

SFM Interview

The good, the bad and the ugly (but which is which?)

by Mark Buckton

Globally, sumo would be nowhere without the Internet. As part of that advance beyond Japanese borders, there exist just three English language 'discussion type' areas for sumo fans with access to a computer. News, views and comment in day-to-day form – they have it all.

They are, in no particular order: [Sumotalk](#), [Sumo Forum](#) and (the) [Sumo Mailing List](#).

Run by Mike Wesemann (MW), Mikko Mattila (MM) and Joe Klemmer respectively, these sites and their readers sometimes go head to head. Opinions differ as to the quality and intent of each. Some die-hard fans of one refuse to access the others – preferring to vilify and ridicule the competition – more often than not unjustifiably so.

In what was one of our most interesting, and ambitious interview quests to date, SFM set out to get these three guys 'together' via the forum that lets them exist as they do – as we do – the Internet.

Sadly, due to SML tech-woes in recent weeks and the site staggering along with limited connection to the vast majority of its members by the looks of things, Joe Klemmer was prevented from answering his questions in full. Fingers crossed, we'll bring his responses in the next issue – and that SML is still with us.

MB: *What membership do you both claim?*

MW: I am a contributor, of course, for Sumotalk; I am a

member of the Sumo Forum under the name Tsuyuharai; and I am a member on Sumotalk's Discussion Board under my own name. In terms of readership, Sumotalk just crossed the 10,000 unique visitors per month plateau in May. We average about 12% growth in readership year over year, so we project around 11,500 unique visitors for May 2008. As for our discussion board, which we opened in May 2007, we have about 175 members who have signed up

MM: I am the chairman of sumoforum.net. We have 861 members at the moment but at regular intervals, totally unused accounts are deleted so the number of members doesn't reflect the total number of registrations since the beginning.

MB: *As you are no doubt aware from posts on the WWW, a number of the more prominent 'names' in terms of sumo fandom, won't read one (or another) of the sites run by yourselves. Any opinions on that?*

MW: My only concern is increasing the readership of Sumotalk, which has, and will open up new advertising opportunities. There is a big misconception out there among a lot of people prominent on these websites that all sumo fans have time to surf the web for more than a few minutes a day and that all sumo fans actively participate or read a forum. The majority don't... at least the majority of our readers don't. I couldn't care less who reads or who doesn't read Sumotalk. I only care that our readership maintains its

consistent growth patterns.

MM: The sumo fan community is relatively small so it is a bit surprising to me that some hardcore sumo fans stay away from Sumo Forum. Then again, if someone doesn't want to contribute or even read Sumo Forum it is their choice and obviously they have their reasons. Sometimes the reason for avoiding it seems to be that the layout is too difficult or that you have to actually click threads to read them as opposed to the sumo ML format. Those reasons are hard to understand.

MB: *Individually now, Mikko, Sumo Forum has been accused of being 'over-policed' in the past and of long term members not having to respect its own rules at other times. I see at least one of your moderators often showing signs of letting things go with certain 'online friends' but readily closing threads that veer off course as a result of less prominent contributors, or those with whom the person in question has previously disagreed. How would you counter that?*

MM: I have relied a lot on our moderators and they interact quite a lot on an admin. sub forum (which is only visible to members with moderator status) about how to deal with some posts, whether to lock some posts or not etc. Sumo Forum isn't a democracy as such, even though in principle all rules apply equally to all members. Although it is in my interests to promote the quality of the forum, sometimes it leads to milder treatment of badly behaved members whose contribution to

the forum has been huge or who have even been the leading forces building Sumo Forum from scratch. On the other hand, it must be said that all members get quite a lot of leeway and there are members whom many would rather see banned for good but who have been tolerated because they also contribute in positive ways.

MB: Mike, Sumotalk is the newest of the sites in terms of having the 'forum' option. That said, the reason a number of folk on Sumo Forum won't go anywhere near it as far as I can see, does appear to be down to the sometimes aggressive rants of a couple of contributors with, presumably, limited live sumo viewing experience, whereas those with a bit more ringside time such as yourself, Kenji and Simon appear more of a stabilizing factor capable of drawing in the readers. Any thoughts along those lines?

