

Haru Bashi Summary

*Text by Lon Howard
Photos by Chris Gould*

Sometimes I yield to the urge and search for a descriptive catch phrase to describe a basho or a yusho-winner's performance, so this time in view of the college basketball championships now underway here in the U.S., I'll call yokozuna Hakuho's zensho yusho in the Haru Bashi "Nothin' But Net." There were a couple of unfocused moments but he was so onto his game that he overcame them with ease. At the outset he and fellow yokozuna Asashoryu were on another collision course to decide the title on senshuraku, but the twin zensho runs ended on day 10 when ozeki Harumafuji slipped to the side of Asashoryu at the tachiai and took control of the match, eventually pushing the yokozuna out from the rear.



Yokozuna Asashoryu

From there Asashoryu appeared to be out of energy, losing two days later to Kotomitsuki, his former patsy. Then on the last two days he seemed to be out of motivation as well, offering token resistance to both ozeki Kotooshu and then to

Hakuho. His loss to Kotooshu was a yusho-clincher for Hakuko on Day 14, and then on senshuraku he was beaten at the tachiai and just waited to be pushed out, giving up on the match while he was still inside the tawara.

Asashoryu later mentioned that his left elbow had stiffened during the basho's second half, and I'll buy into that since in the early stages he did appear to be as commanding as he was in January. Hakuho himself reported a bad ankle and a flu bug toward the end but said those afflictions made him relax – somehow.



Yokozuna Hakuho

From this perspective, Hakuho has been looking relaxed ever since Asashoryu's two-basho suspension at the end of 2007. Irrespective of that possible connection, it's clear that a more relaxed Hakuho is a more powerful Hakuho. When he was winding his way up makuuchi I remember dubbing him "Mr. Slick" because he won so many of his matches with minimal energy – slipping, sliding, pulling and throwing, usually in combination.

That was then, but now he is a pure full-on yokozuna in the classic sense: neutralize the opponent's charge and get a grip, work him to the edge and then over, with an occasional nage just to give them something to think about. As entertainment it's boring but as a fitting yokozuna hallmark it's priceless, and right now the fans are eating it up even though there is rarely anyone around to challenge him.

Certainly not the ozeki. In one sense you could say they improved since it was the first time in eight basho that more than one of them recorded at least ten wins. But it was only ten wins for the two that did, and of those two, only Kotooshu's performance had any merit, at least juxtaposing some great deashi with his usual mental lapses. Conversely for Harumafuji, he unleashed three and a half tachiai henka in the final six days to record four of his last five wins and look okay on paper. Sadly, he seems intent on preserving his ozeki rank the same way he got it – with a wily tachiai. It could simply be a lack of confidence or comfort with the rank to this point but if this trend continues I may give him a new nickname. Chiyonofuji The Wolf will be succeeded by The Coyote, as in Wile E Coyote.

As for the other three ozeki, Kaio surprised everyone by starting 8-3 but surprised no one with his 8-7 meltdown, while Kotomitsuki wandered aimlessly throughout despite upsetting Asashoryu on day 12. After notching his own kachi koshi the next day against his feeble counterpart, Chiyotaikai, he limped home by losing a

mawashi tussle with the normally belt-inept maegashira 4 Takekaze and then another one to sekiwake Baruto even though he had the superior position. He may not have overcome the effects of the gout that plagued him in January but whatever the cause, his fragility in March lends credence to the idea that Asashoryu was also not physically fit when the two of them fought.



Tochiozan

In trying to explain Chiyotakai's sorry 2-13 performance, we'll go with what was suggested and pin it on an injured oblique muscle. That area was taped from about day 5 and it's not known when or how it was injured. What really needs explaining is how his oyakata could allow him to finish the basho and set a new record for ozeki losses in a single basho. It was obvious he was hurting and that from day 10 he would be lucky to win even one more bout, and after day 11 especially he had fought both yokozuna and there were no more appearances to keep up. If he can't recover and loses his rank in May, you'll really have to wonder about the effects of going all the way to the end.

If Baruto and komusubi Goeido get any better there may not be enough wins left for either Chiyotakai or Kaio to stay at

ozeki, injuries notwithstanding. Among his six lowest-ranking opponents, the only loss suffered by Baruto was to a tachiai henka by maegashira 1 Kakuryu, and he has already shown that he can crush any of the ozeki. He did have to win his last four bouts to preserve his sekiwake rank though, and was pressed hard in three of those bouts. As many expected, Goeido's second shot at komusubi went much better than the first, and his crisp 9-6 mark should place him alongside Baruto at the sekiwake west slot. From here he needs only more experience and possibly a bit more bulk. Less reliance on backward-moving waza would further sharpen his competitiveness.

The head shaking begins anew for shin sekiwake Kisenosato, who at times looked asleep on the way to a dismal 5-10. Is it yet time to give up on the oft-christened 'next Japanese yokozuna?' We can say that he's still young – only 22 – but he's been in and out of sanyaku four times in nearly four years, each trip looking worse than the last. Moreover, he spent over four years before that coming up the ranks all the way from mae zumo. That's plenty of time to develop a comfort zone with all aspects of the game and the life. We know he can beat everyone because he has, so it's clear his turmoil is mental. Can he learn presence of mind after all this time? The questions continue but for how long will they be relevant?

