

Amateur Angles #10

Women's sumo... not so new anymore

by Howard Gilbert

With the recent conclusion of the 15th Sumo World Championships, the 6th Shinsumo World Championships and the 8th Junior Sumo World Championships, there is potentially much to write about in the world of amateur sumo. It was of course the first time that all three had been held together, and it would be interesting to see if my talent spotting was realised in the medal winners. Furthermore, this month sees the All-Japan Sumo Championships, Japan's greatest amateur sumo event and one to which I dedicated this column last year. I could take a look at who might figure in this tournament and possibly gain themselves an opportunity to head into Ozumo as a makushita tsukedashi entrant. However, instead, I would like to turn my attention to something new, or not so new as it turns out, in the area of female amateur sumo: namely, a prefix.

It is quite a surprise to me that it has taken until my tenth column to really discuss female amateur sumo, for it is one of the things that I find most interesting about amateur sumo. Firstly, the presence of females in the sport seems entirely obvious as amateur sumo tries to gain acceptance as an international combat/contact sport. There are weight divisions in the amateur sumo (and the other sports alongside which it wishes to be known, compared and evaluated) and so it seems only normal to have female weight categories as well in the modern sport. However, the presence of women within sumo is a subversive existence because they undermine much of the stereotype of sumo being an ancient and

traditional sport for large Japanese males. These stereotypes obviously come from professional sumo being the dominant image of sumo as a sport, but it is challenged by amateur sumo, with its international presence and different weight classes, and even by Ozumo itself with the introduction of foreign athletes (albeit still possessing large bodies). Thus, the presence of women in amateur sumo differentiates the two spheres of sumo (amateur as separate from professional) and inscribes new meanings on the idea of "sumo" as a whole.

Secondly, I find female amateur sumo contests interesting in their own right, often more so than male contests. Personally, I see some of the best technical aspects in international amateur sumo displayed in the women's middleweight class. It is here where the athletes are not just relying on size or bulk, and are often technically better than the heavyweights and open weight athletes because of this. Also, in this weight class there seems to be less of the predominance of other wrestling moves (freestyle, sambo, etc) that creep into the lightweight divisions of both men's and women's international amateur sumo. Furthermore, in the women's middleweight division, the weight difference between the lightest and heaviest competitors is at most only 15kg, while in the same division on the men's side it can be almost 30kg. So, in short, I appreciate the evenness in the size of the competitors and the increased likelihood that these women will do forward-moving, technically sound sumo rather

than bulldozing their opponent through sheer size or resorting to pulling out some tricky move that is not really proper for sumo.

So, is this to be a column in praise of female amateur sumo, or is there more to it than that? Well, 2007 has seen a subtle yet important shift in the way that female amateur sumo is to be represented henceforth, and it has nothing to do with what happens on the dohyo but instead the Japanese name by which it is called.

Women's amateur sumo was begun in 1996 when Japanese sumo officials created and promoted the sport in a conscious effort to satisfy equality conditions set down in the Olympic Charter. These must be met by sports aspiring to be included in the Olympic Games. There had been some advocacy from European countries to include women in amateur sumo, but the concept itself was quite radical in Japan. Historically, there were negative attitudes toward women participating in sumo in all but limited capacities due to Ozumo being a male-only sport, maintaining a ban on women entering the dohyo, and the general idea that women were 'unlucky' for sumo athletes. This kind of thinking filtered through to amateur sumo, which maintained these attitudes almost wholesale. One only need to look at the 1992 film *Sumo Do, Sumo Don't* (*Shiko Funjatta*, directed by Suo Masayuki) to see these attitudes within college sumo. Furthermore, onna-zumo ("women's sumo") had been a bawdy and erotic performance of sumo for

entertainment in the feudal period and added to the stigma of women performing sumo.

As such, when female amateur sumo was conceived it was not given a name that identified it as attached to women. Instead, it was given the Japanese name *shinsumo*, which literally translates as “new sumo”. The novelty of women participating in competitive sumo meant that the name was particularly apt. The ‘newness’ of the name also helped to differentiate women’s amateur sumo from men’s amateur sumo as well as from the idea that women couldn’t, or shouldn’t, perform sumo.

So, for the past decade or more the word *shinsumo* has been the official name for female amateur sumo. Of course, this most often gets used in Japan or by the IFS as they are really the only areas of the amateur sumo world that use Japanese language. In English, instead of being called “new sumo” the sport has informally been called “women’s amateur sumo” or just referred to as part of amateur sumo (indicating that perhaps that the rest of the world has not had the same issues with accepting

females in the sport that Japan has had).

As of 2007, though, there has been a shift of sorts, although it is most dramatic in the Japanese name. Gone is the prefix *shin*, which has been replaced by *joshi* (girl or woman). Thus, the sport is now to be referred to as “Women’s Sumo.” This now sits a lot closer to how the sport would be referred to in English; however, I doubt this is the main reason for the change. Indeed, the simplicity of the name is to rebrand the sport to make it more acceptable and understandable to the world at large. With amateur sumo wanting greater international exposure, most notably through the Olympic Games, the idea of “new’ sumo is now a misnomer. For many people, the sport of amateur sumo itself is relatively new, and they would not understand why female amateur sumo had to be branded differently (at least as it needed to be for Japan back in 1996). To simplify the name is to make amateur sumo more easily identifiable and palatable to a wide audience, and thus hopefully improving its popularity. Secondly, I think the female version of the sport is now firmly

enough entrenched and understood in Japan that changing the name to *joshi-sumo* does not run the risk of having this sumo tagged with the negative stereotypes of females performing lewd acts as it might have done a decade ago when the sporting aspect was not understood and it might have conjured up only the erotic vision of *onna-zumo*.

Much of this change is obviously semantic and only applies to Japan and Japanese sensibilities. The sport will now be more commonly referred to in English as Women’s Sumo, I suspect, only this time the Japanese translation will also fit this name. As the two languages are the official languages of amateur sumo and the International Sumo Federation (IFS), it makes a lot of sense to bring the two into line. What it means for the sport going forward is very little substantive change. What it does mean is that Thailand has hosted the last *Shinsumo* World Championships and next year will see the continuation of such competition under the title “7th Women’s Sumo World Championships”.