TOKYO LETTER

Sumo

By Roslyn Hayman

Probably nothing arouses foreigner's scepticism more—nor ends up winning more foreign aficionados—than the Japanese "national combat art" of sumo.

Just a glimpse of sumo wrestlers' giant roly-poly bodies is enough to arouse moral indignation in most Western observers. After all, in the West, the epitome of physical fitness and prowess since Grecian times has been the streamlined body of the athlete, rippling with fine taut muscles.

"A disgusting exhibition," "overfed monsters," "any wrestler that I have heretofore seen of half the muscle would have laughed at them," were the comments of some of the first Americans ever to witness sumo. That was in 1854, when the Shogunate put on a special sumo display for Commander Perry's fleet, after the signing of the treaty that opened Japan to the outside world.

Even today, most visitors watching sumo for the first time are appalled at the apparent unhealthiness of the wrestlers' bodies. Average weight in the top Makuuchi division is around 140 kilograms (over 300 pounds), while even the 11-meter silk belly-band—the only clothing the wrestlers wear—runs out after four or five circuits of the average wrester's waist.

Bouts are often over in a matter of seconds—yet seem to take interminably long to begin. The barefoot contestants go through weird acrobatic contortions, raising first one leg then the other sideways into the air, stamping down on the clay surface of the sumo mound, crouching like frogs to glare into each other's eyes, then veering off to fling huge handfuls of salt into the air and repeat the ritual again—the referee in his silken robes clucking over their antics like a timorous bantam cock.

After this ostentations build-up, the bout itself can be almost an anti-climax. As the two grapplers suddenly spring toward each other, one might skip sideways, leaving his foe to slump face down in the dirt. Or one might drive his foe straight out of the circle, marked on the clay with straw, in a one-way charge.

Where do the strength and skill come in? The whole thing can have the appearance of an elaborate slapstick show.

Maybe it is an acquired taste. I myself was indifferent to sumo—having glimpsed it in bewilderment on television many times—until the day friends invited me to share a *masuseki* for the final day's action in a Tokyo tournament. It was a taste I quickly acquired.

Only the Japanese, with their (generally) small physique, group spirit, long-suffering nature and chairless history could devise anything quite as uncomfortable as a *masuseki*. In this tiny carpeted space, about 1.5 meters square and surrounded by a low steel rail, spectators in fours get to know the true meaning of togetherness as they sit hunched on cushions watching sumo. The pain of aching ankles is eased by a constant stream of food and drinks—and souvenirs—ferried throughout the afternoon by lackeys, in Edo-period dress, from the tea houses which sell the seats.

But this alone is still not enough to explain why big businesses today pay up

to ¥80,000 ($350)—the going price—for *masuseki* to entertain friends and clients at the sumo.

Sumo certainly involves skill—no doubt about it—and the physical training wrestlers undergo is intense. Those bulky bodies are as hard as steel, can concentrate their energies in an instant and move with devastating speed. But even the most dedicated connoisseurs, among the Japanese themselves, spend little time over questions like technique or strategy. The real interest lies in the fortunes of the individual wrestlers, their personalities and idiosyncrasies, whether their careers are in full flower or on the wane, what the future might hold.

In a way, the ups and downs of the wrestlers reflect the vicissitudes of life itself. Of the 40 or so who make it to the Makuuchi or inner sanctum at the top of the sumo hierarchy, most are cherished as national heroes and almost all are nationally known. Their faces, characteristics and ceremonial names—Chiyonofuji (Eternal Fuji), Kitanoumi (Northern Sea), Asashio (Morning Tide)—are bywords throughout Japan. And television, including commercial appearances, has helped consolidate the familiarity in which they are held.

Maybe it's an identification game. If not with the grapplers' size, at least with their endeavors, their triumphs, their setbacks and the kind of obstacles they face. Age, weight and rank play no part in the schedule of bouts for the six 15-day tournaments held each year. Each grappler has to make the best of his own particular set of odds. And the ranking chart—revised after every tournament—is a critical arbiter of what each has achieved.

No bodies were ever more pampered than sumo wrestlers'—and with their livelihood at stake, they are monitored almost around the clock for medical care. Somehow their very size makes them seem more vulnerable to human weaknesses.

And that, in itself, makes them all the more popular with the Japanese people, at large.

TASTE OF TOKYO

Press Club Rack of Lamb

Everyone is familiar with the word "illiteracy," but few perhaps have heard the expression "palate ignorance." One's palate ignorance, they say, can be tested by sticking something into your mouth and measuring the reaction, rather like a litmus paper test.

The palate-ignorance rate of the Japanese is said to be 7–8%, which is more than three times their illiteracy rate. Americans are reputed to have a high palate-ignorance rate of 30%.

Palate ignorance apparently has not acquired world recognition, nor am I certain as to the dependability of the methods used to measure it. However, it does make you think.

When I visited New York recently, after an interval of one year, I was impressed anew not only by the vitality of that great city, but by the inexpensive and savory American beef steak. I envied Americans for their good fortune.

The Intercontinental Hotel serves steak even at breakfast. A 250-gram steak cost me only $14 and was most delicious. Compare this with the restaurant which