



Let's Hear From You! What Made You A Fan?

by Jack Gartin

Each issue of SFM, We'll ask one of you to tell us something about you and sumo. Think you have something readers would like to know? Write our letters section! Enjoy.

The NCO club was full, but strangely quiet when I walked for an after-work brew. Every head, foreign and Japanese, was turned to the TV on the wall and I thought, "Should be able to get some service even in this crowd."

I raise my hand for the bartender and get, "Wait minute, busy now." Busy doing what? Watching TV? So, I turned to the TV, just in time to watch a tall, large man throw something into the air, cough into his closed fist and move forward to crouch at a white line. What is this? I watched the two men at the white lines crash into each other.

It was a battle that seemed to go on nearly forever. Finally, the tall, large man prevailed with a tremendous (push out or arm throw?) effort. The NCO club went wild. Cheering, clapping, smiling; I had happened onto something that I didn't understand but which was very popular with the audience and probably something I should know about.

25 March 1963 I became an Ozumo fan.

The presence, charisma and sheer power of Yokozuna Taiho was immediately apparent. This was an athlete with the technique, strength and pride of a true

champion and it came across on TV immediately, even to a 'newbie' like myself. And then his class showed as he reached down to help his opponent (Yutakayama) get to his feet.

For the next year, I learned what I could from anyone interested in sumo, Japanese or foreign. Almost the first term, after yokozuna, I learned was 'morozashi', Taiho's favorite and most effective kimarite. Then, to my total surprise and my western bias that there could only be one guy at the top of the heap, I learned there were two Yokozuna; Kashiwado was the other. Are you kidding, that little guy is a Grand Champion? Watching Kashiwado I learned that size and power weren't all there was to sumo. Technique and speed played equally important roles.

Then a 6-year break at home with occasional sumo bits and squibs in the sports pages or in Sports Illustrated while I positioned myself to get back to Japan. But not enough to satisfy my appetite for this new, to me, sport. Remember, this was the mid-60's. No Internet, no Sumo Mailing List and very little interest in sumo in the west. So, I read books that I could find. Few of those, too. But I was at a university that had a

budding Japanese language program and their section in the library had a few things about sumo.

Returning to Japan in 1969 to take up full-time study of Japanese, I was extremely fortunate to have a Japanese teacher who was also a sumo fan. While studying kanji, he very cleverly spent a lot of time teaching me how to read the current makunouchi names and their meanings.

Then he took the class to Nishonoseki Beya, home of Taiho. If I wasn't a completely committed fan by this point, I was done for when I got to meet Taiho. He was very kind to a group of 7 Japanese language students who spoke little more than elementary Japanese. Me, I was totally stunned to meet "my hero" and could barely speak a word.

During the ensuing year the students interested in sumo, about 7-8 of us, were encouraged to use the common room TV to watch sumo, in Japanese, to practice listening skills and learn new vocabulary. We even had a daily pool for the makunouchi division costing 1000 yen per day (about \$2.50 in those days). So, while trying to learn Japanese, I also worked out a simple spreadsheet

to run on my calculator to assign points to each rikishi to calculate winners each day. It worked pretty well, too. I used to win 3-5 pots during each basho. As a result, I became the “resident expert” for the student fans. What a sham!

At this time, Takamiyama had recently entered the makunouchi division, so I had a new guy to root for. Taiho was on the verge of retirement, winning his 32nd basho in January 1971, a jun-yusho in March 1971 and retiring on day 6 of the May 1971 basho. Taiho

had captivated the entire Japanese sports fan world with his ability and presence as a yokozuna.

And sumo had captivated me.

