

Sumo Love: A Many-Splendored Thing

By David B. Wiggins



Ask 100 *gaikokujin* (foreigners) why they like sumo and you're likely to receive 100 different answers. Everyone, it seems, likes sumo in his or her own special way.

Some foreign folks see and like sumo strictly as a sport. Others view it as a magnificent mix of sport and culture. Many enjoy the heavy religious element in it as well as the competition itself. Innumerable observers are into watching Japan's national sport from a historical perspective. They view sumo wrestlers (*rikishi*) as modern-day samurai warriors—throwbacks, if you will, adhering strictly to the ancient "bushido" code of fair fighting. Then, there are those who dig sumo as a form of martial art (which it is).

But what really creates as many different reasons for liking sumo as there are people who like it is the

endless number of ways of combining the above takes on enjoyment. A lot of this, a little of that, some of the other and pretty soon the reasons people like the sport become like so many snowflakes—no two are exactly alike.

It would be safe to say, though, that sumo's broadest appeal is as pure sport. However, many people from abroad—if they're honest—will admit to having to overcome some serious stereotypical thinking before appreciating and respecting sumo for the marvelous sporting endeavor it is. I don't know how many times I've heard people say "At first, I thought sumo was just a bunch of half-naked fat guys bumping into each other." Be honest, even if you are now a sumo aficionado, wasn't that your first impression? I know I'm guilty of thinking that.

It isn't until a decent amount of

exposure to sumo that we realize—Hey, this is one tough sport played by guys of great strength, skill and athleticism. There is so much more to this sport than that which first meets the eye. Suffice it to say, if a person can get beyond stereotyping, he or she becomes a fan, each to a varying degree, yes,—but a fan nonetheless.

What makes sumo almost universally enjoyed, I truly believe, is the many levels on which it may be enjoyed. For starters, it is wonderful in its simplicity. You don't need a cross cultural masters degree to understand and be entertained by it. If you're a Yank there's no sticky cricket wickets to deal with. And if you're a Brit, Aussie, or a Kiwi, you needn't grasp the likes of baseball is infield fly rule. All you need to know about sumo to have fun watching it is that when one guy gets the other guy down or out of the ring, he wins. Bingo! Instant gratification. For many fans, this is all they want or need to know. They may develop only a passing interest. But it's a pretty safe bet everyone feels *at least* this way about a sumo match. It's quick (matches rarely run over a minute) and painless. What's to dislike? I don't think I've ever heard someone say "I hate sumo."

Sumo, though, like most sports is not as simple as it looks. What you see on a sumo mound literally and figuratively is really just the tip of the iceberg. Sumo is a science that you can delve into as deeply as you care to—or as time permits. There are, for example, many ways a loser goes down or out. A loser bends the knee because of a victor's winning technique or "kimarite"—of which there are 70. Most involve either grabbing your opponents belt (*mawashi*) or pushing and thrusting him. They run from the



The first foreign yokozuna, Akebono

most common—*yori kiri* (forcing your foe out with a belt grip) to such exotic maneuvers as *uchimuso* (roughly translated—an inner thigh grabbing twist down).

Also, there are basic fundamentals that are employed by the wrestler in

order to put himself in a position to execute a winning technique or prevent his opponent from doing the same to him first. You must develop an explosive *tachiai*—initial charge—to get your attack going. You often have to use your hands to parry up your

Photo: Nihon Sumo Kyokai

opponents hands and arms before he can defeat you on your belt or by pushing you effectively. This defensive parrying fundamental is called “*ottstuke*.”

How far you delve into these techniques and basic movements is up to you. A grasp of these intricacies may enhance your understanding of what goes into a win or loss but it need not affect your enjoyment of a sumo match. Indeed, ignorance is bliss to many a sumo fan—and equal power to them, I always say.

Foreign fans who go beyond the “passing interest” classification usually do so in stages—sometimes silly ones. As one sees more matches, one usually begins to take an interest in—or a liking to—a certain wrestler. The reasons for those initial attractions usually vary (of course)—he’s the biggest, the smallest, the cutest, the trickiest, the best. Believe it or not I developed my own strange reason for following a wrestler named Asashio. I—please don’t laugh—thought, with his sideburns and pudgy facial features, he looked just like Elvis, the last days. I’d like to think my approach to sumo viewing has taken, ahem, a little more sophisticated bend over the years. This is the case with most foreigners—although they probably don’t have to travel as far as I did on the road to sophistication.