MW: If people on the Sumo Forum don't like Clancy Kelly, then don't read us on the days that he comments. Clancy is an integral part of the website. He knows his stuff, he understands the nuances of Japanese culture, and he can tell a joke like no other. He fits perfectly into the premise upon which the website was founded, namely friends analyzing sumo and trash-talking along the way. The bottom line is Clancy makes us better and increases our readership. The numbers show it. I have no reason to break our current formula just to appease a few people on Sumo Forum, who I'm convinced are reading the site anyway. And yes, we have some recent contributors who are newer to the sport, but the core contributors will right the ship in the end if someone has a bad day.

MB: How, given the answers above and if at all, do you see your sites interacting in the years ahead?

MW: Sumotalk and the Sumo Forum currently mix like oil and water. It shouldn't be that way, but it's reality. The problem is that our aggressive and abrasive style doesn't work for everyone, and it wouldn't be fair to impose that upon someone who doesn't want to read it. Sumo fans will find what satisfies their needs, so for the time being, I think it best that the two sites remain as they are. Moti Dichne says it best when he chimes "a little de-geiko never hurts anyone." As for the Sumo Mailing list, I know of it, but I don't subscribe to it. But once again, it sounds like a great idea for people who want such a resource. The key is to have options and information available for all types of fans.

MM: Interaction will most likely consist of our members' tendency to visit and even contribute to more than one site. Unfortunately, I am rather skeptical about the future viability of SML but Sumotalk is obviously here to stay. Hopefully the tension between our forums will tone down over time.

MB: Have you ever thought of merging with one or more of your competitors?

MW: Of course. If I thought there was a way to increase the readership of Sumotalk, I would do it. I really don't see us as competitors though. It's not one or the other. Any sumo fan can choose what he or she wants to read.

MM: No. Sumo Forum aspires to be the most comprehensive and active discussion board online. ML and Sumotalk members are free to join Sumo Forum and contribute freely but we will probably maintain our independence.

MB: Imagine you were on the Titanic as part of an ST/SF trip to see sumo in the US (and that the Internet were older than it is of

course), Jack / Leonardo is nowhere to be seen and you have a small raft all to yourself. Which trio of your members would you pull into your 'too small for four' lifeboat?

MW: In the case of Sumotalk where we only have six active contributors, I'm not going to alienate half of my staff by leaving some guys out. If I had to choose three guys whose commentary surpasses all, it would be Kitanofuji, Mainoumi, and Fujii (an announcer on NHK).

MM: That is both a very easy and very difficult question. Tough as it is to mention three members and omit dozens of others, it is also easy, as members Kintamayama and Jonosuke are absolutely vital for Sumo Forum, both in the number of posts and especially the value of posts. There is no way they wouldn't be part of the trio. The candidates for the third place are many but if one had to be chosen it would probably be Doitsuyama as he also plays a huge role during honbasho when he posts the daily results of all divisions with very illustrative comments, and he is also the father of the massive sumo database that single-handedly solved the problem of not having one major sumo database to search for any kind of stats.

MB: And, just for fun, imagine you were the real life Rijiho of all you see and command, what changes would you make to the world of Ozumo? Women on the dohyo, steroid testing, reduce prices etc....?

MW: The biggest change would be to move the starting time of the bouts back two hours so the makuuchi bouts ended at 8 PM instead of 6 PM. Honbasho sell out a guaranteed six days per basho... the five weekend days and the one holiday, which usually comes on a Monday. The reason is

that people have time off of work, so they can attend. (It's as) simple as that. It would also provide the perfect place for the after-hours drinking session among co-workers. As for NHK, they have two channels in their non-cable package, so broadcast sumo on the education channel if you have to.

