



Amateur Angles #9 And the winner might be... (II)

by Howard Gilbert

As promised, this is the second part of my preview of this year's Sumo World Championships in Chiang Mai, Thailand next month. In the previous instalment I looked exclusively at European chances, so this time I will look at the rest of the world, namely Africa, Oceania, the Americas and Asia...

And this is where the uncertainty and difficulties in predicting come in. Why you ask? Well, it is partly easier to pick which European athletes might do well because I have more contacts in this part of the world to keep me abreast of developments. Also, European form is easier to follow and judge because there are more competitions on that continent, and the results are readily available. In short, Europe is far more organised and integrated than most other regions of the world when it comes to amateur sumo. The rest of the world struggles to hold regular tournaments and integrated regional competitions. Furthermore, some countries that compete in regional tournaments are absent from world championships. So, in predicting form and possible standouts in Thailand it could also be a case of guessing who might be there in the first place.

Indeed, trying to predict the countries that will attend is almost as interesting as considering the form of their athletes. This year will see the first time that the

Junior World Sumo Championships is run in conjunction with senior competition. This might make the trip more cost effective for some countries that have only appeared at senior or junior competitions in any one year, but if money is an issue for these nations their attendance might be as limited as before – it is difficult to know. Certainly having Thailand as a venue will mean that some of the costs are kept down. Food and accommodation should be far cheaper than in recent years when Europe and Japan have hosted the event. Thailand is also a tourist hub that is well-serviced by airline carriers, and there are many routes into the country from surrounding South-East Asian airports as well. This may lead to greater participation than when the tournament was in Osaka or Riesa.

So, on to the continents and their chances:

I do not see a credible threat from Africa in any of the divisions unless South Africa comes out of the wilderness after their absence in 2006. Prior to this Stanley Somerville had been one of the top five amateur sumo open weight competitors in the world in 2004 and 2005. Egypt has sent athletes to recent junior competitions and they may also make a senior appearance if they come at all. Beyond that, Mauritius is the only other country that might attend at all, as they had female athletes at

the 2005 World Games in Germany. Unfortunately, apart from these nations, sumo seems to be struggling on the continent – moreso than anywhere else in the world.

Oceania is also unlikely to trouble the scorers, although at least one country is guaranteed of participating. New Zealand will head to the tournament with a full contingent of male competitors, but unfortunately will be without female athletes or junior competitors. The lack of junior athletes is particularly regrettable due to the success the team had last year in Estonia, but the difficulty has been keeping these youngsters committed and involved with only sporadic opportunities to compete. As for New Zealand's chances, they will be dark-horses in the heavyweight and open weight divisions with the Perenara brothers, Andrew and Bill, respectively. The abundance of good European heavies, though, will make their quest difficult indeed. Tim Uasi returns to international competition in the lightweight division after having represented his country at the Junior World Sumo Championships in 2000. He is strong and able, but whether his lack of recent international competition will play against him remains to be seen. Thomas Piper is returning from injury that has hampered his preparation. He is a veteran of the last two World Champs but will face a large field in the middleweight division.

Further afield; it is uncertain whether Australia will attend this year. Katrina Watts will be there in an official capacity, but fatherhood seems likely to limit the participation of John Traill and Rowan Klein. This will be disappointing to the international sumo community as they are both well-liked characters, but of course our congratulations are with them and their partners. Lastly, Tonga's two-man team in 2006 did surprisingly well. The question is whether anyone will be on the plane to Thailand after Tonga had to pull out of the Oceania Sumo Championships due to lack of available athletes.

In the Americas really only two countries will figure prominently. In the north, the United States will provide solid, if not spectacular, athletes who have the ability to beat their opponents on any given day. Lightweight Trent Sarbo is strong, experienced and tenacious. He has good sumo fundamentals and has competed abroad this year to expose himself to different opposition. From a wrestling background, Sarbo may be able to counter the upper-body strength of many of the prominent European competitors.

Heavyweight Kelly Gneiting had a great tournament in Osaka last year, losing in one of the bronze medal bouts. He has experience gained from the recent world events, but he perhaps benefited from being in the best bracket of the draw last year. Additionally, the absence of a couple of suspended European athletes who had been involved in the World Sumo League meant that last year's tournament was possibly not quite as strong as in previous years. He is one to keep an eye on, but is likely to play a spoiling role for someone else's championship hopes rather than taking the title himself. In the men's team competition the Americans will fair well in the early rounds but will be found out by the stronger teams later in the competition

Further south, the Brazilians will carry the hopes of South America with them. In particular, the Brazilian women have been strong over the last four or five years. Although not quite at the level of a few years ago (when they had World Champion Fernanda Pereira Da Costa in their midst), Brazil's women won two bronze medals in 2006 through middleweight Alexandra Marques and heavyweight Ana Claudia Souza. On the other side, the Brazilian men, although a little smaller than their opponents, have shown that they are technically quite good. Only as far back as 2004 their team won silver against much bigger opponents through their speed and ability.

