

# Private Lives of Sumo Wrestlers

By Lynn Matsuoka

ONE MORE WIN. Just one more win, and he will make the huge jump up to *Juryo*.... The second of the two top divisions, where he will finally have a life. After working so long just for the privilege of a roof over his head and two meals a day, at last he will get paid a salary, acquire sponsors who will want to buy him beautiful kimonos and take him to dinner, and be regarded with respect.

He will acquire face. His life will change in ways impossible to believe... He will throw off the mantle of poverty and become a man with power of a new sort. And maybe best of all, he will be elevated in the world of the *keiko-ba*, the practice ring, where he must begin almost every day of his life. He will metamorphize from victim to master, in a way. And he will have his own *tsukebito*, or protégé to serve him. He will be a star, and someone will love him.

Yes—he has spent thousands of hours training and sculpting his body, creating a work of art with the flesh and bones given him by the gods. Lonely and painful hours of crashing to the clay, under assault of his fellow stable mates in practice. Humiliating hours being rolled in the dirt, his long, long hair, crusted with sweat and clay, the paper string holding it up long demolished, falling in his face and choking him as he inhales it on still another crash to the *dohyo*. Unable to brush it aside, or wipe the new mud from his face, he is again and again forced to attack his *sempai*\*<sup>1</sup> and be thrown



Wakaishu (lower ranking rikishi) sitting on the dohyo waiting for his torikumi

down. He now finds himself at the end of his resources. He cannot get up. They kick him and curse him, but he can't get up.

He is spent beyond imagination, paralyzed by fatigue. Yet they kick him and prod him again with the bamboo stick, and he somehow finds a hidden, supernatural cache of power—just enough to spirit him up from that horrible position of weakness and defeat on the floor, to regain some dignity by standing again. Black with the wet clay streaming

down his face and body, crying with wrenching exhaustion, he bows to his oppressor/trainer, and goes to fetch water with which to give thanks for the experience.

It is only the promising ones that are given the gift of *kawaigari*, that special individual practice given by the *sempai* who have been there first. They know that being forced to the edge of your endurance is the only way to acquire the immense mental and physical strength needed for the combat to come. They've been there. They've hurt, and they know. And they carry the scars.

On many days, he would be expected to go right the kitchen to join other *wakaishu*\*<sup>2</sup> in preparing the noon meal for the stable. Fortunately, today he is not "*chanko-ban*,"\*<sup>3</sup> but still must towel off the dirt, somehow fix his hair in a makeshift topknot, and get in to the "*chanko-ba*"\*<sup>4</sup> where his elders will be eating their first meal of the day. He will scurry around with other *wakaishu* to set up the table,

and then stand there to serve and fetch as required. When the *sekitori*\*<sup>5</sup> and others of higher rank than himself have finished, he will be allowed to sit, finally, and eat. After assisting with the clean-up, he can retire to the bath.

But today the bath is suddenly not the soothing experience of the past. The scrapes and contusions all over his body sting as the soap lathers over him. The hot water is a further assault on his pain. Yet he must hurry and finish in here, as his presence is required by his



sekitori. He must tend to the washing and run to the store to buy the cigarettes and afternoon eats for the man... He's got to pull himself together. If his sekitori is in good spirits today, maybe he can just take to a corner of the *o-beya*\*6, and get some sleep. If the TV the others are watching isn't too loud.

*Flashback: During a sumo practice many years ago, a little boy watches intently, and says to his mother—I want to be a rikishi. I want to wear my hair like that, like they do on TV, and have lots of muscles, and have all the girls follow me around. And he imagines the glamorous life of the idol.*

*Across the tatami floor sits a young woman who marvels at the beautiful physiques in the ring, and wistfully imagines the attentions of one of them being focused on her. How lucky they are, she thinks... We come to see and admire them, and all they have to do is work out and be beautiful.*

*The little boy grows into a substantial young teenager, and is further seduced into the world of sumo by the scout who talks of the glamorous life, Rolex watches, and fabulous meals. He doesn't mention the pain.*

Just one more win and he could take the division championship, and with certainty be elevated into the dream of ten long years—Juryo! He would be showered with gifts and money from newly acquired fans and supporters, and be on television—not one of a group, but as an individual! He'd be chased after by cameras and fans, invited to appear as the elegant guest at society gatherings, and be treated like an important and celebrated person. Just one more win.

The night before, sleep is difficult. His pals take him to the cheap little corner bar to prime him with sake and confidence for the next day's appearance. He would rather be whisked away like his sekitori, in the racy new Mercedes-Benz of an adoring



*The two yokozuna, Akebono and Takanohana in montage with the tachimochi (Musoyama) represents the rivalry of the yokozuna, and the dignity of sumo*

sponsor, speeded off with so much importance to an esoteric restaurant in Akasaka that only caters to the few. He would sit in the hushed atmosphere of new tatami and fresh green bamboo sake cups, the rare sake served up by elegant kimonoed waitresses who, on their knees as they pour, dare not look up at him.

His *tanimachi*, would look at him with clenched teeth and silent admiration, so pleased with himself that he had the money, the position, the connections needed to actually get this sekitori, this connection with the sexy young world of sports and fame, to grace his evening. It would count big time with the women later.

But here he is in the corner *nomi-ya*, drinking cheap stuff with the wrong kids. He should be home at the stable, getting the sleep he needs, but he doesn't have the mentor yet, and that won't come, if it ever does, until after the fact of the key win. That he must do

himself, with too many odds built up against him even by his own hand. As tonight, no one will show him the right path, yet. He must find it, gods willing, and if he has the *en*, the fortune, and passes through the curtain, a new life waits in the lights on the other side.

