

Ryogoku: The Mecca of Sumo

The Japanese brand of wrestling known as *sumo*, which for a long time was considered to be a rather weird sport by all Westerners except for a few real Japanophiles, is enjoying immense popularity at the moment not only in Japan but also overseas. Indeed, the sport has caught on so much internationally that Japanese fans are now taking a second look at *sumo* wrestlers after reading in the newspapers about a London bookmaker placing odds on them.

Hawaiian giants

When the U.S. television network CNN came to Tokyo from the end of March to the beginning of April to broadcast live the mammoth "Asia Week" special, one of the programs featured famous TV host Larry King interviewing four Hawaiian-born *sumo* wrestlers—Akebono, who had just been promoted to the highest rank of *yokozuna* (grand champion); Konishiki, an *ozeki* (second rank behind *yokozuna*) who weighs in at about 260 kilograms; stablemaster Azumazeki, the former *sumo* wrestler Jesse Takamiyama, who scouted Akebono in Hawaii; and newcomer Musashimaru, who is hot on the heels of Akebono and Konishiki.

The four giants visited the TV studio and chatted openly with King in front of a Japanese audience. When King asked Akebono, the first foreign *yokozuna*, whether he felt any discrimination because of his nationality, Akebono promptly replied "no," to which the audience gave a spontaneous round of applause. The meaning of this clapping ran deep, however.

Konishiki, who had been on the verge of promotion to the highest rank on a number of occasions, reportedly had blamed his failure to gain promotion on discrimination. (Actually, Konishiki claimed that the statement had been made by one of his retainers, not himself.) So Akebono's promotion had been seen as a kind of litmus test of the closed nature of Japanese society, and the nation had awaited the Japan Sumo Association's decision with bated



The copper roof of Kokugikan seen from a nearby Japanese-style park.

Lion-do, a store specializing in large-sized clothes, boasts a rich variety of goods and sizes. Sumo wrestlers are the shop's strongest customers.

breath. When Akebono's promotion was approved, the Japanese people let out a huge sigh of relief.

Akebono has been recognized not only as a foreigner who has done well in *sumo* but also as a wrestler who has fulfilled the condition for promotion, winning two tournaments in a row, and furthermore has the character and dignity befitting that of a grand champion. Fans have praised Akebono for doing his best to absorb the spirit of *sumo*, the country's national sport, mastering its techniques, and distancing himself from other wrestlers through his power.

Regardless of nationality or race, wrestlers who do not meet these criteria cannot possibly become *yokozuna*. When a wrestler reaches the rank of *yokozuna*, standing at the pinnacle of about 800 others, he gains respect, honor, money, and guaranteed status after retirement. In return for these benefits, however, he must keep on winning like a *yokozuna*. If he fails to chalk up the victories, since he cannot lose his status, he is mercilessly forced to retire because he is considered to have

defiled the *yokozuna* honor.

Although it is a professional spectator sport today, *sumo* actually has a history of more than 1,500 years. *Sumo's* various traditional ceremonies and spirit can be traced back to its origins as an agricultural religious rite to pray for abundant harvests. As well as being a professional spectator sport, *sumo* as a whole represents a form of traditional culture. Consequently, although the wrestling at first sight may appear simple, *sumo* actually possesses a depth that goes far beyond the Western logic of strength.

Palace of sumo

Ryogoku, on the eastern side of Tokyo, is the mecca of *sumo*. From the platform of Ryogoku Station on the JR Sobu Line looms the copper octagonal roof of Ryogoku Kokugikan, an extremely imposing building known as the "palace of *sumo*." The Japan Sumo Association built this structure to replace the Kokugikan in nearby Kuramae, which had been used for 35 years since 1949. Construction work on the new

venue, taking three years and costing ¥15 billion, was completed in January 1985. Three of the six 15-day official tournaments held every year are staged here; the others take place in Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka.

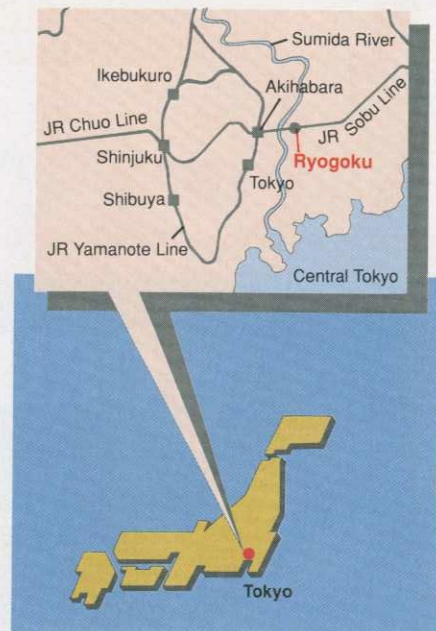
In one corner of the building stands the neat little Sumo Museum, which displays mementos and other historical materials. Admission is free, and opening hours are from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (except Saturday, Sunday and national holidays). During tournaments, only spectators are permitted to enter. The museum's office provides an English-language pamphlet with a brief introduction to *sumo*.

The new Kokugikan was built in Ryogoku because this has been *sumo*'s mecca ever since the Edo period (1603 to 1868). In ancient times *sumo*, as an agricultural ceremony, was carried out under the patronage of shrines and the imperial court and featured farmers and low-ranking warriors. In the Edo period, however, it developed as a form of

entertainment for the newly prosperous townspeople, and professional *sumo* groups emerged. In the large towns of Edo (now Tokyo), Kyoto, and Osaka, *sumo* exhibitions became popular as a means of raising money to build or renovate shrine and temple buildings.

In particular, Eko-in temple in the Ryogoku district, an area that had begun to flourish since the beginning of the 18th century, came to stage such donatory *sumo* exhibitions on a regular basis from 1768, and as a result it thrived as the center of professional *sumo*'s growth.

Eko-in temple actually had been erected to mourn the victims of the Great Meireki Fire of January 1657, a terrible blaze that destroyed half of Edo and took 107,000 lives. The unique feature of the temple is that it belongs to no Buddhist sect, being dedicated to all people who have left this world in an unfortunate manner, the victims of wind or water disasters, earthquakes, *tsunami*, fires, poverty, famine, accidents at



sea, or execution. It also mourns for dogs, cats, birds, and other once living creatures as well.

Scrap and build city

Beside the Kokugikan stands the brand new Edo-Tokyo Museum, constructed by the metropolitan government of Tokyo on the site of a former vegetable-and-fruit market and opened to the public as recently as March 28. (The museum is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., until 9 p.m. on Friday; closed Monday. Admission is ¥500 for adults and ¥250 for elementary, junior high, and senior high school students.)

The museum traces the 400-year history of Tokyo's development as Japan's capital on two extensive floors, with many life-sized and miniature models. The exhibit should be fascinating not only for Tokyoites but also tourists and foreigners (transmitter guides are available in Chinese, English, Japanese and Korean).

One of the museum's lessons is that Tokyo has surprisingly few relics despite its four-century history because it has suffered so many blows from fires, earthquakes, and the air raids toward the end of the Pacific War. Each time, however, Tokyo has managed to pick itself up off the ground and recover quickly to continue its "scrap and build" cycle. One cannot help wondering what the future has in store for this scrap and build city, which now has been rebuilt with unbreakable plastics and other incombustible materials.

Ritsuko Misu, Editor



Above: At the newly opened Edo-Tokyo Museum, located by JR Ryogoku Station, visitors can have a panoramic view of Tokyo's 400-year history.



Left: A young *osumo-san* enjoying free time after a hard morning workout.