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EXCURSIONS

A Novice's Guide to Watching Sumo

A far cry from Wrestlemania, an afternoon at a sumo match presents a fascinating slice of Japanese culture.

By Yukari Iwatani Kane Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

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(See Corrections & Amplifications item below.)

TOKYO -- For native Japanese, going to see a sumo wrestling tournament is not the same as going to a baseball or soccer game. It's a much bigger deal, akin to a trip to a classical concert or the opera in the United States.

With its rituals, sumo taps a deep vein in Japanese culture. Legend has it that two gods determined possession of the Japanese islands over a sumo match 2,500 years ago. The country's emperor is said to trace his ancestry back to the Takemikazuchi, the god who won. Though the contact sport was an important imperial ritual for hundreds of years, it wasn't until the Edo period (1603-1868) that sumo became a professional spectator sport.

That tradition, and a culture of formality surrounding matches, put many regular Japanese off the sport, but sumo has come a long way over the last 20 years.

Thanks to the 1990s-era popularity of two talented young wrestlers, the brothers Takanohana and Wakanohana -- and fascinating scandals involving their family -- the sport has become more popular with mainstream Japanese, especially among women. And a number of strong foreign athletes, primarily from Mongolia and the Pacific Islands, have made competitions more interesting and added global appeal.

Still, many Japanese have never seen sumo live. I myself hadn't attended a match until recently, when I went with my husband and a group of friends, two of whom were visiting Japan.

For travelers, an afternoon spent watching sumo offers a glimpse into Japan's most hallowed spiritual and athletic tradition -- so much more than the kitschy image of fat guys in diapers, fighting to the finish.

Here's one novice's guide to enjoying a match.

Three times a year, sumo tournaments, or honbashi (pronounced HON-ba-sho), take place at the venerable Kokugikan sumo hall in Ryogoku, a district in eastern Tokyo. Colorful flags bearing wrestlers' names festoon the outside walls of the sumo hall. The hall is in the same district as the sumo training stable, or heya, where wrestlers live communally, working out together and learning sumo traditions. If you arrive in the early afternoon, you'll see fans outside the hall, waiting to catch a glimpse of the senior wrestlers arriving for bouts.

Where high-end seats once cost hundreds of dollars, you can now see a match for as little as \$35 for the cheapest seat. Tickets are readily available for purchase online or by phone. The Japan Sumo Association offers plenty of information on its Web site in English (<http://www.sumo.or.jp/eng/>), including daily updates on the number of tickets available in each section during tournaments.

Tournament days technically start around 8:30 a.m., but the morning bouts, mainly for

new trainees and the lowest-ranking wrestlers, draw only a small audience of die-hards. Better to arrive in time to watch intermediate division competitions, which start around midafternoon.

In my parents' generation, most people couldn't afford tickets, and people dressed up to attend. Ladies often wore kimonos, and men dressed in formalwear. Most attendees were upper-class businessmen entertaining clients and associates.

Though some people still dress up, you can also show up in jeans and a t-shirt.

Once you enter the hall, instead of finding your way to your seat, you'll be asked to report to an assigned teahouse stall, the concession stand responsible for taking your food and drink orders.

HOW TO GET TICKETS

Grand Tournaments, which last approximately two weeks, take place in Tokyo in January, May and September, Osaka in March, Nagoya in July, and Fukuoka in November.

You can check the English-language tournament schedule on the Japan Sumo Association's Web site, but you will need to use the Japanese version of the page to actually buy the tickets online.

The Sumo Association's English-language site will have phone numbers for reserving tickets.

Tickets start at 3,600 yen (about \$33USD) for an arena seat on the second floor. A box for four starts at about 36,800 yen, or 9,200 yen per person. Boxes for two and six are also available. A final note: The last days of a tournament, when the competition stakes are highest, sell out fast.

For the full treatment, you can order bento boxes, which come with yakitori (grilled chicken skewers), beer, snacks and mementos, for \$30 to \$100 each.

On our visit, we decided to forgo the bentos and stuck with beer and yakitori – this sumo hall's specialty. For 530 yen, you get a box with four or five skewers of charcoal-grilled chicken. It's succulent, with just the right touch of smokiness. For 200 yen, spectators can also try chanko, the hearty stew of vegetables, meat and fish that the sumo wrestlers eat to gain weight.

A staff member takes your order after showing you to your box, a cramped space clearly meant for petite Japanese people from another generation. During a recent visit, I sat with my legs crossed in one of the front "seats", while my husband, whose legs are too long to cross, sat behind with each leg stretched out on either side of me. Usually, spectators squeeze in as best they can.

(A friend advised me that the chic way of attending a tournament is for two or three people to get a four or six-seater box to themselves. That would mean paying double,

but you'll have room to spread out.)

Thus settled, time for the sumo.

In a standard bout, two wrestlers battle each other in a circular ring 4.55 meters in diameter and bordered with 20 straw bags of rice. To win, a competitor must push his opponent outside of the ring or force him to touch the ground with any part of the body other than the soles of his feet.

Before the match begins, each wrestler, clad only in a silk belt in various colors called mawashi, stamps his feet in a wide stance – a gesture reported to drive away evil spirits. As the crowd chants and cheers, the wrestlers sip special "power water" to purify their bodies, and toss salt in the air to prepare the ring. The fight starts when, after staring each other down for awhile, the men silently agree to begin, charging one another at full speed.

The solemn rituals are broken up by a bit of advertising when men parade around the ring, holding flags with sponsors' logos – sort of like a commercial break between bouts.

The hall fills by early evening, when the top wrestlers finally begin their matches. The

cheering gets louder too as people scream the names of their favorite wrestlers.

Even sumo novices will know they're in the presence of someone special when a star like Kotooshu, a towering, handsome Bulgarian, enters the ring.

Foreigners increasingly make up the top sumo ranks, but Kotooshu, a former Greco-Roman wrestler and the first European to win the Emperor's Cup, is particularly beloved among fans for his dark and handsome looks. He's often called the David Beckham of sumo.

The second-to-last bout during our visit starred Hakuho, a Mongolian who was the fourth non-Japanese to be promoted to the top rank of yokozuna last year. After clinching the match by throwing his opponent to the ground, Hakuho extended his arm to help him up. The audience approved: we heard women around us say, "Yasashii (he's so kind)!" as they sighed in admiration.

In the final bout of the day, we watched Asashoryu, the bad boy of the sumo world and the first Mongolian to become yokozuna, take on Ama, another Mongolian wrestler.

Big stars like Asashoryu provoke strong reactions in the crowd – sumo wrestlers are as much personalities as athletes, appearing on television talk shows and sitting for more interviews. Asashoryu is particularly controversial because he has an aggressive personality and a defiant attitude, which some Japanese find undignified and inappropriate. In 2007, he attracted the ire of sumo fans for playing in a charity soccer tournament when he'd pulled out of an exhibition tour, citing injuries.

In the ring, however, Asashoryu did not disappoint.

He glared down at his opponent several times, and after a suspenseful few moments when the two wrestlers gripped each other's belts without moving, he quickly pushed his opponent out of the ring and almost into the audience in the front rows.

When a yokozuna loses, the audience traditionally tosses their seat cushions into the ring to show disgust. Asashoryu won the match we saw, but a spectator threw his cushion anyway, proving just how polarizing Asashoryu can be. This sumo novice was simply mesmerized by the raw power in his winning move.

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Corrections & Amplifications:

The Kokugikan sumo hall does not double as sumo training stalls, called heya. The two are both located in the Ryogoku district in eastern Tokyo. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the training stalls, shared space with the Kokugikan sumo hall.