

Sumo in Burundi

So much more than the quibbles a world away

by Francois Wahl – Swiss Sumo Society

Sumo is a sport. For some of us it also constitutes a part of our 'living' in the sense that coverage of the sport we love goes part way to paying the bills.

For others, sumo is a hobby – something they enjoy doing or simply enjoy watching up close if in Japan, on TV or PC if not. Whoever you are, wherever you are, the odds are you keep up with sumo in part via computer. TV coverage may be another method but regardless of your own links to the sport to date, electronically, via magazine subscription or other, the chances are that few if any readers of this piece will ever make sumo mean so much to so many as does Mr. Francois Wahl of the Swiss Sumo Society.

As part of his day job, Francois works in some of the places we only hear about on CNN or the BBC.

The pictures you will see here will show you just how basic some of the medical services are in one of his most recent project areas - Burundi - in the 21st century. The text you will read was written by



Delivery room - Gitega Hospital



Hospital ward-Gitega Hospital

Francois, nudged into place by SFM and is brought to you herein so you can see just how petty the online sumo community has become in recent years with its rows and gripes about the old days, the new days, the best ever, the worst ever, numerical evidence having occurred X times in the past and strength analysis on right hand inside grips.

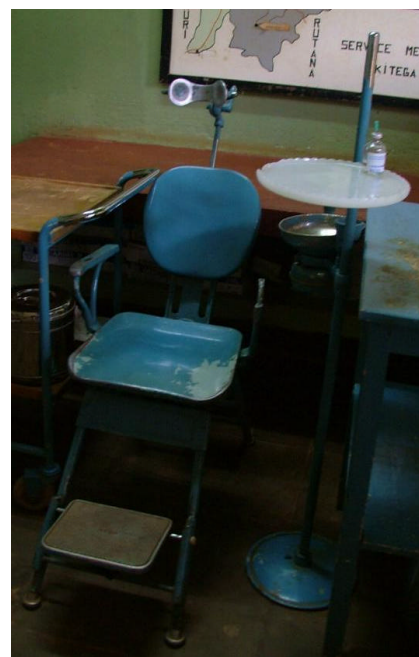
Lets take sumo back to a place many Japanese fear it will never tread again – to the heart; the place so few rikishi and yet fewer fans will ever have the fortune to tread.

The efforts Francois is making in Burundi and elsewhere, in part related to sumo, matter a million times more than individual win / loss ratios in the larger scheme of things.

Direct some of your energies, and

if you so wish, finances to Francois and let sumo benefit on an altogether different plane.

Mark Buckton
SFM



Treatment room - Gitega Hospital



Martial arts club with Francois Wahl

Judo and martial arts in general are in a stage of early development in Burundi – the world’s fourth poorest country - thanks, in part to a 13-year civil / ethnic war leaving 750,000 of a population of 7.5 million as orphans – a full 10% of the population are now children without parents to turn to in times of need and fear.

At present, Burundi is rebuilding. A little international help has come in to date but it is far from

what is required. Is the lack of oil or easily accessible natural resources behind the First World ignoring this forgotten corner of central Africa? Perhaps.

Japan, for example, has no diplomatic presence in Burundi – no representation in the capital Bujumbura - nothing.

I first entered Burundi after the local Ministry of Health tasked my company, Numelec SA, with



First sumo club in Burundi

improving one of the poorest hospitals in the country – a hospital in the central town of Gitega.

Eighty per cent of the local population is unemployed. One in five children dies before their fifth birthday. Female life expectancy is 42 to 43 years.

From the start it was too difficult for my small company to cope alone and thus we created a non-governmental association named "les amis du Burundi" (The Friends of Burundi) to see what could be done with a larger injection of people, and things greatly improved thanks to a hospital in Oyonnax, France that



Nadia Nsabimbona

kindly decided to donate equipment to their own town hall who in turn arranged transportation to Burundi. Amongst the list of solutions / projects we came up with was the idea of building a martial arts facility.

The way we planned it was simple – with the help of donors (in many areas including transportation – a glaringly absent aspect of the Burundi infrastructure) we looked at pinning down, under one roof, the equipment needed to allow us to open a club we could use for medical rehabilitation as part of the hospital in the daytime and after 5pm as a regular club.

There would, ideally, be hot

showers (this town sits at an altitude of 1300 m after all with an average temperature of 20°C but lacks much in the way of hot showers), flush toilets, tatami and weight-lifting equipment..... ideally.

But all this takes time.

We received our first offer of aid from a Strasbourg (France) judo club and a doctor in England – the first container of equipment is now on its way to Dar Es Salaam.

Sadly, when we contacted Japan – the home of sumo at both a pro

and amateur level – we were ignored.

We haven't stalled though – in spite of this lack of interest - but we do need more help.

The idea is still there to 'liberate' part of the hospital – a facility lacking a cardiology department and so so much more – while at the same time giving local children the opportunity to practice a sport so easy to do, so easy to understand and so relatively cheap to take up.

Upon the advice of Nadia

Nsabimbona (pictured), the first female judoka from Burundi, we pressed forward. Listening to a person who fought centuries of stereotype to become a pioneer for her sex in this nation with a population the size of Tokyo, was inspiring and so, like all journeys, we set off with one small step by borrowing a rope from a nearby orphanage and shaping a circle on the floor.

And with that simple act – sumo in Burundi was, is and has been born. Where we go from here is anyone's guess.