

Nagoya 2011 Basho Review

Long-overdue change at the top brings additional excitement

by Chris Gould

After May's dreadful technical evaluation tournament, sumo desperately needed to revive itself as a spectator sport in July. For the first time in a long time, it did not disappoint. The winds of change finally hit gale-force, and blew the sumo association's faith in the winds of conservation out of the water. Nagoya 2011 was simply a feast of great sumo and drama, and a beacon of hope for the sport's immediate future.



Ozeki Kaio

The top of the banzuke looks set for much-needed root and branch reform. Veteran second-ranker Kaio, who turned 39 on the tournament's final day, finally called it quits after years of underperformances. A sizeable portion of fans relished seeing him soldier on against overwhelming odds, stamping and clapping while chanting his name, but a few days after his retirement there was nothing in the arena to suggest he was unbearably missed. While his



Ozeki Harumafuji

career has taken in the record number of sumo wins, and the joint-records for most tournaments won outside the yokozuna ranks and most basho as an ozeki, no-one spoken to by SFM questioned the timing of his retirement. It is time for the colossus to move on as a coach and fulfill his stated ambition of "training up strong sumotori."

Fellow ozeki Harumafuji, meanwhile, looks set to finally make the step up to the grand champion berth for which SFM tipped him two years ago. The 27-year-old Mongolian, perhaps spurred on by the birth of his wife's first child, went 14 days unbeaten for the first time in his career, skillfully outmanoeuvring the majestic Hakuho on the last of those days to clinch the Nagoya 2011 title. It was the first time in eight tournaments that Hakuho, who slipped to three defeats, had been prevented from claiming top honors, meaning that he continues to share the record of seven consecutive championships with

Asashoryu. And, in the most startling development of all, he suddenly looks incapable of repeating such dominance.

The final day saw his left elbow heavily bandaged and barely functional, resulting in a very lame defeat to giant Estonian Baruto, who whooped with delight upon recording just his second win over Hakuho in 20 encounters. It's the first time Hakuho has lost two matches in a row since January 2010, and only the second time since May 2008. With Hakuho's body eventually beginning to show the signs of wear and tear that every 26-year-old sumotori wrestles with, championships are sure to become more open, and Harumafuji now has his best ever chance to capitalize and seize yokozuna status by winning the upcoming September tournament.



Yokozuna Hakuho

In a fantastic final day's action

which threw up surprises and flying floor cushions in equal measure, Harumafuji was prevented from becoming only the eighth post-war ozeki to post a 15-0 score by the eternal nearly-man Kisenosato, who did his own ozeki hopes no harm with a hard-fought 10-5. The same score was posted by Mongolian Kakuryu, who now has 22 wins from two tournaments and probably needs just 11 more to become an ozeki next time. Both of them should have been pipped to the post by stocky Japanese Kotoshogiku, who needed 12 wins to become ozeki but somehow only managed 11 after first going 10-2.



Kyokutenho

He made heavy weather of his promotion home stretch, following up a surprising win over Hakuho (which earned him the Outstanding Performance Prize) with desperate defeats against the far lower-ranked Okinoumi and Wakanosato. A final-day drive-out of Fighting Spirit Prize winner Homasho (11-4) came too late to ensure he achieved his dreams this time. Sumo is now bereft of Japanese representation in the top

two ranks for the first time since it started (and that's a long, long time ago!)

The final day also sparked hopes that the rankings just below ozeki will also see some new faces in future. Towering 193-centimeter Okinoumi, whose great sumo physique is very similar to that of Hakuho, followed up an impressive May with an outstanding 8-7 against the top division's very best, even managing to beat muscular European Kotooshu on the final day. The match was truly bizarre, with the giant Bulgarian adjudged to have stepped out and lost, but continuing to fight, clobbering Okinoumi to the clay. The Japanese was none too happy, and the question of what Kotooshu intentionally or unintentionally did is certainly intriguing. Fellow big European Baruto (11-4), meanwhile, generally let himself down against the better wrestlers, but redeemed himself with a convincing win over Hakuho which could spur him on to a big score in September.

Other success stories of July saw Russian powerhouse Aran rack up 10 wins, and the current youngest makuuchi wrestler, Takayasu, continue to rise up the banzuke. The May tournament's surprise package, Kaisei, also posted a very respectable six wins from a high ranking position. The big failures were veteran Mongolian Kyokutenho, who suggested his phenomenal strength is finally waning with a 2-13, and crowd-favorite Takamisakari (3-12), who was lucky to be spared demotion last time but will now fall to the middle-ranks of the second division: juryo.

The second division championship this time was won by Miyogiryu, a struggler at that level last year but a clear beneficiary from a spate of recent retirements. At juryo's other end, former komusubi Kakizoe looks to be staring retirement in the face as his battered body registered a career-worst score of 1-14. It is a sad comedown from four years ago, when he would take on the makushita in his stable and beat them 25 times in a row. Akiseyama (formerly college-champion Fukao) also looked wayward, posting only two wins from 15 bouts. It is hoped that a return to the makushita division he fought so long to get out of may provide more of a wake-up call.



Takamisakari

While sumo's recent scandals have been met with widespread condemnation and even unbridled public anger, few can disagree that the resultant enforced shake-up of the rankings system was hugely positive for the sport. Bring on September!