

# SUMO

## Traditional ceremonial beauty and strength



Just before a bout  
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)

### Introduction

*Sumo*, a form of wrestling, holds the status of Japan's national sport. In addition to wrestlers' colorful *mawashi* (belly bands) and distinctive hair styles called *oicho* (ginkgo-leaf knot), both of which evoke images of ancient times, *sumo* retains many of its traditional practices, such as its *dohyo* (elevated straw ring), ranking system, and ties to Shinto religious ceremony. The word *sumo* is written with the Chinese characters for "mutual bruising."

Although *sumo*'s history goes back to ancient times, it became a professional sport in the early Edo period (1603–1867). Today, this almost exclusively male sport is practiced

by clubs in high schools and universities, as well as by amateur associations. Both in Japan and abroad, however, *sumo* is best known as a professional spectator sport.

### Objectives of the Match

The object of a *sumo* match is for the wrestler to force his opponent out of the *dohyo* or make him touch the surface with any part of his body other than the soles of his feet. Prior to the actual clash in the center of the ring, the two wrestlers usually spend several minutes in a preparation ritual, extending their arms, stamping their feet, squatting, and glaring at each other. Handfuls of salt are

repeatedly tossed into the air to purify the ring.

After this extended warmup, a match often ends in a matter of seconds, although some may continue for several minutes, and a few even require a brief *mizui* (intermission) to allow the wrestlers to rest before concluding the bout.

Winning techniques in *sumo*, of which there are 82, involve pushing or lifting out of the ring; using a grip on the belt to “throw” one’s opponent down; leg trips; jumping quickly to the side during the initial charge and slapping the opponent off balance; and digging in at the edge of the straw ring to toss an opponent out, just before falling out oneself.

*Sumo* is especially admired for its dignity and composure. Arguments over a referee’s ruling or displays of poor sportsmanship are unheard of. While vigorous open-handed slaps to the upper body are permitted, such tactics as striking with fists, kicking, and hair-pulling are strictly prohibited. And although the results of some bouts are so close that the referee’s decision must be reviewed (and sometimes overturned) by the judges, neither winner nor loser ever raises a protest, and they seldom display more emotion than an occasional smile or frown.

## Division and Rank

Wrestlers in professional *sumo* are assigned a rank according to their division; they are then designated as a member of the east or west side. The latter determines which dressing room, and therefore which side of the ring they will enter every day they compete. The highest ranks, in descending order, are *yokozuna* (grand champion), *ozeki* (champion), and *sekiwake* (junior champion).

*Yokozuna* is the only permanent rank in *sumo*. While such men cannot be demoted due to a mediocre performance, they are expected to retire if they are not able to uphold the demanding standards of their position. Since the ranking came into existence several centuries ago, only about 70 men have ever gained promotion to *yokozuna*. Some of the greatest

grand champions of modern times were Futabayama (*yokozuna*, 1937–1945), who achieved a winning percentage of .802, including 69 consecutive victories; Taiho (1961–1971), who won a total of 32 tournaments and maintained a winning streak of 45 consecutive matches; Kitanoumi (1974–1985), who, at the age of 21 years and 2 months, was the youngest ever to be promoted to the rank of *yokozuna*; Akebono (1993–2001), who became *yokozuna* after only 30 tournaments and set the record for fastest promotion; and Takanohana (1995–2003), who, at the age of 19, became the youngest to win a tournament.

Because professional *sumo* does not adopt weight classes, it is common to see a huge wrestler compete against a much smaller man. But while bulk often works to a wrestler’s advantage, speed, timing, and balance can also determine the outcome of a match, and smaller, faster wrestlers often please the spectators by pulling off upset victories over larger opponents.

## A Wrestler’s Life

Typically, an apprentice wrestler—more often from a rural part of the country than a city dweller—is scouted while still in junior high school. If the boy’s family agrees, an *oyakata* (stable master), himself a retired wrestler who manages one of the roughly 50 *heya* (stables) in Japan and oversees a half dozen to 30 or more wrestlers, will “adopt” him as an apprentice. The youths train, eat, and sleep communally in the stable and receive a small allowance. Members of the same stable do not compete against each other in regular tournament play.

The life of a *sumo* apprentice is demanding and even the most promising young men usually require five years or longer to reach the higher ranks and begin to receive a salary as a *sekitori* (professional). Out of more than roughly 700 wrestlers who are members of a stable, only about 70 presently qualify for *sekitori* status. The few who make it to the top divisions usually marry and live outside the stable, but for most, the

### Yokozuna ring-entrance ceremony

Yokozuna Kisenosato performs a ceremonial ring entrance ritual at Tokyo's Meiji Shrine  
(Photo courtesy of KYODO NEWS)



stable is the only home a young wrestler will know for most of his *sumo* career. Many are forced to retire due to sickness or injury, and it is rare that a wrestler would compete beyond his early thirties.

Most *sumo* stables are located in the eastern part of Tokyo. Life for the lowest-ranked wrestlers is rigorous. They rise as early as 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, put on their *mawashi*, and begin *keiko* (practice). They are also obliged to run errands for the higher-ranked wrestlers. The latter enjoy the privilege of sleeping later.

