

From Fukuoka to Fukuoka

The amazing coincidences surrounding the Japanese ozeki situation

by Chris Gould

It started with Takekaze miraculously falling over on the Fukuoka clay when defeating a local opponent seemed certain. It finished with Fukuoka-born Kotoshogiku struggling to rescue Japan from the ultimate sumo nightmare: no homegrown talent in the top-two ranks for the first time ever. Few would have thought these two events would ever have been linked. But linked they are, by a series of frightening coincidences which perhaps ought to warrant further investigation.

On the 11th day of the 2010 Fukuoka Basho, battle-worn local hero Kaio found himself in the middle of his best winning run for seven years: nine straight victories. At the age of 38, and with a recent record of barely scraping eight wins a tournament, his winning streak was nothing short of remarkable – especially as he had seemed so weak in losing his opening November match to a highly average Aminishiki. On day 11, he encountered Takekaze, a



Ozeki Kaio

pot-bellied vertically-challenged happy slapper who generally never troubles the top rankers, but who had defeated Kaio in Fukuoka the previous year by a fine push-out from behind. The 2010 match started brightly, and Kaio soon found himself in trouble to the extent that Takekaze got behind him and looked set to win in exactly the same fashion of a year previously.

And then the incredible climax. Takekaze suddenly fell over with Kaio facing in the other direction. Even the ringside judges could not believe it, let alone thousands of Fukuokans. Kaio's amazing run would continue for another day, finishing with 11 straight wins and eventually the tournament's runner-up honors. We now know that this was to be Kaio's last ever tournament on local soil, which coincidentally turned out to be his best performance for several years.

Even more strange was the coincidence which saw the NHK commentators predict his near-miss-out on the championship after only seven days, when there was no indication he could keep it going. "If he continues like this, he might actually win the title," said Mainoumi, even though nothing in Kaio's previous umpteen basho remotely suggested he would challenge for top honors. His NHK co-commentator simply replied that: "Ha! That would be asking a little too much wouldn't it?" thus predicting Kaio's near miss to a T. Did they know something we didn't?



Wakakoyu

Fast forward eight months to the July 2011 basho, and Kaio's ninth-day loss to up and coming Wakakoyu. Kaio has lost many matches over the last five years, and yet no commentator has morosely suggested he is in fatal decline. Mainoumi suddenly broke the trend after the Wakakoyu debacle, boldly declaring that "Kaio's power is just simply ebbing away, isn't it?" in a tone which fully suggested the end was nigh. One day later, the end (coincidentally?) came.

Kaio's retirement meant that for the first time in sumo's centuries-old history, Japan was left unrepresented in the top two ranks – a catastrophic situation for a government-sponsored sport. And yet, coincidentally enough, Kaio's retirement came at exactly the time that Kotoshogiku was finally ready to become the next Japanese ozeki. Within five days, he should have been one – with only his own ineptitude under pressure denying him against Okinoumi and Wakanosato.



Kotoshogiku

Amazingly, he was born only a few kilometers away from Kaio in Fukuoka.

Yet more amazingly, the NHK commentators again predicted his fate with manna-from-heaven accuracy, declaring that “if he could beat Hakuho, it would do his promotion chances the world of good.” At the time of that comment, there was nothing in Kotoshogiku’s form to justify it; he had only defeated Hakuho once in the previous 27 encounters. And yet, three days later, he conquered Hakuho for only the second time, earning “imminent ozeki promotion” headlines in the press and setting himself up for the biggest fall of his career to date.

Remarkable parallels were also drawn with Kaio’s career when, in the technical evaluation tournament in May 2011, he unexpectedly felled Hakuho for only the second time in five years. Coincidentally, the two occasions on which he won were the two

occasions on which he most needed to.

Alas, NHK’s crystal ball was found wanting on days 13 and 14, when Kotoshogiku very unexpectedly lost to both Okinoumi and Wakanosato – two wrestlers guaranteed never to go easy on a foe. In sumo, what’s in the script tends to happen, and the sumo world was stunned at Kotoshogiku tearing up his own script. The man himself was reported by NHK to be screaming in the shower after his second loss. The sumo association must have been screaming inside too. The banzuke now has no Japanese yokozuna or ozeki for the first time ever. It is up to Fukuokan Kotoshogiku to ensure this situation changes after only one tournament.