I would also make it a false start for a rikishi to step outside of the starting lines before he touches his opponent at the tachiai. This wouldn't limit the tachiai henka entirely, but it would make it much less rewarding than it is now. Compared to ten years ago, the tachiai henka is running rampant and lessening the overall quality of sumo. A rikishi would get his tail kicked if he ever tried a tachiai henka in keiko, so why is it acceptable atop the dohyo?

MM: Fine tuning is always possible but maybe the starting time could be later in the evening for makuuchi bouts, especially if one goal is to coax the younger generation to get more into sumo. Perhaps some modifications should be made on how to assess the need for recovery from serious injuries and actually create some kind of cushion against a severe drop in ranking in case of necessary surgery forcing the rikishi to be sidelined for two basho in a row or so. In general, one problem sumo has is the amount of basically "crippled" makuuchi rikishi. Sumo is a very tough sport and takes a toll on the body but there are ways to modernize and improve the handling of the injury problem.

MB: *An 'admin' Q for you now - how do you view the issue of image (photo) usage in relation to copyright on the pages you run? Any plans to credit the pics used or demand it from your posters (Mikko – SF)? Similarly, what do you feel about members openly selling copyright infringing videos of the NHK broadcast*

having recorded the images themselves? In short – do you subscribe to the Internet free for all belief of some or hold yourself to a different standard?

MW: Sumotalk uses photographs obtained from the various news wires. We currently do not credit the pictures because I'm too lazy to take the time to do it, but we would do so if we were asked to. Personally, I don't have any problem with someone adding a picture to their post on the Sumo Forum or sending it as an attachment in an email, but I think it's wrong to redistribute DVD's of NHK's broadcast for profit. If NHK posted a video file of the broadcast somewhere on their website so anyone could view it for free, then sure, make all the DVD's you want and try to sell them then.

MM: There has been talk behind the scenes about how to handle these copyright issues. Of course, one mitigating factor is that Sumo Forum certainly doesn't draw any profit from its operation and it is very difficult to imagine that the sources of the photos posted would suffer economically or in other ways from the appearance of photos in Sumo Forum's threads. The forum environment has the advantage of enabling the use of pictures and some of the most popular threads are picture threads so it does play a big role. The talk behind the scenes continues though and we are trying to find some kind of consensus and framework of rules on how to deal with copyright issues on Sumo Forum.

MB: *Do you see yourselves expanding in any way?*

MW: Yes. I'm always looking for opportunities to add something to the site that I think would be beneficial for our readers like a juryo reporter or someone who covers the non-sekitori rikishi. The problem is where do you find the

time to take care of the administration? Sometimes the other contributors will say "hey, why don't we do this?", and my reply is always "if you take care of the admin work, then go for it". I'm also always on the lookout for new contributors. I wanted someone from Eastern Europe, so we brought Martin on board. In the future, I'd love to have someone from Mongolia, and I'd also highly welcome a female contributor. I think mixed representation is extremely important.

MM: Sumo Forum has expanded little by little. New sub forums, new features, new side material etc. have appeared. All options are always open. When a good idea emerges there is no reason not to see if it can be incorporated into Sumo Forum.

MB: *Now to the nitty gritty – who has tried on a mawashi himself? If so – when and where?*

MW: Only in my dreams. But to think that you can't provide commentary on sumo without having strapped the mawashi on yourself is a misguided take. Case in point: Doreen Simmons. Then you have the NHK announcers... then you have all of the other Japanese journalists. This will sound very arrogant, but if I knew there was someone who provided better sumo commentary in the English language than me, I wouldn't do what I do.

MM: I haven't had the opportunity to do that. The details of sumo are always of great interest to me so I have tried and even utilized many of the sumo exercises, for example. I have also tried many sumo techniques wearing judogi.

MB: *You may know I have gone on record as saying Asashoryu should have been kicked out of sumo but how did you see the*

whole 'offence / penalty / mental illness' issue?'