The big surprise of the basho was unquestionably the 10-5 thrown down by maegashira 1 Kakuryu. It not only earned him the Gino Sho technique prize but will also make him a sanyaku for the first time. He's an intriguing rikishi, slightly undersized with wide-ranging skills, yet unspectacular. Only one of his 15 makuuchi basho has been spent at a double-digit maegashira rank so we know he's rubbed elbows with a few of the big boys. Now he'll get to push and shove

with every one of them, and that's a whole new ball game.



Kakuryu

The remaining sanyaku slot left open by komusubi Kyokutenho's expected departure (6-9 in Haru) will be filled by either maegashira 2 Tochiozan (8-7) or maegashira 7 Homasho (11-4). It should be Tochiozan since he defeated three ozeki early on and burst to a 7-3 start before running out of gas against the rest of the sanyaku. Homasho faced no sanyaku opponents and was awarded the Kanto Sho fighting spirit prize, even though the most distinguishing aspect of his show in Haru was his practice of not touching down his left hand at the tachiai – sometimes without pretense. But since he was only called on it twice, why should he, I suppose? Despite the lure, he's more of a wistful wish than a new young hope. He's not new, not that young, has sustained several serious injuries and defeated just two sanyaku opponents in the last eight basho – long odds for such a short resume.

The young Russian Aran showed enough raw power and not-so-raw technique at maegashira 11 to start some buzz apart from that related to his addiction to henka. After four canny tachiai in the first six days netted only two wins, he was 7-2 the rest of the way while playing it straight, finishing at

10-5. So for now, he joins a long list of big raw-boned foreign rikishi who looked scary early but ended up wandering all over the banzuke. Further down, maegashira 13 Chiyohakuho's 10-5 showed a new dash of panache on the belt that surprised some of his opponents.

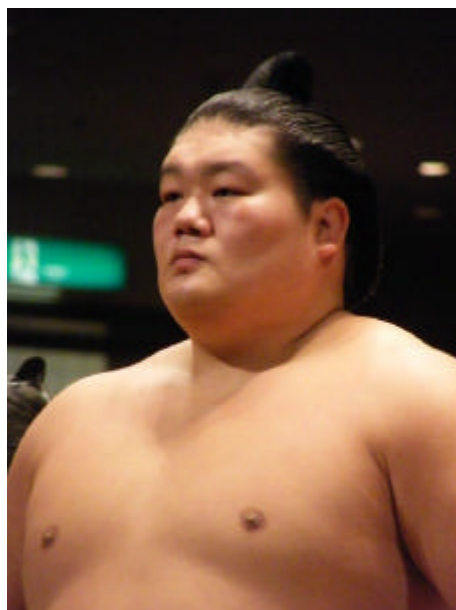


Chiyohakuho

There were no more movers or shakers but the mild 8-7 surprise by maegashira 6 Tamanoshima will place him at his highest rank in two years, somewhere just behind Homasho; and Maegashira 5 Aminishiki's nine wins will also put him in that grouping. Maegashira 6 Toyonoshima will be right there with them with his 8-7, although his listless torikumi showed he's not over the left arm injury suffered from Kaio's kotenage in January.

The biggest banzuke diver in May will be maegashira 1 Hokutoriki,

whose 2-13 stinker will send him far enough down so that he can easily rebound and further buff his elevator statistics. It was hardly the most notable failure though.



Hokutoriki

That belongs to maegashira 3 Tokitenku, who in little more than a year – with no discernable physical maladies – has gone from a potential sanyaku regular to a makuuchi also-ran. He looked even worse on the dohyo than his 5-10 looks on paper, showing no appetite for resistance when pushed around. Are there hidden health issues there?

Maegashira 2 Kotoshogiku recorded the fourth 6-9 in his last five basho – two of those wins fashioned with henka – and it's very obvious that as his sumo slips, so does his confidence.

Maegashira 8 Kokkai will tumble toward juryo again, losing his last eight bouts after starting 5-2.

At the bottom of makuuchi, shin nyu maku Shotenro's 7-8 at maegashira 12 was good enough for a return ticket, and number 13 Yamamotoyama will also stay in with his 8-7. Maegashira 15 Tosanoumi returns to juryo with 4-11, along with number 16 Toyozakura, whose return to makuuchi was short and sour, recording only five wins. Maegashira 15 Kimurayama takes the bubble seat with 7-8.

Looking ahead to the Natsu Basho, many people are writing Asashoryu off again, citing his mercurial physical health. The consensus about his present modus operandi is that if he falls behind Hakuho in the yusho chase, then he'll back off and save himself for the next basho. Many are predicting retirement as early as this year, saying he won't continue as the 'other yokozuna.'

All of this makes sense in the mind but as I mentioned last time, I'm done predicting what happens with him or even pretending to know what is important to him. In contrasting the two yokozuna, the only thing I'm certain of right now is that the younger Hakuho is more capable of overcoming what ails him. So maybe I've been talked into believing that it really is all about the elbow. Maybe...