

# Views of Japanese Sumo Fans

## What Sumo Means to Me #2

by Michiko Fukuda

It was so natural for me to start watching sumo that I don't even remember when I first saw it, but I'm sure the first time I heard the hustle-bustle of sumo bouts was unconsciously - when I was still in my mother's womb. She liked sumo very much, so the TV in my house was always on during the 15-day tournaments.

I was born and brought up in a very small village in Kagoshima Prefecture in the southern part of Kyushu. In those days, there were not so many TV channels or entertainment type programs broadcast for kids. Therefore, it was only natural that I started to enjoy watching NHK sumo broadcasts with my parents. However, when I think anew, nowadays, of sumo and what it meant to me, I would say that "I learnt a lot from sumo." Sumo has influenced my life so very much.

From memory, the first foreigner I ever saw was Takamiyama, (currently Azumazeki Oyakata) albeit an image obtained through TV. There were no foreigners in my village so Takamiyama was the first. Thanks to him I learnt of the existence of at least one other country besides Japan and that the language they spoke was not Japanese. My mother was a fan of Takamiyama for the reason, as she explained later, that he must have had a very hard time to make himself understood in Japanese and to get accustomed to his new environment as part of Japanese culture. Many years later, when I heard the phrase 'culture shock' Takamiyama came to mind.

After becoming an elementary school student, one day I asked my

mother why she liked sumo. She told me it was because sumo was a microcosm of human life. At that time I couldn't understand what she meant at all, but as I grew older I picked up on the significance of her words little by little; sumo displays almost everything we can see in human life – just on a larger scale than would happen in a 'normal' life. Rikishi, after training so hard and checking-up on the techniques of an opponent, think deeply of the maneuvers and counter-maneuvers they will bring into play during a bout. However eagerly they prepare, they may be defeated by making a small error, or, if worst comes to worst, might end up seriously injured. This means that they have to fight not only their opponent but also their own spirit; fears and pressures. Furthermore, in the life they live they must follow a set of very strict rules, some of which may seem very irrational, until eventually the time surely comes when their body rejects any more struggles and is forced to yield to juniors.

I feel these things do happen to me on a much smaller scale, more slowly, and at times more abstractly. Some may say we can see the same aspects of humanity in other sports too. Roughly speaking, we may be able to consider all sports as a microcosm of human life but as sumo is about man-to-man bouts, a vehement battle between two almost naked men wearing only a 'mawashi' and is often played out in an instant, I look upon sumo as the more direct and obvious epitome of our life.

There are of course other factors regarding sumo I'd like to make

mention of: sumo begins with courtesy and ends with courtesy, rikishi play fair and square, they value the importance of the 'tachiai' where two wrestlers rise simultaneously to begin grappling. All of these aspects of the sport have long been maintained in the sport and each carries its own precious meaning. It seems to me that sumo resembles the Japanese tea ceremony – another aspect of culture with its own extensive history as both begin and end with courtesy and are full of movements laden with special meaning. Sumo, like the tea ceremony is unquestionably Japanese in culture.

Considering the comments above and in retrospect, 'gratitude' is the most suitable word to describe my feeling towards sumo. Sumo taught me so many things and made me feel various forms of emotion. If I select just one of the many bouts impressed upon my memory, I would pick the 1993 Kyushu Basho bout in which Konishiki was beaten by the younger Akebono and as a result dropped to sekiwake. I remember clearly the very sad look on the winner's face and will never forget the sentiment I felt that day.

In ending though I'd like to make one more mention of sumo as regards my mother. She was hospitalized and confined to her bed for about fifteen months near the end of her life but during sumo tournaments, for about thirty minutes a day was able to sit up in bed with my help. She really enjoyed watching sumo at these times, and when her favorite wrestler won she tried to speak - an unbelievable thing for her to be

doing according to her doctors.  
She looked very happy as everyday  
I hoped her favorite would win.

The Hatsu Basho this year was  
sadly the last sumo for us to watch  
sumo together and although she is

was almost comatose, I am sure  
she enjoyed the hustle-bustle with  
me.