

Sumo: More than a Sport

By Tsuneo Yatagai

I knew that bookmakers in London now accept bets on *sumo* tournaments in Japan and that there are many *sumo* fans also in the United States, but I was surprised to hear that Lyall Watson, the famous British biologist and author of *Supernature*, served as a commentator for NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corp.) during *sumo* broadcasts in May of this year. Watson, a big fan of *sumo* who has a good knowledge of the sport, is the coordinator for the *sumo* matches to be staged in London in October this year.

Actually, international interest in Japan's national sport is nothing new. The February 1, 1868 issue of the *Illustrated London News* carried some sketches of *sumo* sent by Charles Wirgman, the journal's correspondent in Japan.

These days the winner of a *sumo* tournament receives many trophies, some of them from such countries as Czechoslovakia, China, Hungary, the United Arab Emirates and Mexico. The Pan American Airlines trophy has the longest history, going back to 1953. The company's popular representative, David Jones, handed over the 42-kilogram trophy to the tournament winners on more than 170 occasions, continuing even after Pan American withdrew from the Pacific route in 1985. Jones retired this May. (Coincidentally, this was the same month in which grand champion Chiyonofuji called it a day after setting a record of 1,045 career wins.)

When Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Japan in 1856 to demand that the isolated country open its doors to diplomacy and trade with the United States, he was entertained with some amateur *sumo*, and the artist accompanying the commodore's fleet made sketches. In 1906 a grand champion visited Washington, where he performed the ring-entrance ceremony of a *yokozuna* or grand champion for President Theodore Roosevelt, and then went on to introduce the sport in Europe.

Even before then, Japanese emigrants took *sumo* with them to Hawaii, where the sport became very popular. *Sumo* wrestlers from Tokyo have also visited Hawaii. Perhaps this explains why there are two Hawaiian-born American *sumo* wrestlers who are within sight of the top ranking. *Sumo* has also been performed in Los Angeles and Paris, as well as Brazil, the Soviet Union and China.

Push and topple

The match between two *sumo* wrestlers wearing nothing more than heavy loincloths takes place in a ring measuring 4.55 meters in diameter set out on top of a 54-centimeter-high, 5.45-meter-square clay mound. The ring is slightly smaller than a boxing ring—and indeed probably the smallest space in which a sporting contest takes place.

The objective is to push your opponent out of the ring or to topple him inside the ring. Once a bout begins, a wrestler is not allowed to touch the ground with any part of his body except the soles of his feet. If just one finger touches the earth, that wrestler loses. You can also lose by committing an infringement. For example, *sumo* wrestlers are not allowed to punch their opponent with a fist; strike vital parts of the body, such as the eyes or pit of the stomach; deliberately grab the opponent's hair; or kick the opponent in the chest or stomach.

Another characteristic of *sumo* is that the match is over very quickly—sometimes within a couple of seconds. Very few fights last for more than a minute. But this does not mean that the show is over. Some 200 matches are held each day, from 9:30 a.m. to about 6 p.m., during a 15-day tournament with some 400 wrestlers fighting one bout each. Super-vising the matches are 40 referees and more than 20 judges.

Though a single *sumo* bout can be over in a flash, the buildup can take ages. The two wrestlers enter their side of the ring,

perform some warm-up exercises that involve raising the legs alternately and stamping them on the ground, then scatter some salt in a ritual of purification. They then squat in the middle of the ring, about 60 centimeters apart, with hands touching the ground and glare at each other. When the moment comes, they spring forward and begin the duel.

If the right moment to spring forward does not come, or if only one wrestler dashes forward while his opponent still has a hand on the ground, they must start again. Each wrestler returns to his side of the ring, throws salt again, and goes back to the center, with tension rising all the time. In the past there was no limit on how long this buildup could continue, but now it is limited to four minutes to save time.

Sumo wrestlers are fat, to say the least. Boxers very rarely exceed 130 kilograms, but for *sumo* wrestlers this is almost on the skinny side. The heaviest wrestler at the moment is Hawaiian-born Konishiki, who tops the scales at 254 kilograms. *Sumo* wrestlers have only two meals a day, but when they do eat they gorge huge amounts of rice and seafood stew so as to put on weight. Pictures of the time show that when Commodore Perry was given presents to take home for the U.S. president, American soldiers were amazed to see a *sumo* wrestler effortlessly carrying two bags of rice weighing 60 kilograms each.

