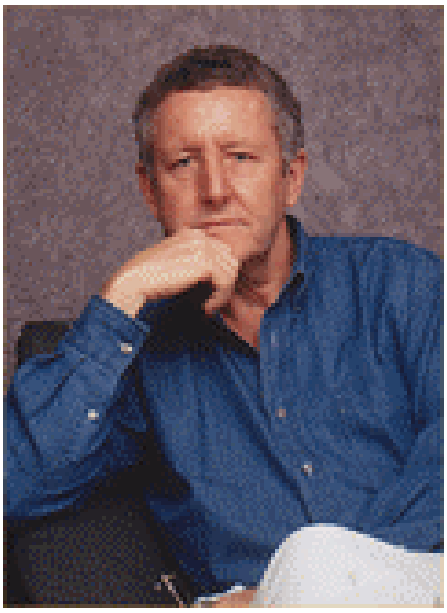
SFM Obituary
Dr Lyall Watson

by Chris Gould

Chris Gould looks at the late Lyall Watson's contribution to increasing sumo's worldwide popularity and publishes – for the first time ever – the biologist's last-known views on the state of sumo.

For the thousands of Brits who, like me, came into contact with sumo through the UK's Channel Four broadcasts of the late-1980s, controversial biologist Dr Lyall Watson was unquestionably the 'voice of sumo'. For 15 weeks a year, his smooth dulcet tones seemed to glide across the airwaves, gently enlightening viewers as to the inner workings of an Aki Basho. His flamboyant vocabulary, far above that of the average viewer, perfectly captured the flavour, subtlety and mystery of the curious Japanese tradition he was attempting to describe. It is difficult to see how anyone could have better balanced the conflicting demands of restrained respect for tradition and sensationalist mass television. On Channel Four, sumo had to appear quintessentially far-Eastern and distant, yet cool at the same time. Dr Watson somehow managed to project both images.

His love-affair with sumo began in the late-1970s, long after he had shot to fame on the back of such hair-raising biological thrillers as The Romeo Error, which attempted to cast severe doubt on the human conception of death. Three years ago I decided, with a deep breath, to write to my childhood hero and discover more about our shared love of sumo. Correspondence by post was a prerequisite for contact with Dr Watson; he confessed on his website (managed by someone else) that he never used computers because he felt they distorted real life experiences. The weeks passed, and no reply came forth. Then, one fine summer's day while I was on holiday in the south of France, I received a telephone call from home. Dr Watson's letter had arrived.



In predictably neat handwriting, Dr Watson began his letter by explaining how he became interested in sumo. His explanation was far from straightforward, and showed that he had lost none of his linguistic charm in the 14 years since he had last fronted a sumo broadcast. 'I was attracted to sumo by dignity, surely,' he began. 'But that is not all. I went to Japan to study the Japanese tea ceremony – the most intricate ritual in the world – but I soon encountered obstacles.

'Firstly, I couldn't find a tea master unless I signed on for no less than ten years. Everything in Japan takes ten years. But, finally, I met a young master who would take a chance with me for one year, though he also had conditions. You may be surprised to hear that the most important of these was that half the precious year would be taken studying tea and the other half was to be dedicated to a martial art.

'After a tour of these, I finally selected kendo – and found that he was right. The more I learned to focus my energy in kendo; the better was my attention in tea...'

It was this experience in the martial arts which made Dr Watson more appreciative of sumo when he first came into contact with it. 'I learned that all martial arts depended on knowing and practicing bushido (The Way of the Warrior),' he wrote. 'All martial arts follow the same discipline... and that was certainly sumo's secret too.' Then came my favourite Watson line. 'But the next problem was to convince the western television producers that sumo was more than fat men falling down. That took five years...'

As a person committed to spreading the sumo gospel around the globe – and having to place an embarrassingly large focus on Japan – the line is nothing short of inspirational. The central aim of any sumo fan attempting to convert the waverers should be to prove that sumo is about 'more than fat men falling down.'

Watson's task of persuading producers was made dramatically easier by the introduction of a new British television channel in 1982: Channel Four. Under the stewardship of bold entrepreneur

Michael Grade, whose father had previously chaired the BBC, Channel Four decided to challenge conventional British television diets and sought to broadcast numerous sports from overseas. For open-minded Channel Four programme makers, the sight of the eccentric Dr Watson and the Sumo World Magazine team promoting nigh-naked obese men in loincloths proved truly salivating. After little-known Cheerleader Productions took over the making of programmes, the first UK sumo broadcast was screened live in early 1988. Several hundred thousand people tuned in to the first of 15 episodes which each covered one day's action of the 1987 Aki Basho in Tokyo. From this historic moment, UK sumo literacy came forth and multiplied. Even today, it is difficult to find a long-term UK resident who does not remember witnessing at least one of the 64 episodes broadcast in total.

