



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

by Pierre Wohlleben

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.

Unlike the three American fans profiled in the last edition of SFM whose sumo fandom goes back several decades, my story is a more “typically European” one. In other words, my first exposure to the sport came thanks to Eurosport’s broadcast of the basho digests. However, I can’t claim to trace my interest back to that famed first broadcast of the Paris koen like many other European fans – I simply ran into sumo while flipping through the channels one evening. I’m not even sure of the exact first basho I saw, but my earliest memories include a distinctly late-career Konishiki who was mostly immobilized by that point and retired soon after, so it must have been sometime in 1997.

Up until that point, I didn’t even have much of a spectator interest in fight sports and martial arts at all, beyond a cursory interest in boxing and a typical male teenager’s fascination with professional wrestling. I suspect it was that severe contrast to pro wrestling that ended up attracting me to sumo. It just looked completely different and unusual with its subdued and ritualistic routines and the “blink and you’ll miss them” bouts. Around the

same time I happened to get internet access and of course I looked for some information about sumo on the net, but it being 1997 it was still pretty much a wasteland. I found what passed for the official Kyokai website back then, but never managed to run into the sumo mailing list for some reason, and eventually I stopped looking and went back to just watching sumo on TV.

So for the next few years my sumo fandom was strictly casual, trying to catch the Eurosport broadcasts when possible but not doing much else to learn about sumo. I didn’t even realize just how casual my interest was until several years later – when Takanonami retired in 2004, I could barely remember anything from his ozeki career even though I had been around for the last three years of it. (I do remember seeing plenty of the two Hawaiians and the Taka-Waka brothers, go figure.)

At any rate, my interest waned at the beginning of the decade and I didn’t even watch much of the broadcasts anymore, until I caught most of the Nagoya 2002 basho on TV and finally went searching on the net again. The first stop was again the official site where I was

greeted by the announcement of a certain Asashoryu’s promotion to ozeki – having watched barely anything in the year and a half before I didn’t have much of a concept of who this guy was or of his meteoric rise, but he happened to have the same birthday as me, so... Eventually I made my way to the excellent sumoinfo.de and the [SML archives](http://SML.archives) and for the next few weeks I ended up devouring pretty much any material about sumo I could find online, thanks to all the knowledgeable folks who had been posting about sumo for years and years. I lurked on the SML and the German sumo forum for a while, and a few months later an SML post led me to the then still relatively small English-language Sumoforum which ended up becoming my main place to talk sumo.

It turned out that the meritocratic nature of ozumo (including its basho-to-basho manifestation in the banzuke) is what I find most intriguing about it, along with the statistical record-keeping that goes with it. I’ve always been fascinated by numbers and statistics so this isn’t a big surprise in itself, but I definitely didn’t expect things to end up this way, back in 1997. Almost as a by-product, I have

found myself getting interested in tracking rikishi careers in the divisions below juryo, and over time that has turned out to be nearly as interesting as the makuuchi competition. There's just something about being able to see a sekitori newcomer as more

than a blank slate that's very satisfying, and fortunately many sumo fans online share that passion nowadays.

I have yet to watch any ozumo live in Japan, but I am definitely planning to do that at some point,

though that's probably still a few years away. For now I am looking forward to the London tour next year which I'll do my best to attend, and in the meantime there is still lots for me to learn about this endlessly fascinating sport.