MW: I strongly disagree that he should have been kicked out of sumo, and I strongly disagree with the penalty. I've given the reasons why in my blog on Sumotalk. Part of my outrage was how can you try and sweep the brutal death of a 17-year-old kid under the rug, yet you go after a yokozuna for participating in a charity event? The Sumo Association's agenda, priorities, and biases are obvious to me. As for Asashoryu's mental illness, I think he was faking most of it to get his own way, but what do you expect the guy to do being unjustly banned from the sport for two basho and then being put under a ridiculous house arrest?

MM: From a medical point of view, the handling of the post-penalty collapse or mental breakdown of Asashoryu was rather ridiculous with out of the hat diagnoses and a bizarre lack of patient confidentiality. The penalty itself was severe. The puppet theater-like series of doctors and Asashoryu's "close friends", the media frenzy following every move of Asashoryu and the sudden recovery all left a bad taste. I personally hope this whole mess will go away quietly when Asashoryu returns and makes his mandatory apology speech. He has served his penalty after Kyushu Basho and he has another chance to get back to do his job. I think he shouldn't have been kicked out of sumo but the punishment was hard enough.

MB: *Think he'll be back or will he be a shadow of his former self? And of course, the Tokitaizan case as it stands today (at time of interview early Oct)? Will physical abuse ever be removed from sumo? Should it be?*

MW: Asashoryu and Hakuho will continue to dominate things for

years to come. They're also good friends and don't have any problem laying down for the other guy. When Hakuho was knocked out of the yusho race in Nagoya, he let Asashoryu have his way on senshuraku ensuring that Kotomitsuki couldn't catch him. Similarly, if Asashoryu slips up early and can't overcome Hakuho by senshuraku, he'll let Hakuho win. I see Asashoryu getting rid of the ring rust in January and then taking the Haru Basho yusho.

Physical abuse should never be removed from sumo, but you have to be smart enough to draw the line, and the abuse should only occur within the confines of the practice ring. Limit butsumakari torture sessions to 10 minutes a day, and everything will be fine.

MM: I think he will certainly be back. He must be hungry to show he hasn't gone anywhere despite the emergence of a new yokozuna. The competition is hard though and he will have to work hard to stay at the top.

The essence of sumo is harsh keiko. Self discipline and going to the limits are the main tools to develop one's body and spirit. No question about that and it is human nature to try to give in before the limits have been reached. For this purpose, refining a young rikishi's willpower and teaching him not to slack off even when the mind is exhausted is essential. The difficulty is where to draw the line and when do things turn into something more malignant. There is a huge difference between kicking someone's butt when they're slow to get up from the dohyo and hitting them in the face with a beer bottle. No pain, no gain applies to sumo perfectly but it is clear that sumo also has many immature youngsters who don't have the ability to assess what is enough and what is going overboard.

Oyakata play big roles in setting the boundaries as they should be mature teachers who know the limits and who also protect their rikishi.

I doubt that this forcing to the limit will ever be uprooted from sumo and it shouldn't be, but physical abuse as such shouldn't be part of sumo. Defining the difference is the key. "I don't know how to explain it but I know it when I see it" may fit here perfectly.

MB: *Finally, any last words for the other two in this joint interview or, indeed, your own contributors and admiring public?*

MW: I don't know Joe, and we have never corresponded. As for Mikko, we have corresponded, and he knows that I respect him greatly and enjoy his sumo takes. I've even asked Mikko if he wanted to contribute for us in the past. To sumo fans in general, if you want to know what I have to say about anything, you know where to find me.

MM: Well I wish all the best to both Sumotalk and Sumo ML and a peaceful co-existence with each other. Hopefully the public regards the versatility of our discussion boards as a positive asset. I am always grateful to Sumo Forum's contributors who have developed Sumo Forum into a fruitful discussion board.

MB: *To you both – Joe next time I hope, a huge hand of thanks for appearing on SFM, and answering the questions above – some easy, some less so, and some downright tricky of course. In doing so, I hope you pick up a few new readers to the links we have posted in this PDF - and will one day pop back here for a look at SFM?*

[Sumotalk](#)

[Sumo Forum](#)

[Sumo Mailing List](#)