2012 saw a lot of fighters who established themselves in 2011 turn into stars in 2012, as numerous win streaks were expanded on and titles won or defended. While choosing fighter of the year was quite difficult, I felt there were two men in particular who had the most impressive year and because of this, I saw this category as a tie.

Winner: **Hirotaka Urabe (2012 Record: 5-0-2, 4 KO) and Naoki Ishikawa (2012 Record: 2-0-2, 0 KO)** - While I felt compelled to side with Krush in their decision of Hirotaka Urabe as fighter of the year, I felt equally compelled to place the man who fought him to a draw twice, Naoki Ishikawa, in that same category. Although Urabe went 5-0-0 with 4 stoppages in his fights that weren't against Ishikawa while Naokick only went 2-0-0, I felt that each of them had only one really solid win outside of their draws against each other, with Urabe defeating Xavier Bastard and Ishikawa beating Kan Itabashi. These two proved twice this year that they are each other's equals and despite Urabe's impressive slew of knockouts this year, I felt the 33 year old Ishikawa was just as deserving as his decade younger counterpart.

Runners up: **Yuta Kubo (2012 Record: 3-0-0, 2 KO)** - This list would hardly be complete without the man most people tout as Japan's top talent as he had another solid 2012, pushing his win streak to 11. He picked up a pair of wins against foreign competition in Charles Francois and Abdallah Ezbiri and a knockout of top Japanese Welterweight Yuya Yamato, all while gradually moving up in weight in each fight. While relative inactivity kept him from being a serious contender for the top spot, he could quickly find himself in contention in 2013 should he

run through the Krush 67kg tournament in January.

Hiroki Akimoto (2012 Record: 5-0-0, 3 KO) - Being the only fighter from the prospect list to make it onto this list as well, Akimoto had as impressive a 2012 as any other fighter. He improved to 17-0-0 in his pro career, started the year with 3 straight knockouts, which pushed his KO streak to 7 in a row, and in his last two fights of the year, he beat top 5 Featherweights Yosuke Morii and Shunta Ito, making no doubt in anyone's mind that he was the top Featherweight in Japan. 2013 will be a crucial year for the 20 year old as he looks to make the foray into the international scene, though whether he aims for a Lumpinee title or a stint in Glory or K-1 is yet to be seen.

Masahiro Yamamoto (2012 Record: 3-0-0, 1 KO) - Despite only 3 fights this year, Yamamoto made his stamp on the international scene by capturing the It's Showtime 61kg title from Javier Hernandez in July. He followed that up with a win over Raz Sarkisjan teammate Mansour Yaqubi at RISE/M-1MC Infinity. Though It's Showtime is now defunct, Yamamoto will likely be a key player in Glory or K-1's supposed weight class expansions. After a 2010 that saw him lose 3 straight fights, including a K-1 tournament fight to Tetsuya Yamato, a WBC Japan title fight to Rashata and his first crack at the It's Showtime title to Sergio Wielzen, Yamamoto put together a strong 2011 and 2012 that saw him once again establish himself as one of Japan's top Lightweights.

Yosuke Mizuochi (2012 Record: 5-1-0, 3 KO) - Mizuochi is definitely the most under the radar fighter on this list, but he has quietly become one of Japan's top Lightweights over the course of the past 2 years, amassing a 10-1-0 record with wins over Yoshinori Nakasuka, Keiji Ozaki, Keijiro Miyakoshi, Shingen Endo, Yoshito Kajita and most recently Nong'an Sasiprapa, winning the WPMF Japan and World Lightweight titles and the WBC Japan Lightweight title in the process. He is poised to go from surging unknown to full blown star in 2013 should he continue his destruction through the Lightweight ranks and it could culminate in some shots against Japan's top Lightweights.

Shota Takiya (2012 Record: 3-0-0, 2 KO) - Another victim of not fighting often, Takiya pushed his unbeaten streak to 10 in a row, while pushing his KO streak to 5, although that was snapped in his most recent fight. He defended his Krush title twice with a 71 second knockout of Nobuchika Terado and in a rematch of the quarterfinals of the Krush 55kg tournament against Takumi. With KENJI leaving the sport, the only really interesting matchups for Takiya in Japan are a 3rd fight with Ryuya Kusakabe or Takumi or a fight with Keisuke Miyamoto, and the Miyamoto and Kusakabe fights seem rather unlikely. He faces Mike Alamos, brother of Lumpinee Stadium champ Damien Alamos, on January 14th to start off 2013.

Sun Hyun Lee (2012 Record: 4-0-0, 2 KO) - After making his name known to fans in late 2010/early 2011 with a beatdown of Kizaemon Saiga in K-1 and a disputed extension round decision loss to Koya Urabe in Krush, Lee returned to notoriety in late 2011 when he lost a majority decision to RISE 65kg champ Koji Yoshimoto, a fight that would have gone to an extension round had Lee not missed weight. 2012 saw him shine as he picked up wins over RISE 63kg champion Yuki, top RISE Lightweights Yuto Watanabe and Shohei Asahara and a 1st round stoppage of M-1's Buakaw WSR at Infinity. He is set to rematch Yuki for the RISE title on January 6th at Infinity.II and a win could see him vault into LiverKick's Lightweight rankings, as Yuki's stock has gone up significantly since a win over Javier Hernandez.

Masaaki Noiri (2012 Record: 3-1-0, 0 KO) - Despite a strong 2012, including nabbing the #1 spot on LiverKick's Lightweight rankings, the image most people have in their mind of Noiri's 2012 was his upset loss to Raz Sarkisjan at the Hoost Cup. Noiri showed amazing heart and determination, managing to drop Sarkisjan in the 3rd round after being dropped twice himself in the previous round, but he still ended up losing the fight. However, his 2012 saw him pick up wins over Cedric Peynaud, Makihira Keita, and most importantly Yetkin Ozkul, who was ranked #4 on the LiverKick rankings at the time and coming in off of a knockout of Krush 63kg champ Thomas Adamandopoulos.

Rena (2012 Record: 3-0-0, 0 KO) - After an up and down 2011 which saw her drop fights to Ai Takahashi and Jessica Penne while defeating Erika Kamimura, Rena fought only 3 times in 2012, though they all took place on the same night at this year's Shootboxing Girls S-Cup. After cruising in the quarterfinals against Australia's Kim Townsend, she needed an extension round to get past Seo Hee Ham before defeating V.V Mei for the second time in the S-Cup finals to capture her 3rd straight Girls S-Cup title. While fans didn't get the matchup with Erika Kamimura that most expected, Rena did prove that she is still the girl to beat in Shootboxing and, if she wins her rematch with Kamimura in RISE, the best female fighter in Japan.

Koya Urabe (2012 Record: 7-1-0, 2 KO) - After a devastating 2011 which saw him make it to 3 tournament finals only to lose in each one, Koya Urabe came back strong in 2012. After a close win over Kizaemon Saiga, Urabe hit a setback with a majority decision loss to NJKF champ Keijiro Miyakoshi in a fight most had favored him to win. However, Urabe rattled off 6 straight wins to close out the year including picking up his first career tournament win in the Krush 2012 63kg Youth GP, stopping Kengo Sonoda in the quarters, decisioning Hiroto Yamaguchi in the semis and picking apart Hisaki Higashimoto in the finals en route to a highlight-reel 3rd round stoppage. He closed out the year with an emphatic decision win over Mickael Peynaud and looks to once again establis himself as a top Lightweight in 2013.