This only leaves Asia to consider, where Japan, Mongolia and Thailand seem to figure most prominently. For the Asian countries this tournament will prove slightly challenging, in that when the competitors line up for the main event on the Sunday, they will have competed already on the Friday at the Asian Sumo Championships. This could be a mixed blessing, as it will give them recent top-level competition, but there is the risk that the warm conditions and only one day's rest might hamper some of the athletes, particularly the heavyweight and open weight competitors. Asian nations may also benefit from greater acclimatisation, as I expect they will assemble in Chiang Mai a few days earlier than most of the other international teams.

Mention must be made of the Kazakh athlete Niyaz Gunyashev who claimed silver in the men's lightweight last year. His presence was a surprise as Kazakhstan had not been seen at a World Championships for more than five years and his performance was also a surprise as he upstaged the former champion on his way to the final. It remains to be seen whether he will attend and try for

more this year.

The locals have a good chance to push for medals, as they have been improving steadily in recent years. I mentioned some of their athletes in my column two issue prior: Jakraphong Chaorungmethuee won silver in the men's lightweight competition in 2005, Chalermthip Saguna took bronze in the women's middleweight division in both 2005 and 2006, and Sukhbat Agvaansamdan took bronze in the men's middleweight in 2005. They obviously have the advantage of being acclimatised and having hometown support.

Mongolia is also expected to do well in Thailand. They have the reigning men's heavyweight champion in Byambajav Ulambayar, perhaps better known as former Makushita rikishi Daishochi. He has been based in California in recent times and won both the open weight and heavyweight titles in the USA Open in April. However, the Mongolian threat goes far deeper than just one athlete. Gantugs Rentsendorj won silver in the men's middleweight, Myagmarsuren Tsedev took bronze in the Open weight for men, and the men's team took bronze. In the women's lightweight division Enkhzava Selenge took bronze, and the women's team also claimed bronze, following up their silver in 2005.

It is difficult to predict just who might perform well for Japan, because they have so many athletes to choose from. Unlike other nations that have a small, crack squad of athletes, Japan is able to choose from the best of the college athletes who get regular competition. Also up for consideration are recent graduates who are still competing in corporate sumo competitions. As such, the pool is large and thus picking who will be in the mix is akin to crystal ball-gazing.

Gone from the previous three tournaments is Ichihara Takayuki, who was heavyweight champion in 2004 and 2005, and bronze medallist in the 2006 open weight division. He is now plying his trade in Ozumo, so the open weight spot needs to be filled. His classmate Mori Tomoki, who was bronze medallist in the heavyweight, has also gone to pro-sumo, so another big man needs to be found for Japan. Given the strength of Nihon University it would make sense that two of their men are chosen to replace their seniors. However, although the Nichidai team has been performing well this year as a unit, individually its stars are not achieving the same results as in previous years. If two Nichidai athletes were chosen then it would probably be club captain Fukao Mitsuhiro, who was runner-up in the All-Japan Amateur Championships last year, and possibly 1st year phenomenon Sakuma Takayuki, who has more than held his own in collegiate sumo after being a stand out in high school. However, as I said, this is a lottery, and the spots could just as equally go to one of the cross-town rivals from Nittaidai (Nihon Taiiku

University), a club having a stellar year in individual competitions.

Of personal interest will be whether last year's champions in the lightweight and middleweight competitions are selected to compete. Both have now left university but certainly have the pedigree to keep competing. Nagasawa Takaharu took the lightweight gold away from Europe's grasp last year, but I have not heard whether he has continued with sumo since leaving Nittaidai. He could well be replaced by whoever won the under-85kg category at the All-Japan Collegiate Weight Class Championships.

The pedigree of three-time middleweight champion Yoshida Katsuo should definitely see him selected once more, but the policy of Japan's selectors may be to give younger blood a chance. Yoshida chose not to enter Ozumo, opting instead for a job at Kyushu Electric, which has its own corporate sumo team. Already this year he has won an individual competition for adults, so his form has not slipped upon leaving university. A record-setter with his hat-trick of titles, it would be

phenomenal if he could (given the chance) add to that tally.

As for Japan's women, the selection depends upon the results of the All-Japan Shinsumo Championships in late October. Expected winners include Ishigaya Satomi and Tsuihiji Rie, both of whom have competed for Japan over a number of years. If both make the team then they would be expected to figure prominently in the women's lightweight and open weight divisions respectively. Both had a poor 2006 World Championships, finishing out of the medals. As they are both former champions and regular medallists, they will be looking to make amends in Thailand.

And so comes to an end my speculation about who to watch and who will be in the hunt for medals. This form guide is patchy at best, and largely takes into account past form, although some current information is available. As with almost any sport, the on-the-day nature of the World Sumo Championships will no doubt see favourites upset, surprise packages emerge, and dark horses having their moment of glory. Would we have it any other way?