*Keiko* is characterized by three traditional exercises: *shiko*, *teppo*, and *matawari*. For *shiko*, the wrestler raises his legs alternately as high as possible. During *teppo*, opened palms slap continuously against a wooden pillar. *Matawari* is an exercise in which one sits with legs spread as wide as possible.

A daily session of *keiko* ends around noon, upon which the wrestlers sit down to a brunch consisting of a special stew called *chanko-nabe* (a high-calorie stew containing various kinds of meat and vegetables), condiments, pickles, and several large bowls of rice, often washed down with one or two bottles of beer. (Wrestler's appetites are legendary.) Following this large meal, the next several hours are usually spent napping, which along with the large quantities of food facilitates weight gain. Through this regimen of exercise, diet, and sleep, it is not unusual for some wrestlers to weigh more than 150 kilograms, and a few tip the scales at 200 kilograms and higher.

## Tournament Competition

Under the sanction of the Japan Sumo Association, six 15-day Grand Sumo Tournaments are held each year: three in Tokyo (in January, May, and September) and the other three in Osaka, Nagoya, and Fukuoka (in March, July, and November, respectively). In between the grand tournaments, the wrestlers tour the nation's rural areas and engage in local competitions, which help to stimulate interest in the sport and attract new recruits.

The first "official" *sumo* arena, the Kokugikan, was built in Tokyo's Ryogoku area in 1909. After World War II, the Kokugikan was moved to the nearby Kuramae area where it remained for the next four decades. In 1985, a newly built facility with seating for 11,000 opened close to the original location, near JR Ryogoku station.

Nationwide television broadcasts of the bouts begin around 4:00 p.m. and last until 6:00 p.m., but matches between lower-ranked wrestlers start much earlier in the day.

During a tournament, top-ranked wrestlers in the *makunouchi* and *juryo* divisions compete once a day for 15 days; those in the lower *makushita*, *sandanme*, *jonidan*, and *jonokuchi* divisions compete only on 7 of the 15 days. While the object is, of course, to win as many matches as possible, achieving a majority of wins in the course of a tournament (8 wins out of 15 matches, or 4 out of 7) is enough for a wrestler to at least maintain his current ranking or ensure promotion to a higher level. Victory in a tournament goes to the *makunouchi* wrestler with the most wins; ties are settled by elimination matches on the final day.

## Honors and Awards

Before some *makunouchi* division matches, attendants can be seen circling the ring holding pennants displaying the names of corporate patrons that donate cash prizes to their favorite wrestlers. The more pennants there are, the larger the prize, this being handed to the winner by the referee upon completion of the match. Squatting at the edge of the ring, the winner accepts his prize while making a gesture, called *tegatana* (hand sword), that signifies his grateful acceptance.

A tournament winner receives cash, trophies and a variety of other prizes, including rice, *sake* (rice wine), and so forth. Wrestlers below the rank of *ozeki* that achieve



winning records during the tournament become eligible for three special awards: the Outstanding Performance, Technique, and Fighting Spirit prizes. These are accompanied by cash bonuses.

Another incentive to wrestlers is the *kimboshi* (gold star), awarded to a lower-ranked wrestler who manages to upset a *yokozuna*. Each additional *kimboshi* entitles the wrestler to an incremental boost in his salary for the remainder of his active career.

## Internationalization

*Sumo*'s popularity was further enhanced by the late Emperor Showa, an ardent fan of the sport. Beginning with the May 1955 tournament, the emperor made a custom of attending one day of each tournament held in Tokyo, where he watched the competition from a special section of VIP seats. This has been continued by other members of Japan's imperial household. Said to be an enthusiastic *sumo* fan, four-year-old Princess Aiko attended a *sumo* tournament for the first time in 2006 with her parents Crown Prince Naruhito and Crown Princess Masako. Diplomats and visiting foreign dignitaries are often invited to see the tournaments.

While *sumo* was first practiced outside of Japan by members of the overseas Japanese community, several decades ago the sport began to attract other nationalities. Since the 1960s, young wrestlers from the United States, Canada, China, South Korea, Mongolia, Argentina, Brazil, Tonga, Russia, Georgia, Bulgaria, Estonia, and elsewhere have come to Japan to take up the sport, and a few of them—after overcoming the language and culture barrier—have excelled. In 1993, Akebono, an American from the state of Hawaii, succeeded in reaching the highest rank of *yokozuna*. In recent years, wrestlers from Mongolia have been very active in *sumo*, the most successful so far being Asashoryu

and Hakuho. Asashoryu was promoted to the rank of *yokozuna* in 2003 followed by Hakuho in 2007, and the two became dominant presences in *sumo*, winning many tournaments. Asashoryu retired from *sumo* in 2010. Wrestlers from countries other than Mongolia have also been rising in the ranks, including the Bulgarian Kotooshu and the Estonian Baruto, who were promoted to the rank of *ozeki* in 2005 and 2010, respectively.

Thanks in part to greater dissemination of *sumo* overseas by exhibition tournaments held in Australia, Europe, the United States, China, South Korea, and elsewhere, the sport is gaining popularity outside Japan.