### The Day

The day is here—practice is light today. They did the job on him much earlier. No one except his *oyakata*\*7 mentions the fact that this day could be the last day of obscurity. The *oyakata* grumbles a few colloquial words to remind him that he should pull it together and do what's expected. Remember—chin in, elbows tight to your body... *Hai!*\*8

His excitement is felt in isolation, and he experiences now what will be his constant companion for life.. the loneliness of battle. He will walk up the *hanamichi*, the path to the *dohyo*, with his heart racing, but with the stoic straight face he has learned from his *sempai*. He

passes through the sea of fans who barely notice him, as he is on the faceless side of the curtain. They are screaming for someone now in the ring, one who has made it through. Can he get there?? No—don't even think of it. Just get out there and do-your-best... the mantra of the game—don't think now. Don't admit even to yourself that you care. Lose today and everything remains the same. Win today, and move into the lights. The cheers of the crowd fade, he is barely aware of them. He sits by the side of the ring, next to the judge who has seen it all. The judge was once nobody too, but rose high in the ranks, with all the same doubt and fear... But here he was, proof that it is possible. And up there on the ring, the two facing each other will get through it and make way for him. Any minute, he must spring to his feet, and bound up to the ring. Win? Can't think about it. Leave it all to the gut. And the gods. If he is worthy. If they are willing.



The man he faces is the one he's faced before, not only in the ring, but as a friend in another dimension, another time. Now he is in a void, a time warp, where only two people exist. The only clear vision is that of his opponent's eyes. The crowd is reduced to a whooshing in his head, about the same intensity as the sound of his beating heart. In the vague periphery is the *gyoji*\*9, whose proximity give him reference to the ring.

The whooshing fills his head, and his eyes meet those of the other, and, and...UYEAHGHGH... They collide to a roar of cheers, he grabs the other's *mawashi* with the steel grip of years of training, forces his right ankle in between his opponent's feet, winds it out and around the left ankle and sweeps away the opponent's supporting leg. As he sails down to the dohyo, this time the winner, the feeling of joy is almost unbearable, but he falls, rolls over and up to his feet in one graceful effortless movement, and with a straight face, returns to his side of the dohyo to solemnly accept the *gyoji*'s fan as winner. Now he is bathed in the screaming and cheering from the crowd, but it doesn't actually register. They know something he doesn't at this moment—that he's gotten the win that would thrust him into the light. It hits him as he walks quickly back down the *hanamichi*, people reaching out to touch him, to shake his hand... The bewildered look he gave them was for real—until it dawned on him... I've made it!

This would be the time, for a long while, that he would walk alone to the dressing room. From now on, he would have a *wakaishu* waiting there for him at the end of the *hanamichi*, to wrap him in *yukata*\*10 as he sailed through, to smile or commiserate with what had just gone before. He would have his man servant to do his bidding, and give



Two *wakaishu*: two young sumotors sitting in the dressing room waiting to prove themselves worthy of sumo's elite

credence to his existence.

Later in the evening, returning to the stable, he is greeted by the first real smile ever bestowed upon him by his *Oyakata*. The Japanese equivalent of "ya done good, kid" gives him his greatest gift. A small outing is proposed by a new face—a friend of the *Oyakata*, who invites the winner, the *Oyakata* and a few other *rikishi* to dinner. Upon arrival, he is greeted by more friends of the stranger, who all introduce themselves as his fans. They've been watching him, they say, and have expected this all along. He is confused... Where have they been then, all this time?

Now, down to business... He'll be needing a *kesho-mawashi* for the *dohyo-iri*, and the new face will be more than happy to provide it. Of course the new *sekitori* will be happy as well to come along to special parties and events that the new sponsor might invite him to. At his convenience, of course, says the new sponsor, but the tacit understanding is that a refusal would be unacceptable.

The dinner is served, and he is seated between two middle-aged women, both dressed in very expensive and lacy dresses, adorned by diamonds of varying sizes. They are more flirtatious than he imagined women of this age would be, but then, this is a new world, and he's yet to understand many of it's idiosyncrasies. NO matter—the

attention feels so good, and the wine is potent, and he is at the threshold of his new life. He'll take it as it comes, and... do-his-best.

**Note:**

\*1 Sempai: an elder to you... someone who has been in the top divisions but has fallen back down, or who never made it at all, but has been in sumo for long enough to be regarded as a master

\*2 *Wakaishu*: a young or low ranking sumotori

\*3 *Chanko-ban*: the person in charge of creating the meal

\*4 *Chanko-ba*: the place where food is usually set up for the morning and evening meals

\*5 *Sekitori*: someone who has reached either *Juryo* or *Makunouchi*. (except the *Yokozuna*—a class by itself)

\*6 *O-beya*: the large open *tatami* room where all of the *wakaishu* sleep at night. All their (few) worldly possessions are stored there

\*7 *Oyakata*: an elder, in this case, the stable owner

\*8 *Hail*: understood, "got it!"

\*9 *Gyoji*: the referee

\*10 *Yukata*: a cotton kimono

JJI

Lynn Matsuoka has illustrated for *ABC*, *Vogue* and others. She has made a name for herself in exhibitions worldwide, though her highest acclaim may be behind-the-scenes artwork in *Sumo* and *Kabuki*, an honor granted to few. For the past six years, she has covered the grand *Sumo* tournaments as a guest commentator for *NHK*.