

Review of 2011

by Chris Gould

The decade is already a fifth old, leaving a sense of not only how quickly time has flown, but also how astonishingly much can have happened in that short period. Had somebody ventured to suggest in January 2010 that within the next 18 months one yokozuna and three ozeki would retire, they would have been labelled “brave.” Had they also suggested that one ozeki would be fired and several other rikishi punished for gambling, that 25 sumo association members would be forced to resign over match-fixing, and that a tournament would be cancelled for the first time in 66 years, they would have been labelled “barney.”



Takamisakari

But all this did happen – and more. And with the benefit of hindsight, we may venture to add that the timing of all these events so soon after the Liberal Democratic Party lost its vice-like grip on power in September 2009 is far from coincidental. But that has yet to be proved – unlike the match-fixing, the text message details of which made for fascinating reading!

In terms of PR disasters, the sumo association must have had the full bucket-load emptied upon their bewildered heads in the past two years. But, where there is darkness comes a new dawn, and despite the dangerous threats posed to sumo's crowd-pulling power by the disappearance of so many popular rikishi of late, recent basho have shown that new stars, and a new era, could be in the making. Kotoshogiku grabbed



Takayasu

the gauntlet ahead of Kisenosato and earned promotion to ozeki with his showing in July, although the sumo association put appearances first and wouldn't promote him until he registered a slightly better score in September. Kisenosato, who was heavily rumoured to be in line for an ozeki promotion before the March tournament was shockingly cancelled, emulated Kotoshogiku's achievement in November, and earned an immediate battering from his new ozeki rival in the first match after his promotion was announced. It will be interesting to see how the two fare against each other in their quest to become Japan's top dog.

Sumo's only existing yokozuna, Hakuho, who won the Kyushu basho and failed to take the top honours on all but one occasion in 2011, said in his final matchday interview of the year that he hoped the rise of Kisenosato and Kotoshogiku would herald a new era for sumo in 2012, and that he hoped one of them would make yokozuna soon. He also vowed to do his best for those who suffered in north east Japan in the Great Earthquake this year, especially as the day of the disaster was actually his own birthday! Many fans not only place hope in his words, but actually believe them.



Ozeki Kotoshogiku

While the year just gone will forever be remembered for text messages and forced resignations off the dohyo, some hugely significant events also happened in the ring itself. Let us not forget that eternal ozeki Kaio, just days before his 39th birthday, somehow managed to break the all-time record for sumo career wins on the fifth day of the July tournament, lanky Mongolian Kyokutenho going down in history as the



Ozeki Kisenosato

man that he beat. Kaio then retired less than a week later, leaving the rankings list without a home-grown yokozuna or ozeki for only the second time in its 250-year-plus history. That at least helps explain why Kisenosato was promoted to ozeki with only 32 wins from 45 matches, one victory less than the stated requirement. Japan not only needs him, but needs someone from in their confines to act as a standard bearer for a national sport which has become overrun by foreigners (not necessarily a bad thing).

In 2011, the January tournament was won without incident by Hakuho, and the March tournament was cancelled. In the wake of the match-fixing debacle, the May tournament was classified as a "Technical Evaluation meet" which appeared to be greeted with scorn by giant Estonian Ozeki Baruto. He earned a reprimand for his light-hearted remarks, leaving Hakuho to take the plaudits and the championship with time to spare, thus allowing for Kaio to beat him in what proved to be his last match in

Tokyo. To widespread surprise, Hakuho failed to break Asashoryu's record of seven successive tournament victories in July, when Harumafuji came from nowhere to win 14 bouts in 14 days. Muscular Mongolian Harumafuji then spurned the chance to record the only 15-0 yusho of the year, losing a final-day thriller to Kisenosato, who enhanced his own ozeki credentials no end. Harumafuji then wilted appallingly in September and November, garnering only 16 wins from the two tournaments put together and losing to Hakuho easily both times. Hakuho thus collected the last two championships of the

So, what's in store for 2012? Don't expect the personnel at the top of the banzuke to change at all; they are all too young, too healthy and too untainted by scandal to retire. The big questions are whether Baruto can make the giant step to yokozuna, and whether exciting Mongolian Kakuryu can fill his giant shoes at the rank of ozeki. Expect ever-popular Robocop Takamisakari to retire, and keep an eye on veteran Tochinsonada to see if his extraordinary strength and stamina will suddenly disappear. The Bulgarian press, meanwhile, have been bigging up the young giant Aoiyama, who has risen through the ranks meteorically until now. And



Yokozuna Hakuho

year, unusually without posting a perfect score. Interestingly, there was no talk of his seeking to break annual win records this time round. He knows his body is no longer what it was two years ago, and that Baruto is now starting to beat him regularly. Of the existing ozeki, only Baruto looks capable of consistently posting high enough scores to challenge for yokozuna. Should he replicate the form of March 2010, next year should be very exciting indeed.

super-fan Bebelita Takayasu will ensure that her son, who wrestles under the family name, will battle every inch of the way to secure a sanyaku ranking. Takayasu's first match with Hakuho, in the next basho, will make for interesting viewing indeed.

Is this a new dawn for sumo, filled with optimism? I emphatically think so.