Channel Four Sumo ran for four years, from 1988-1992. During this time, sumo's UK popularity grew to such an extent that the sumo association decided to stage its first five-day jungyo tournament on foreign soil in London. For Watson, the October 1991 jungyo was clearly the most satisfying reward for his promotion of sumo's cause, and his sumo broadcasts leading up to the event saw his calm, authoritative tones replaced with a childish delight: 'The big men are here at last!'

After the success of the London jungyo, held at the Royal Albert Hall, Channel Four elected to screen the Hatsu Basho for the first time in 1992. However, with sumo ratings falling, programmers opted to cut the number of broadcasts from 15 to six, and focus disproportionately on English-speaking wrestlers: Akebono, Konishiki and Musashimaru. From now on, in a desperate attempt to revive ratings, sumo was to be portrayed as a freak-show and nothing else, where featherweights like Mainoumi somehow occasionally beat monstrous lumps of lard like Konishiki. The show marked the lowest point in Channel Four's sumo coverage and Watson, sensing that the format completely undermined the image of sumo he had carefully crafted, understandably wanted nothing to do with it. He was replaced as commentator by Shakespearean actor Brian Blessed, who had never studied sumo in Japan. The series flopped, sumo was axed from Channel Four schedules and Watson would never commentate on sumo again.

Having disappeared from the scene at just the time the sport was changing most, Watson left a catalogue of admirers wondering what his thoughts were on modern sumo. My 2005 letter sought to prise them from him, asking questions on the rise of the Hanadas, Asashoryu and the future of sumo. Dr Watson responded as follows:

'The brothers Taka and Waka were just getting to the top when we made the Channel Four programmes. What I did see and hear about them made it clear that they were very strictly trained to be the "Saviours of Sumo." And Taka was always the one to take on the role of Prince Charming. He played the role well, in the ring and out, but he was too pretty to last. Waka, I thought, from the beginning was the better fighter. He never said much, but he was the more traditional fighter. He could have been great if he could have been a little larger.

'I never saw Asashoryu fight in the flesh [but] I heard about the hair-pulling. Disqualification was the right punishment. Nobody wants sumo to turn into western wrestling!

'The future of sumo, meanwhile, depends entirely on a return to classic sumo. What is needed is a new Golden Age, with trainers and fighters going back to basic principles and rikishi who dedicate themselves to the art. It has happened before...'

Thus, in sumo as well as biological affairs, did Dr Watson put forward views that were deliberately designed to provoke heated debate. It is for the next generation of sumo fans to form their own conclusions as to whether his views were correct.

Prior to visiting Japan in January 2007, I again contacted Dr Watson via his London agents to ask for permission to use his letter in my sumo writings. To my utmost surprise, I received an emailed reply from the man who claimed to detest computers. His reply was very brief, but replete with the avuncular warmth of someone who wished a younger sumo fan all the best in navigating the path he had himself trodden 30 years before.

'I can imagine your excitement on going to see and hear and smell sumo once again – and getting to meet the rikishi in the flesh,' he radiantly began, before adding: 'I envy you.' Afterwards came the poignant part: 'And please feel free to publish anything I ever said about sumo. I am sure you will do it credit...' His last words written to me served as proof that he never intended to re-enter the sumo fray. He had closed that chapter of his life long ago.

In light of his final written words to me, and in the wake of his sudden death on June 27th, it is apt to conclude by outlining exactly why sumo is 'more than fat men falling down.' As Dr Watson truly realised, it is about the jonokuchi novices who rise at 5am in the morning and perform to empty sumo arenas. It is about the young jonidan who equates progress to the fourth division with vaulting the greatest barrier

imaginable. It is about the sandanme veterans desperately striving to extend their careers for perhaps longer than is healthy, occasionally changing their ring names in the forlorn hope of changing their luck. It is about the third division tsukebito, determined to keep sight of his own dreams of salaried status despite being at the beck and call of his top-division master.

Sumo is about the young foreigners seeking their fortune in a strange land. It is about the young Japanese hopefuls relied upon by a patriotic fan base to bring some Japanese pride back to the country's national sport. It is about the sekitori veterans clinging to their ranks with the tricks of experience, some hoping to retain their prized salaries and incentive pay, others hoping to regain such treasures. It is about Takamisakari and his attempts to reach out through television adverts to the next generation of sumo supporters while delighting existing fans with his zany antics. Of course, to a sizeable degree, sumo is obviously about the superstars, the Asashoryus and Hakuhos who collect all the big prizes and leave crowds breathless with their feats of strength. But, in addition to the scores of unsalaried hopefuls, it is just as much about the coaches and stablemasters who miss the buzz of the ring but still feel the ultimate motivation to train up young recruits who can emulate their own fine achievements.

I would hope that, were he still alive to represent a shining moment of happiness from my childhood, Dr Watson would view this conclusion as one which 'does him credit.' After all, he was, and always will be, the Voice of Channel Four Sumo.