



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

by Jim Bitgood

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.

I guess my first mistake was enlisting in the US Air Force right out of high school. Two years later (I was a slow learner and spent that two years in technical schools) they sent me to Japan. That was 1965, and even on the base the only TV was Japanese. The story we got was that the Japanese government didn't want FREE American television being broadcast in the Tokyo area. So we watched "Get Smart" and "Batman" in dubbed Japanese.

My next mistake was walking past the TV at the wrong (or right) time. I don't remember exactly how I got interested in watching sumo. Somebody had the TV on in the lounge one afternoon and it looked interesting. I don't think any of us knew we could catch a train to Tokyo and watch it live and in person all day. Only the last 90 minutes or so was televised then. After we learned a few names, we started picking out favorites, not necessarily the best. Although Taiho was dominant then, many of us in the barracks liked Kirinji, probably because he wasn't. But he tried hard. Unfortunately, all we were able to learn were the names of the sekitori (a word I didn't even know then). Words like kimarite and other things weren't in our sumo knowledge base. But we still enjoyed watching the matches.

Having had many years to think

about it, I think what interested me most was the confrontation between two men with no kind of equipment, no sticks, no gloves, no bulky padding, no uniforms covered with advertising. Just bare hands, strength, strategy, and sometimes guile. And frequently a lot of luck. Those of us who were interested usually tried to watch every day when flying or real work didn't get in the way. Many times we would hash over the matches for the next day based on what we remembered from matches in the previous basho. I remember one evening, on the street half way between the bars and the base, that a couple of us began discussing the 'real grudge match' that was due the next day.

It was usually a two-week wait to see how Taiho would beat Kashiwado and Sadanoyama on the last two days. And I think I just missed Takamiyama's makuuchi career. Watching sumo while having a beer in the bar with a TV is when I started learning to read Japanese. It was only the wrestlers' names, and my ability to read hasn't gone much beyond that since then.

1967 - I left Japan and the USAF. One of the first things I did as a new civilian was go to see the new James Bond movie because I had heard that Sadanoyama was in it. I tried to keep following sumo in the campus libraries while I was in

college. That tailed off after I graduated and went to work. I didn't have so much time to go to the library until later in my career when "research" became part of my job.

1991 Discovered the Sumo Mailing List when I made a mistake at work. Then I kept making that mistake until I got my own computer at home. Then I could follow the sport thru all the postings to the ML.

1997-2000 I was able to watch the tournaments on TV for the first time in 30 years. Living in Hokkaido, I was also able to visit three museums of four former yokozuna from Hokkaido (Taiho, Kitanoumi, Chiyonofuji and Chiyonoyama). I can provide directions to anyone planning a visit to Hakodate, Sapporo or Lake Akan.

In January 2000 I was in Tokyo long enough to go to day 2 of the Hatsu Basho. That was a treat, even from my seat on the upper level (nosebleed) seats.

Since I have been back in America – from October 2000 – I have kept up with sumo through the ML, learning about Windows Media Player, checking out all the Japanese newspaper websites, and Sumo Fan Magazine.

Just before I retired in 2003, I was

able to visit Japan for one week on business and spent a weekend in Chitose, and then got back to Tokyo for Day 11 of the Aki Basho. This time I got there earlier than I had in 2000 and snuck into the lower level seating, but way in the back where nobody bothered me. That was a great day for me. Getting lots of autographs (including Kokonoe Oyakata in the casino one evening) in Las Vegas was great too.

Now that I'm retired and don't have to get up in the morning, I can use some of that old shift work experience. I slide my sleep schedule around a little bit and get up in time to crank up the computer and plug in to the streaming video, at anywhere from midnight to 3 am here in Maryland depending on when they decide to turn it on, and whether we are on Standard or Daylight Saving Time.

Since I retired I have been keeping my eyes open for a job that would send me to Japan frequently. But since I have no skills that would interest anybody and very limited language ability, I am still looking. Maybe I should go into management. I even tried recruit myself to the Cleveland Indians after they signed a Japanese pitcher recently. I'll try almost anything to get back to watching live sumo.

