up and coming stars. Homasho never had a look in against the veteran on Day One, standing up solidly but forever panicked into hasty moves. Kaio, in contrast, merely took his time, controlled the movements of the two and then slapped the younger man onto his face. Against Kisenosato, Kaio was more panicked, but calculated his game plan to a T, sidestepping slightly at the tachi-ai, forcing Kise to stumble, latching onto the belt and forcing his junior over the rope. When Kaio gets his favoured grip, recently measured as the firmest in the business, virtually no opponent can resist him.

Coming back from a shoulder injury and in danger of demotion,

Kaio heaped further pressure upon himself in September after the first week went much worse than planned. Although he showed considerable skill to reach 3-1, he then stumbled against three consecutive opponents, leaving him on 3-4 with the yokozuna, three ozeki and one sekiwake still to face. Yet, cometh the hour, cometh the fighting qualities that separate him from the other Japanese.

After outmuscling Tokusegawa in a highly competitive day 8 encounter, he faced his Armageddon against Baruto on day 9. Defeat here would have left him on 4-5, staring demotion firmly in the eye. Instead, when the giant Estonian ripped into the veteran with a series of tsuppari blows, Kaio not only stood firm but turned the onslaught to his



advantage. Deflecting a round-house thrust, he sent Baruto floundering forwards, moved behind the bigger man and marched him across the ring and over the rope. It was the

comeback of a hero, and the Kokugikan audience could barely believe it.

As he approaches yet another basho in his hometown of Kyushu, Kaio remains boulder-like: very heavy, difficult to move and stubborn as an old lady refusing to vacate her house in the face of a hurricane. He is the definitive proof that belt-fighting will always take you further than plain thrusting à la Chiyotai. Superiority of size, raw power and grip strength forever gave him the edge over recently-retired Kotomitsuki. And sheer determination and guile will ensure that he continues to represent Japan in sumo's highest echelons for several basho to come.