

Amateur Angles #14

How time flies... some historical reflections (II)

by Howard Gilbert

My last column looked at the establishment of amateur sumo within Japan, and particularly its position within Japanese universities. For this edition, I will focus on how amateur sumo established itself outside of Japan during the twentieth century, and particularly since the 1970s.

As I explained last time, amateur sumo became established as a competitive sport in the first decade of the twentieth century. Prior to this, and subsequently, sumo was performed in the countryside in ad hoc ways for festivals and religious celebrations. The cultural position of sumo was strongly rooted in local performances, particularly in rural areas, and so it was unsurprising that Japanese emigrants continued to perform sumo in their new locations.

Prior to World War II, large numbers of Japanese emigrated from the Japanese homeland to seek new opportunities abroad. Driven by mainly economic factors such as high rural taxation, indebtedness, and the pinch of compulsory military service for adult males, Japanese farmers began seeking work overseas in places such as Hawaii, mainland North America, and Latin America from as early as the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868-1912). For example, work available on sugar plantations enticed over 180,000 Japanese workers to Hawaii between the 1890s and 1920s, making Japanese the largest ethnic grouping in the fledgling territory. However, fears of the growing Asian population, or the 'Yellow Peril', particularly in California, caused a change in US

immigration policy. This increasingly made emigration from Japan to Latin America a new and attractive proposition, and the first group of Japanese migrated to Brazil in 1908. Emigrants to Brazil were only a part of what may have been as many as one million people who left Japan before World War II.

With such numbers having left the Japanese homeland, the sense of 'the Japanese' and 'Japanese culture' started to take on more fluid concepts. Sumo, performed as a Japanese cultural entity, was now established among Japanese diaspora in the Americas and within the emerging empire of Japan in the Pacific and mainland Asia. Sumo competitions were performed regularly by Nikkeijin (those of Japanese ancestry) in South America (particularly Brazil) and in Hawaii and the west coast of the US. The performance of sumo was one element that kept alive the links to the home country and its culture. Sumo tournaments in the new locale also had meaning as a physical pursuit and contest, just as they had in the countryside of Japan.

The sumo activities abroad were supported from afar by Japanese sumo officials, both from amateur and professional circles. In the pre-war period groups of ozumo athletes would tour Hawaii or the US mainland, and talented Nikkei athletes were also sometimes recruited into ozumo. For instance, in 1914 a group went to Hawaii on a jungyo, followed by a visit the next year to the American mainland. In 1921 a group travelled to both Hawaii and continental United States.

Amateur sumo athletes also conducted overseas goodwill tours. The All Japan Student Sumo Federation (Zen-Nihon Gakusei Sumo Renmei) sent groups of its representatives to the United States in July 1925, June 1926 and July 1927. They also sent a group to Hawaii in 1930 and a follow-up tour was taken in 1937, but thereafter war between Japan and the US halted such expeditions.

In the post-war period, as well, there was significant support to foreign sumo groups from amateur sumo organisations within Japan. The Nihon Sumo Renmei resumed its goodwill visits to Hawaii in 1951, and visited in 1956, 1959 and 1973 as well. The All Japan Student Sumo Federation (Zen-Nihon Gakusei Sumo Renmei) sent teams to Hawaii in 1960 and 1977, and the Ishikawa Sumo Federation sent members to Hawaii in May 1956 and then a second time in May 1976. From the late 1970s, however, the Ishikawa federation sent teams to Brazil instead of Hawaii. Part of this shift would undoubtedly have been due to the greater ease of accessing South America by jet travel from Japan. Furthermore, although sumo had been performed in the immigrant colonies in Brazil, it was not until 1962 that the Brazil Sumo Federation was formed, and so centralised and orchestrated contact with Japanese amateur sumo officials had been lacking prior to this. Just as the pre-war connections had focussed on demonstrating sumo to Japanese communities, these groups travelled with Japanese teams, referees and judges, and amateur sumo officials to attend,

participate and instruct at foreign community tournaments. They appeared as paragons of sumo quality from the Japanese homeland.