As time goes on, even the *gaikokujin* with just the slightest interest can’t help but pick up on things on the periphery of the competition itself. And this is where one’s education in the cultural aspects of sumo kick in. The “*gyoji*”—the referee—resplendent in his colorful robe and curious hat, is always exhorting the combatants to “go for it”. The ominously black robed judges at ringside “*shimpan*” are present to make sure the referee makes the right call and corrects himself if he doesn’t. The wrestlers go by a single name or “*shikona*,” not their own birth name. The names often make reference to nature—mountains, rivers, the ocean, etc. One wrestler’s *shikona* I was particularly fond of was “*Kyokudozan*”—“Serpent of the South

Sea.” Many times the name is apt because it matches the wrestler in some way. As it was with Kyokudozan, small but wiry, and a slippery, slithery performer from the bottommost tip of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan’s four main islands. The fighting name of Akebono—the first foreign grand champion “yokozuna” in the over two thousand year history of the sport—translates out to “new dawn,” as in new beginning, in case you were wondering.

As with the tactical maneuverings of the actual sumo competition, one may similarly immerse oneself as deeply as one wishes in these cultural aspects of

sumo. There is that much of a cultural—as well as a spiritual—tie-in. It can be evidenced in almost every act the wrestler performs. From the bowing to one’s foe before and after a bout, to stamping the feet to scare away evil demons, to throwing salt on an injured body part for purification and protection, cultural symbolism abounds.

Many a sumo fan, in fact, actually values these aspects of sumo as much as he or she does the competitive portion. One lady friend is so thoroughly enamored of and knowledgeable in this regard that I good-naturedly refer to her as a “culture vulture.” But hey, different

strokes for different folks has always been one of my pet phrases,

You could write a book—indeed many have—on the cultural aspects of sumo. In fact, in most general books on sumo, more pages are devoted to its cultural, religious and historic connections than sumo the competitive sport.

Many foreigners are fascinated by how the Shinto religion and mythology are so vigorously interwoven into sumo—not that they’re necessarily ready to convert to their precepts, however. To most, the yokozuna as being God-like is a bit of a stretch. A great athlete and cultural treasure, yes,



Photo: Nihon Sumo Kyokai

definitely. But, unlike most *Nihonjin* (Japanese), most *gaikokujin* I know are not quite ready to rush up to a grand champion to request the yokozuna touch their baby to insure a long and healthy life. The thrill of a handshake will normally suffice. Safe to say, with the hard core sumo-as-sport fan (maybe even most culture vultures), one fan's rituals are another's delightful superstitions.

For many, the historical evolution—and lack of it—of wrestlers is a most intriguing phenomenon. These guys—no disrespect intended—are living dinosaurs. Sumo in one form or another has been around for two millennia. With the formal end of feudalism in Japan and no more battles to be fought, many samurai began to use their martial arts skills as a form of entertainment. However, they retained a feudal-type organization within their ranks. As a result, feudalism still lives in Japan—in the form of a sumo stable or “heya.” The lord is the stablemaster—a sumo coach and former outstanding wrestler himself. The samurai are the top ranked wrestlers. The unpaid *sumotori* (lower ranked wrestlers) are the humble villagers who are at the lord's and



samurai's beck and call. To sumo historians, wrestlers are living history. Throwbacks of all throwbacks.

The difference between the feudalism of the past and its present sumo form is that these days upward social mobility is more attainable—maybe. The climb from the bottom of the sport's six divisions to the top two play-for-pay divisions is an extremely difficult one that only a very small percentage of *sumotori* completes—you must constantly compile winning logs. Along the way you must also cook and clean for and bathe the top-ranked wrestlers. It is a singularly unique method of reaching the top of one's sport. In other professional endeavors, athletes play at their sport several hours a day and go home. Wrestlers *live* sumo—24 hours a day. It is more than a sport in that respect. It is a way of life—a feudal one that fascinates many.

This appeal of sport and history linking up is but one example of the myriad of possible combinations that

could result in a sumo “turn on.” It would seem to me that the combo most often resulting in a sumo fan being born is the various and sundry ways sport and culture intertwine in the sumo ring. Especially appealing to many is how there is a meshing of athleticism and dignity in sumo. Such an occurrence is truly rare in this day of boorish and self-absorbed sports competitors. You could say sumo is hot dog-free—something I personally really like. Oh, there are two wrestlers who break the mold slightly in the way they execute their purification salt throw before a bout—short and spunky Asanowaka spikes his salt and that big, lovable lug Mitoizumi hits the rafters with his. But that's about it. No big deal. Rather, just enough humorous showmanship.

But that's just me. Again, everyone's combination of reasons for liking sumo are always just a little bit different.

And a lot alike.

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