

How many *yokozuna* will we have in Tokyo in September? In Fukuoka in November? And more difficult still, in 2008? Two months ago, it all seemed so straightforward. Whatever divinity allots good fortune to sumo wrestlers was pretty even-handed in Nagoya in July. No clean sweep, but modified good news for more than one.

Kotomitsuki, at age 31, became the oldest man ever to be promoted to sumo's second-highest rank, *ozeki*. Everyone agreed that it was his last chance: If he muffed it this time, he would never get within reach again. His posture at the *tachiai* (initial jump-off) is not good, and his chances of being a good *ozeki* – let alone a great one – are limited indeed; but for the time being all is smiles in Sadogatake-beya, whose retired master had already promised to bestow his own professional name, Kotozakura, if his protégé made *ozeki*.

New yokozuna Hakuho faltered, but finished with an 11-4 score, respectable for a newly-promoted man whose time is occupied with important events and important people.

And Asashoryu, after a loss on Day 1, won the remaining 14 bouts and clinched his 21st victory – the first in four tournaments, since in the meantime, Hakuho had won the two consecutive victories he needed to qualify for yokozuna promotion.

For a week or so during the great Asashoryu row in late July/early August, the Internet was buzzing, especially in the mailing lists and other forums. Soon two clear camps emerged: Asashoryu has saved sumo from extinction and deserves praise, not censure; the Kyokai (Sumo Association) is a short-sighted group of old men who are anti-foreigner. Conversely, Asashoryu's latest escapade is only one in a line of unacceptable behaviour and the Kyokai has been relatively restrained.

A brief recap: Throughout the Nagoya *basho* (tournament), Shoryu had been in considerable pain and had been receiving treatment at home in the evenings. After the *basho*, he submitted a doctor's certificate citing a stress fracture of the lower back which would prevent him from taking part in the upcoming *junryo* tour of Tohoku and Hokkaido from August 3 to 20. This was a disappointment, as the tour was much longer than in recent years; the Kyokai was working hard to get its following back.

Disappointment turned to fury when, before the tour even started, Japanese TV news showed the yokozuna playing football in his native Mon-

golia. In vain did his supporters produce a raft of extenuating circumstances: no dice. While the match was an amateur one for charity, it aroused an outcry in Japan. Sometimes in the past an injured yokozuna went along on a *junryo* in a ceremonial role, performing his *dohyo-iri* entrance ceremony, but not taking part in the bouts. But here was a man who claimed to be too ill to manage even that, leaving the country without letting his employers know, and playing football. Personally, I think he might still have got away with it, if he hadn't scored a goal.

An emergency meeting of the Board of

the manager of the American baseball team. An emergency meeting of the Kyokai directors banned him from competing any more. Ever. Period. Having no choice, he submitted his resignation. Coincidentally, he then became Takasago-oyakata, a forerunner of Asashoryu's master.

A different case was the "bad boy" yokozuna, the brilliant but erratic Wajima. He was physically there, but his extramural activities didn't leave him much energy for sumo; the Kyokai bigwigs eventually "gated" him – ordered him to move back out of the bachelor pad and into the stable. One of the most striking powers of the Kyokai was demonstrated after Wajima's retirement. He had taken over the Hanakago name, the stock in the Sumo Association that enabled him to use that elder name. When it came out that he had used the *myoseki* as collateral for a large loan, the Kyokai simply took it away from him. This left him high and dry; he was no longer a member of the association. He was O-U-T out.

Another promising young man, yokozuna Futahagoro, was promoted too soon, got frustrated at his lack of success, hit one of his juniors so hard that he broke his eardrum, and finally had a flaming row with his stablemaster and the stable's chief supporter, and strode out of the room in such a rage that he brushed the stablemaster's wife out of the way as she tried to hold him back. Without waiting for the association to act, his master handed in Futahagoro's resignation, which was accepted.

Please note that these men were Japanese. The one really big "racism" row flamed up when Samoan-Hawaiian Konishiki, a successful *ozeki*, was reported to have said, "I'd be a yokozuna today if it wasn't for racism." This was quoted in the *New York Times*, and we continue to see the boilerplate assertion that "Konishiki qualified for yokozuna promotion but was denied it." In fact, he never met the qualifications. But in any case, Konishiki tearfully denied having said it at all, and the furor subsided.

A bittersweet moment came earlier, when the Kyokai's spokesman informed Kotomitsuki of his promotion to *ozeki*. The spokesman was the former *sekiwake* Hasegawa, who won a *yusho* (that's his giant picture hanging in Ryogoku Station) and was reasonably well qualified for *ozeki* promotion, but the bigwigs decided they had enough *ozeki* at the time. Their refusal knocked the stuffing out of him and he never got close again. **KTO**



In your dreams, chum!

Doreen Simmons puts the Asashoryu controversy in context

Directors decided on suspension for the next two *basho* (September and November) and a 30 percent cut in salary for four months. His stablemaster, Takasago-oyakata (the former *ozeki* Asashio), got the same salary cut, for not giving him a better steer. A yokozuna is expected to pace himself, but his master has some responsibility if he seems to be going off track.

Some foreign journalists are trying to make out that this punishment is uniquely severe, and hint that it is based on racism. It's unique, all right; some Japanese yokozuna who stepped over the line have been sacked outright.

An almost parallel case occurred in October 1949 when Maedayama, an excellent *ozeki* but a failure as a yokozuna, was 1-5 in Osaka, reported sick and returned to Tokyo. He actually went to a big international baseball match, and the papers were full of photos of him shaking hands with