

Technical Evaluation Tournament Review

by Chris Gould

With gaping holes on the banzuke, and equally noticeable ones in the audience, May's Technical Evaluation Tournament could hardly be classed as sumo's finest hour. Serious doubts were raised beforehand about whether such an obscure and unprecedented event should even go ahead. Such doubts were hardly allayed afterwards.

The hopes of sumo's hierarchy, whose judgment is so repeatedly being called into question, were obviously pinned on a peaceful 15 days to bridge the cavernous gap between the scandals of February and the next official tournament in July. And yet even after six days, sumo's quintessentially Japanese image of stable bliss created by deliberate silence towards anything extraordinary, proved unsustainable.

The spanner in the works came in the form of giant Estonian Baruto, one of sumo's more genuine characters whose contribution to the sport should be extolled in such saddening times. Highly educated and opinionated, Baruto ventured in an interview that with spectators not even paying to watch, the matches felt more like "fun and games" than serious contests. Anti-sumo elements in the media feigned customary outrage: "How dare such a senior wrestler, and a foreign one at that, suggest that professional sumotori have a cause to feel demotivated?" And yet, upon witnessing the sheer lethargy of grand champion Hakuho in losing the tournament's final match to crippled veteran Kaio, one can't help look for a little truth in Baruto's remarks.

Hakuho, lest we forget – and on this last display, we very well might – was supposedly at the peak of his powers before sumo went into meltdown, posting a staggering record of 88 wins and two defeats over 90 bouts – something not achieved since the great Tanikaze in the Edo era.



Ozeki Kaio

Kaio, as few need reminding, has been in the twilight of his career for several years now, and within just weeks of his 39th birthday is by a long way the oldest post-war ozeki. For the latter to defeat the former is simply embarrassing. For once, believing the match were fixed would actually be more palatable than believing it were not! After all, is it really helpful for sumo's popularity to believe that the sport's nigh-invincible champion, oft feted as the best ever, is incapable of mixing it with a cripple who has no further legitimate claims to even be on the

dohyo. It was a truly dreadful end to a dreadful 15 days.

Hakuho had already collected the May championship before losing to Kaio, thus cementing his 7th successive tournament title – equaling the record set in November 2005 by his legendary compatriot Asashoryu. His 13-2 score this time was the worst of his last seven, the second defeat to a highly average Harumafuji making it all the more disappointing. The Yokozuna Committee is doubtless preparing some stern words, and rightly so.



Yokozuna Hakuho

Those on the second rank will fare little better in the post tournament verdict. Kotooshu appeared to be nursing an injury and lost a stack of matches before withdrawing on the 11th day, making him kadoban for the first time since May 2008. On that occasion, he not only kept his rank but won the entire tournament – his only such success to date. It remains impossible to see how he will win another. Harumafuji fared much

better with 10 wins (two more than he posted last time out) but still disappointed against the lower rankers, who reduced him to 4-4 in the opening days. Baruto also garnered 10 wins but invited unwanted scrutiny of his “fun and games” comment in a pitiful second-half showing, which saw him lose four of his last six bouts. Most significant among those defeats was that to rising Georgian star Tochinoshin, whose outstanding 12-3 hopefully marks the start of his quest to become Europe’s third ozeki.



Tochinoshin

Other big impressions were made by feisty Mongolian Kakuryu, who beat compatriot Harumafuji again and whose 12-3 further underlined

his own ozeki credentials – some may say more so than existing ozeki. Japanese hopes were raised by Goeido, a man heavily punished for gambling on baseball last year but, somewhat counter-intuitively, apparently unconnected to the match-fixing scandal. Kotoshogiku is also in the ozeki hunt, roaring to ten wins from sekiwake. Alas, fellow third-ranker Kisenosato, so convincing in January, was once again guilty of criminal inconsistency, only scraping a kachi-koshi on the final day having been 4-6 and then relying on a default win against the injured Kotooshu. The words “Great Ozeki who never was” ring louder with every passing basho.

With the banzuke now shorn of 25 wrestlers in the wake of the match-fixing scandal, results of the survivors will be placed under ever tighter scrutiny – especially by SFM. Questions, unfortunately, must be asked about a wrestler – previously thought to be clean – who went 1-7 in both January (before the match-fixers were fired) and in May (after the match-fixers were fired). It might be the most unfortunate of coincidences, but the fact he finished 8-7 in January (miraculously winning 7 in a row) but slumped to 5-10 in May demands serious explanation.

SFM’s special congratulations this

issue are reserved for Brazilian-born Kaisei, who won the first nine bouts of his makuuchi debut and almost equaled the record of 11 set by the revered Taiho in 1960. Remarkably, this man was struggling in the fourth division barely three years ago, and his rise to stardom has been truly meteoric. With a juryo yusho to his name he has finally shown the hunger to develop a winning mentality. Much of his success can surely be attributed to the wise words of Kaio, who should take heart from his extensive coaching skills and concentrate on them full-time.

And so on to July, where it looks indeed as though Takayasu will become the first Heisei-born makuuchi man. However, the bigger news will surely concern the man who probably should be trading places with him. Should Takamisakari return to juryo for the first time in nine and half years, the top division will be deprived of its most popular wrestler. With sumo’s popularity taking hits left, right and center, the sumo association may well give the feted Robocop a top-division reprieve scarcely merited by his score. And, of course, should that happen, the debate about pre-arranging certain results for the common good would take on a yet more interesting turn.