Sumo in legend

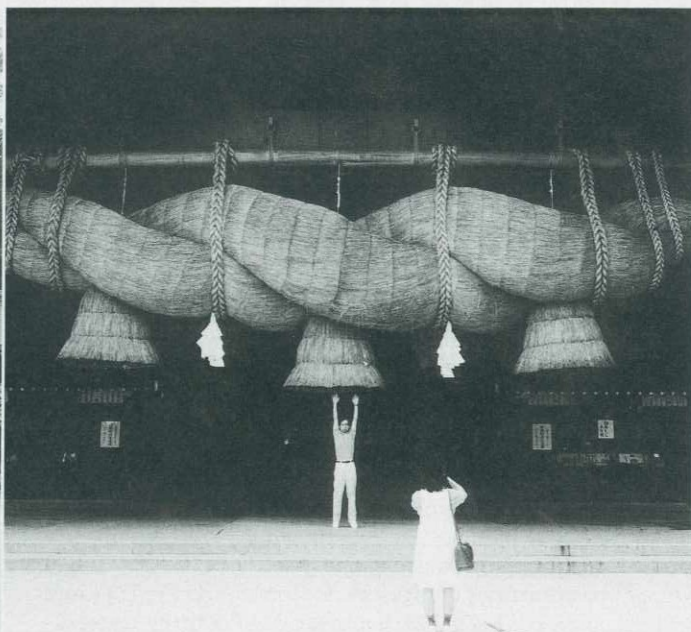
Japanese mythology has it that even the fate of provinces was determined by the outcome of *sumo* matches. Usually, however, *sumo* in the past was performed to predict agricultural harvests and to pray for peace. Even today, dedicatory *sumo* tournaments are often held during shrine festivals. Omishima Shrine in Shikoku holds an interesting ritual called "one-man *sumo*," in which a single wrestler tussles with an invisible god who con-

Photo: Meiji Shrine



Ritual ring entrance ceremony of a yokozuna grand champion displayed at Meiji Shrine in Tokyo.

Photo: Shin'ya Sakamoto



Japan's biggest sacred rope (shimenawa), hung at Izumo Taisha Shrine.

trols crops. Legend has it that a good rice harvest was guaranteed by letting the god win.

From the seventh to the 12th centuries *sumo* was an important event at the imperial court, with contests taking place in the presence of the emperor. This imperial connection has been revived, with the winner of a tournament now receiving the Emperor's Cup. Emperor Showa, who was an avid *sumo* fan, sometimes attended tournaments in Tokyo, as does his son, the present emperor.

Though *sumo* is considered Japan's national sport, people in the *sumo* world do not think of it as a sport. For a start, they believe that the *sumo* ring is a sacred place. Before a bout, wrestlers rinse their mouth with water—called *chikara-mizu*—so as to purify their bodies. According to tradition, the winner of the previous bout remains to offer the ladle of water to the next wrestler on his side of the ring. The act of scattering salt on the ring by the two opponents is also a purification ceremony with its origins in Shinto.

The grand champions of *sumo*—the highest rank—are called *yokozuna*. Before the top-ranking matches, *yokozuna* wrestlers perform a ceremony that goes

back to the ritual of calling a powerful *sumo* wrestler to the site where a new shrine, temple, castle or other building was going to be constructed. The wrestler would stamp on the ground so as to drive away evil spirits.

When they participate in the ring ceremony, the grand champions wear a huge white rope (*yokozuna*) around their waist of the type used in Shinto to designate a purified place. Whenever a new grand champion is created, many wrestlers participate in the making of a new rope, and a foot-stamping ceremony for the gods takes place at Meiji Shrine in Tokyo.

Festive spirit

Sumo is a mixture of customs from different periods in Japanese history. While wrestlers grow their hair long and tie it in the old top-knot style, the judges and the professional callers who announce wrestlers' names before a bout and clean the ring wear traditional clothing but with modern hairstyles. What has remained unchanged from olden times is the *sumo* wrestler's outfit, which consists of a loin-cloth with several braids hanging from it. This is the same decoration as that used

on ropes designating sacred places according to Shinto.

When the top 40 or so wrestlers circle the ring to face each other and demonstrate to spectators, they wear splendid and very expensive ornamental aprons. The referees wear traditional costumes that have not changed for about 1,000 years and hold a fan similar to that brandished by warlords in combat in the Middle Ages. The fan is often illustrated with the sun, moon and stars, reminiscent of ancient astrology.

These days the ring is covered by a suspended roof, from the four corners of which hang ornamental tassels representing the pillars of old. The colors blue, red, white and black, together with yellow in the center, indicate the influence of the yin and yang concepts of ancient China.

The spectators sit in groups of four in the Japanese style, eating boxed lunches, drinking *sake*, and enjoying the wrestling. Indeed, apart from the exciting matches, this festive spirit is one of the attractions of *sumo*. APR

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