2012 saw a lot of change for the Japanese scene, with Krush and RISE bringing in an unprecedented amount of foreign competition, as well as other promotions like Shootboxing and the Hoost Cup featuring foreign fighters against top Japanese stars. This influx of international competition was the result of 5 of my 7 upsets of the year. However, none was more surprising and significant than the winner.

Winner: **Yuki vs Javier Hernandez (RISE 90, October 25th) -** Both men were coming into the fight after a rough year. After winning the It's Showtime 61kg title from Karim Bennoui in one of 2011's fights of the year, Hernandez started 2012 with a loss to Reuben Almeida, then after a win over Carlos Reyes, lost his It's Showtime title to Masahiro Yamamoto. Yuki started his year with a defense of his RISE 63kg title against Yuto Watanabe, but not without having to stage a huge comeback. Then, he dropped a decision to RISE Korea champion Sun Hyun Lee. Heading into this fight, Hernandez was still considered a top 5 Lightweight, while Yuki probably wouldn't have made it into a top 25. That's when everything got weird, as Yuki used his signature strikes, his low kicks, to stop Hernandez in the 2nd round. Everyone knew Hernandez was susceptible to low kicks and Yuki threw them hard, but nobody expected this. The win vaulted Yuki to #4 on the LiverKick Lightweight rankings.

Runners up: **Raz Sarkisjan vs Masaaki Noiri (Hoost Cup, May 20th) -** Masaaki Noiri has been one of the hottest commodities in Japanese kickboxing since he defeated Hiroya in the K-1 Koshien semifinals back in 2009. Coming into the fight, he had racked up wins over the likes of Hirotaka Urabe, Ryuji Kajiwara, Hiroya (again), Cedric Peynaud and a highlight reel knockout of Koya Urabe to cap off 2011. However, he had shown a tendency to get into slugfests with brawlers, something his questionable defense and chin could not keep up with. Enter Raz Sarkisjan, an unkown Dutch-Armenian. After an uneventful first round, Sarkisjan dropped Noiri twice in the 2nd round, surprising everyone in attendance. Showing his heart and determination, Noiri came back in the 3rd like a man on a mission, but was only able to drop his opponent once before the final bell rang. The scorecards were announced, and Sarkisjan won a unanimous decision.

Lorena Klijn vs Erika Kamimura (Shootboxing Girls S-Cup, August 25th) - 2011 was the year of Erika Kamimura as she built upon the reputation she had created in 2010 as a knockout

machine, winning the Girls S-Cup Japan Qualifying tournament with 2 stoppages and a fight of the year contender against Seo Hee Ham. Her hype train was derailed a little bit when she lost a decision to end the year against her rival Rena, but she seemed determined in 2012, stopping her first opponent in 33 seconds, then winning another fight against Ham, earning her another shot at Rena in RISE. However, the 2012 Girls S-Cup represented another shot at Rena for Kamimura, as the two were on opposite sides of the draw and most had them pegged to meet for a 2nd time in the finals. Holland's Lorena Klijn was one of the few that did not expect, or want, that to happen. After an even 3 rounds, the two went to an extension round where Klijn managed to score a shoot point, sealing her victory. A stunned Kamimura could do nothing but watch as Rena went on to claim her 3rd straight Girls S-Cup title, and she has Klijn to blame for it.

To continue reading about the other 4 major upsets, click read more

Chang Hyun Lee vs Genji Umeno (K-1 Rising World GP Final 16, October 14th) - Like Noiri, Genji Umeno was one of Japan's biggest stars throughout most of 2011 and 2012. He had dismantled nearly all of the competition put him front of him, including a one-sided unanimous decision over Yosuke Morii in one of 2011's most hyped fights. After getting himself ranked at Lumpinee Stadium, Umeno made the curious move of taking an offer to fight in K-1 under kickboxing rules, as well as moving up to 61kg. His opponent was the unknown Chang Hyun Lee. Lee was the stablemate of another South Korean who had made his name known with a surprising win in K-1, Sun Hyun Lee, who battered Kizaemon Saiga to a unanimous decision back in 2010. This time it was Chang Hyun, also known as Little Sun Hyun Lee, who shocked the world, fighting Umeno close for two exciting rounds before scoring a decisive knockdown in the 3rd. In doing so, the two not only produced one of the best fights of the year, but one of the biggest upsets.

Hisaki Higashimoto vs Hiroya (Krush 63kg Youth GP Opener, September 9th) - After being billed as the next Masato due to his success in K-1 Koshien (tournament runner-up at 15, tournament winner at 16), Hiroya failed to live up to expectations. While living up to the moniker of "next Masato" was a bit unrealistic for a teenager, Hiroya had failed to establish himself as an elite fighter, with this fight being preceded by another upset loss to Naoki. In this year's Youth GP, he was put on the opposite side of the bracket as Koya Urabe and the two were thought to be the tournament favorites, setting up a rematch of the 2008 K-1 Koshien finals. Kyokushin practitioner Hisaki Higashimoto had other ideas. While having an extensive background in Kyokushin competition, Higashimoto had 0 experience as a professional kickboxer and his fight

against Hiroya was his first. Hiroya's weakness had always been his boxing defense, but he wouldn't have that exposed against a Kyokushin practitioner, right? Wrong. Higashimoto tagged Hiroya with a left hand that wobbled his legs and sent him crashing to the ground. Despite looking as though he were still there, Hiroya was unable to find his legs and the referee was forced to call the bout. Higashimoto made it to the finals, where he was picked apart by Koya Urabe, but he had already proven he belonged in the division just 1 fight into his career.

Gagny Baradji vs Hideaki Yamazaki (Krush.25, December 14th) - Hideaki Yamazaki went from prospect to title contender in 2012, putting together a perfect record (5-0-0, 1 KO) in the Krush WILDRUSH League and earning himself a shot at Krush 63kg champion Thomas Adamandopoulos. One of the biggest narratives in Krush this year had been the influx of French opposition that had been brought in to test their top fighters. Gagny Baradji, a Savate champion, had been brought in to face Yamazaki. Most had Yamazaki pegged as a huge favorite, as Baradji's kickboxing career was a bit unknown. All seemed to be going well for the #1 contender as he dropped Baradji in the first round. However, just under a minute into the 2nd round, Yamazaki found himself on the ground, unable to steadily regain his feet, forcing the referee to stop the fight. Should Yamazaki find a way to beat Adamandopoulos, I have a good idea who Krush, and probably Yamazaki, might want to bring in as his first title challenger.

TOMOYUKI vs Kenta (NJKF: Kick to the Future 1, February 18th) - Kenta had a breakthrough year in 2011, winning the Krush 70kg tournament with wins over Masakazu Watanabe, Hiroki Nakajima and Yutaro Yamauchi. He picked up a win over Yasuhiro Kido in the opening round of the 2011 K-1 MAX Japan Tournament, but lost a disputed extra round decision to Yuya Yamamoto in the semis of a fight of the year contender. After reaching the level of success he did, Kenta went on to have a pretty dismal 2012, which saw him go 2-3, losing two of his three titles in the process. But the fight that started it all was a matchup against Thai Fight participant Tomoyuki. After 3 tough rounds, Tomoyuki had his hand raised, winning a majority decision and vaulting himself into the top 10 of Japanese Middleweights and sparking a prosperous 2012 which saw him go 5-2.