Over time the contact between foreign sumo enclaves and Japan was expanded to Japan hosting foreign teams so that they might improve and extend their sumo experience. The Hawaiians reciprocated by sending teams to Japan in 1961 and 1974. During the latter trip the Nihon Sumo Renmei and its prefectural sumo organizations hosted the Hawaiian team for two weeks of Japan-America goodwill sumo tournaments around Japan in July and August 1974. A group of invited athletes from Brazil was hosted in May 1983 and groups of Brazilian children visited Ishikawa in August 1986 and July 1994.

While these bilateral exchanges were vitally important in establishing and developing amateur sumo abroad, perhaps more important for the long term development of the sport was the beginning of regular international competition among these regions (Japan, North and South America) through invitations that would come in the mid-1980s and beyond to attend amateur competitions in Japan. The beginnings of this took place in August 1980, when a tournament was held between Japanese teams, a Hawaiian group (two teams) touring Japan at the time, and a Brazilian high school selection attending other tournaments in Japan. This was the first time that the three countries had fought each other in amateur sumo, and it laid the platform for regular contact over the next decade.

International Competitions

In 1980 a new annual tournament the All-Japan Novice Sumo Championships (Zen-Nihon Shiroto Sumo Senshuken Taikai) began, held at the Kuramae Kokugikan, the home of ozumo. It

was designed to give real novices, those without a recognised pedigree in amateur sumo, an opportunity to perform in the same way as they could watch professional sumo on the television. The use of shiroto (meaning novice, amateur or unskilled) in the name of the tournament indicated two things: firstly, it implied the inexperience of the athletes for whom the tournament had been designed; and, secondly, it linked this type of tournament to shiroto sumo which had been a popular term for amateur sumo in the early 20th century (as was mentioned in my last column).

In the spirit of exposing novices to the sport of amateur sumo, this competition included not only Japanese teams but also invited teams of foreigners. For the first tournament many of the foreign competitors were resident in Japan, such as those from the expatriate community and from American army or naval bases. Teams representing the American Army and Navy stationed in Japan, the United States embassy, and Hawaii joined those representing Japanese prefectures to compete in both team and open weight individual competitions. As the tournament grew, other international teams were invited from abroad, mainly from North and South America to represent those countries where Japanese diaspora had already established amateur sumo. For example, Brazil joined the other teams for the second tournament in 1981.

In 1985, when ozumo left the Kokugikan in Kuramae to a new building across Tokyo's Sumida River in Ryogoku, this tournament followed to the new building as well. This was not the only change for the sixth instalment of the tournament, however, as it also grew to become an international competition in name as well as form. To reflect the international nature of the tournament, the title

was changed to the International Sumo Championships (Kokusai Sumo Senshuken Taikai). The international invitees in this year comprised six teams representing five countries. They came from Brazil, West Germany, Paraguay and Argentina (combined), Hawaii, the Misawa military base, and the American Club in Japan.

Increasingly the tournament hosted teams from outside of Japan and, although there were still strong links to Japan's diaspora in terms of the teams invited, teams from beyond the Americas began to compete as well. In subsequent years the numbers of international teams increased steadily, both in terms of countries represented and teams attending. In 1989, to celebrate the tournament's tenth year, the venue was changed to Sao Paulo, Brazil. There were five Brazilian teams, one each from Hawaii, Paraguay and Argentina, and nine Japanese teams made the journey. The change of venue represented an increasing international scope for the Shiroto/International Sumo Championships, even though the tournament was still held within the context of staging sumo as part of Japanese culture/diaspora.

The staging of the tournament abroad was a one-off event, as the 11th tournament was held once again in Tokyo in December 1990. Of the 24 teams, five international teams represented Brazil, Argentina, England (for the first time), Hawaii and Paraguay. In late November 1991 the 12th International Sumo Championships was held at the Kokugikan. The tournament attracted ten teams from eight countries, marking the greatest number of countries to date. The new entrants came from Rhode Island in the United States, India, South Korea, and two Mongolian teams.

The Nihon Sumo Renmei did not settle for just hosting the

International Sumo Championships in its desire to promote amateur sumo internationally. During the late 1980s and early 1990s efforts were also put into promoting the sport to international audiences by continuing with goodwill visits and sumo demonstrations overseas. Such displays of amateur sumo were often staged amid festivals of Japanese culture in various locations or as displays in and of themselves as a way to promote and improve bilateral relations between Japan and the host country.

