

Kyushu Basho Summary

by Chris Gould

As predicted in last issue's Kokugi Connections, the magic stardust that Kyushu seems to sprinkle on sumo's rank and file was in abundance again this year. The final day was gripped with genuine tension for the first time in an age as plucky Toyonoshima (all five feet six inches of him) pushed yokozuna Hakuho (all 194 centimetres of him) all the way for the top-division championship. And the stardust had begun to descend several days before that.



Yokozuna Hakuho

Throughout this year, sumo writers have been forced to concentrate on one topic only: the winning streak of Hakuho, which started on the 14th day of the Hatsu basho and remained unbroken 10 months later at the start of this tournament. Sixty-two successive wins, with scarce little sweat broken, had taken him to within seven victories of equalling

the all-time successive win record set by Futabayama in 1939. Before this tournament, Hakuho actually visited Futabayama's grave in neighboring Oita prefecture. It was a visit which was supposed to symbolize the passing of the win-record from one great champion to another.

And yet, the magic of Kyushu ensured a vastly different outcome. After a customary easy victory on day one, Hakuho found himself paired with Kisenosato on day two, surely the only man among his first eight opponents with even a glimmer of hope of defeating him. Despite rattling Hakuho earlier in his career, Kisenosato had not beaten the majestic Mongolian since September 2008 and, this year, had been subjected to some particularly harsh beatings, often involving roundhouses reminiscent of a boxing match. And yet, despite his numerous failings which have prevented him from realizing his potential year after year, Kisenosato's spirit remains inextinguishable irrespective of the odds against him. Hakuho, obviously admiring his opponent's battling qualities, looked distinctly nervy and cautious before they fought.

The tachi-ai came and Hakuho was suddenly thrust into blind panic, a shadow of the calm and collected figure which had dispatched Harumafuji – his most feared foe – with such ease on the final day of September. It was, put crudely, “not Hakuho” who turned up that day, his sumo – presumably strangled with nerves – bordering on the amateur. Kisenosato promptly capitalized, bulldozed

inside the yokozuna and dumped him into the fourth row of the audience. The great yokozuna looking on in anguish while surrounded by rows of applauding spectators not only made a great tabloid image, but also jacked up expectations that someone other than Hakuho might actually take the yusho. Right until the final minutes of this year's sumo did that remain a possibility.



Kisenosato

Hardly expected to be among the yusho contenders was 38-year-old Kaio, the ailing ozeki who struggles to get even eight wins a tournament, returning to his home town of Fukuoka for the 23rd time as a sumo wrestler. And yet, after a first day defeat to Aminishiki in which he looked pathetically weak, Kaio posted eleven straight wins for the first time since March 2004! It was hardly “rolling back the years” stuff, with several bouts ending within three seconds via some cheap victory move, but it did make Kaio joint-leader until the 13th day, when he was easily defeated by Hakuho for the 26th

time in 31 encounters.

After Kaio fell by the wayside, the Kyushu folk pinned their hopes on pot-bellied maegashira Toyonoshima, who was born in Shikoku – thus close enough to be captured as a local hero.



Toyonoshima

Toyonoshima knocked Baruto from the yusho race on day 13 with a stunning throw and then expertly humiliated Kaio the following day with some brilliant, low-moving belt sumo. His father and bride-to-be turned up for the finale, which saw Toyonoshima dramatically overcome Kisenosato at the edge of the dohyo – and

reduce fiancée Ms Takahashi to tears. This was his 14th win, placing him one ahead of Hakuho with just minutes of the basho remaining. Kisenosato, meanwhile, once again rued the inconsistencies which enabled him to beat Hakuho and two ozeki but still only finish with 10-5. The Outstanding Performance Award was small consolation.

Hakuho duly beat Kotooshu for the ninth successive time with consummate ease and forced the playoff with Toyonoshima that everybody in the stadium wanted. Toyonoshima had already collected the Fighting Spirit and Technique Awards for his endeavors, which now amount to 28 wins and just two losses since September. He stood, opposite Hakuho, as only the fourth lower maegashira in sumo history to force a playoff with a yokozuna. He was also fighting to become the first Japanese in 29 tournaments to collect the top-division tournament – a hugely significant event. Although he geed himself up after watching Hakuho thrash Kotooshu on television, he knew he had little chance of defeating a yokozuna in his prime. Sure enough, at the vital moment, he froze, miscalculated and ended up with a great yokozuna behind him, ready to throw him onto his considerable belly.

“Toyonoshima did great in front of all these Kyushu people,” a

victorious Hakuho said afterwards. “There were many [bad] things that happened this year and I wanted to finish it with a bang. I was disappointed not to get Futabayama’s record but I am happy to reach five successive tournament championships.”

Third-place in this genuinely exciting tournament went to Kaio (12-3), whose Tomozuna stablemate Kaisei, born in Brazil, also benefited from the stardust effect, negotiating a four-man playoff to take the juryo yusho in only his third juryo tournament – and even overcoming a shoulder injury to do so. Of the other ozeki, Harumafuji lost three matches before withdrawing, Kotooshu barely grabbed an 8-7, and Baruto lost his last three matches to finish with 11-4. Both sekiwake, Kakuryu and Tochiozan, posted 7-8.

Sumo thus begins 2011 with a dominant yokozuna at the top of his game, a highly buoyant Toyonoshima back on the rank of sekiwake, and a 38-year-old ozeki going stronger than expected, within 20 victories of the all-time career win record. It is now up to Baruto, Kotooshu and Harumafuji to up their game and make it a year to remember.

And if others like Tochiozan wish to join them in that pursuit... well, the more the merrier.