One example of such participation was the dispatch of a team to attend the 'Black Ships Festival' in Newport, Rhode Island. The festival was held in the birthplace of Commodore Matthew Perry, the commander of US Navy ships which had been instrumental in the dismantling of Japanese seclusion in 1853. The city already had a relationship with Shimoda; the first port opened to the Americans in 1854, and looked to regularly commemorate the links between the two ports. Within this context, the Nihon Sumo Renmei was invited to first send a team to the 6th Black Ships Festival in 1989. They decided to honour this request as a way of displaying sumo to a wide audience in New England and to the expected crowd drawn from New York as well. To have the display of sumo as the main event to such a tournament certainly aided the Renmei's aims to popularise sumo abroad, as well as serving to strengthen Japanese-American goodwill.

In a similar vein, Japanese sumo athletes were sent to another festival in America, this time in San Francisco, celebrating the blooming of cherry blossoms. The Northern California Cherry Blossom festival has been running since the late 1960s, and in 1987 a team of Japanese college sumo athletes attended the 20th

anniversary and four years later a team of 12 athletes and 5 officials returned for another appearance. They spent close to three hours demonstrating sumo exercises and having a tournament amongst the twelve athletes. The inclusion of sumo as a form of Japanese culture sat well with the Japanese theme of the event, which is run by the Nikkei community in San Francisco.

However, not all international goodwill trips made by Japanese officials and athletes were to festivals or sumo tournaments in North and South America or to places with connections to Japanese diaspora. Demonstrations were held in Europe and other countries to display (amateur) sumo to audiences in countries whose cultural connections with Japan came through modern trade and bilateral relations. For example, in October 1986 a small group of sumo athletes was sent with a contingent of martial artists to Lyon, France and London to give displays of Japanese martial arts. A team went again the following year to give displays in six French cities. Another group of martial artists visited Australia in mid-1988 as part of the Bicentenary celebrations. The Nihon Sumo Renmei sent six athletes and an official as part of this group. Such displays cast sumo as part of a variety of Japanese martial arts, and a medium whereby 'Japan' could be represented to a foreign audience through its performance as a cultural icon.

The above explanation has been just a snapshot of the establishment of amateur sumo in many countries. Of course, it is only half the story as it does not discuss the efforts in each country or region to promote the development of the sport. However, it provides a context in which the Sumo World Championships emerged in 1992. This 'new' tournament greatly

increased the number of countries competing, and presented itself as a true world championships rather than an international competition dominated numerically by Japanese teams. The consideration of amateur sumo's development after 1992, and the start of regular tournaments, both world and regional, outside of those hosted in Japan is the topic for a future instalment of Amateur Angles.

In closing this instalment about the international roots of amateur sumo, it seems pertinent to note the dawn of a new era in European sumo. As was mentioned in SFM Interview in Dec 2007, European Sumo Union president, Gunther Romenath has retired from his position this year. He has been a prominent force in the development of the sport in Europe since being made a vice-president of the International Sumo Federation with responsibility for Europe in 1992. With a background in competitive judo as both an elite athlete and holding administrative positions with the German Judo Federation, coupled with his ten years experience working in Japan, Gunther was a logical choice to oversee the region's integration. He became president of the ESU when that body formed in 1995, and has held the post to the present. He will remain as an Honorary President of the ESU, but, since making the decision to step down, the focus has been on who might replace him at the top of the ESU hierarchy.

At the recent European Championships in Poland, the new ESU executive was elected to guide this region for the next four years. Familiar faces in Stephen Gadd (Netherlands) as General Secretary and Francois Wahl (Switzerland) as treasurer remain to guide much of the day-to-day work, but the new head will be Sergey Korobko of Ukraine. He will be supported by two vice-presidents, Liliana Kaneva of the

Bulgarian Sumo Federation and Dariuz Rozum from Poland. All three have experience running their national federations in recent years, and it will be interesting to see what direction this trio take. To me, this election

demonstrates the increasing power that Eastern European nations are playing in the world of amateur sumo. As the power bloc in Europe shifts to the east, and also away from the solid connections to Japan that

Gunther Romenath provided, this next ESU term will prove enlightening for the future direction of amateur sumo in Europe.