

Amateur Angles #15

Sumo into the Olympics??

by Howard Gilbert

As the amateur sumo world is about to undertake its biggest event of the year, the Sumo World Championships, it might seem strange that I am not going to consider it in this edition's Amateur Angles column. Instead, events since the last column appeared have put into context the sport of amateur sumo and the future that the International Sumo Federation (IFS) seeks for it. I have mentioned in a previous column, almost two years ago, the desire of the IFS to have amateur sumo in the programme of the Olympic Games at some point in the future. Also, the IFS themselves contributed a column over two years ago that touched on the same issue. Given that the Beijing Olympics have just been held, I feel now would be an excellent time to consider amateur sumo's Olympic future, and the steps that the IFS are taking to make this a reality.

In that previous column, I explained that a sport wishing to be in the Olympic Games needs to become recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). By way of a recap, there are two forms of recognition, provisional and full:

“The IFS has been provisionally recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as having met some of the requirements for entry into the Olympic Games. What remains for the IFS... is a process whereby the sport is elected into the programme of the Olympic Games. However, gaining full recognition, which includes introduction into the Olympic programme, requires a majority

of the 115 Olympic members at a full Session of the IOC. This would only be put to the vote once amateur sumo had convinced the powers that be that they are ready to become a fully fledged Olympic sport.”

To gain provisional recognition a sport must adhere to the wider principles of the Olympic Movement, which are outlined in the Olympic Charter. These principles relate to equality, opportunity, fair play and Olympic spirit, and include such practical elements as gender equality in sport, equality of participation in the sport through the implementation of weight divisions (for example), and the eradication of performance enhancing drugs by adhering to the World Anti-Doping Code. In addition, any sport that could make the Olympic Games is to be “widely practised by men in at least seventy-five countries and on four continents, and by women in at least forty countries and on three continents.”ⁱ

This last condition is important in terms of ensuring that the sports in the Olympic Games represent the sporting landscapes throughout the world. Such minimum numbers set an expectation for the level of popularity and breadth of support that a prospective Olympic sport should have. In effect, a sport wishing to be part of the programme of the Olympic Games needs to have an established level of popularity that it can contribute to the Games. While undoubtedly the two weeks of the Olympics every four years helps to showcase certain sports in ways that they

might not usually enjoy, such as television exposure, they are in themselves self sufficient in terms of their organisation and activity. The popularity of prospective sports is also gauged by the participation rates and figures at tournaments and the interest these tournaments generate, rather than just the on-paper numbers of devotees. This then mitigates the influence of sports that might have large numbers of members who are inactive or infrequent participants.

What all of this means for sumo is a far more complex picture than the statement that the IFS is recognised by the IOC, and that amateur sumo could be in the Olympics in the future. While the IFS has made adjustments to amateur sumo that align it more closely with the Olympic Movement, they still remain a way away from being accepted as a fully recognised sport. The use of different weight divisions in international competitions, the inclusion of women's competition, and the implementation of drug testing at Sumo World Championships all bring amateur sumo closer to the way in which other sports conduct themselves. As of this year there is even change, in the form of an Athletes' Commission, which brings the sport's governance in to line with Olympic ideals. However, this will only ever be part of the equation when amateur sumo is compared to other sports that want to be in the Olympic programme, or to the ones that already have their spot in the Games.

The IFS claims a membership of over 80 countries (currently up to

86, I believe), but which countries these are or how many are actually actively participating is quite another issue. The IFS website lists over 70 nations (with mostly out-dated contact details) as members, but more than half of these countries have not been seen in a decade, if ever. In fact, the largest number of countries ever at a Sumo World Championships was 40 way back in 1995, when the International Sumo Federation used to contribute to teams' costs to attend the tournament, and nowadays it is far more common to get between 25 and 30 nations competing. By my calculations only 67 countries have ever attended even one Sumo World Championships in the 16 years of its existence, and a whopping 90% of those were in the first five years of the event.

One matter that contributed to the large numbers of countries attending in the first five years of the Sumo World Championships was the funding from Japan to the national federations to send teams. This began with funding for all the team to attend and gradually subsidised fewer and fewer athletes until the practice was stopped in around 1997. This seed-funding gave the sport a chance to take hold in various countries and regions and gave time for national and regional federation to emerge to administer sumo in different parts of the world. At the same time there was also money put into the promotion of the sport by the IFS and the Nihon Sumo Renmei. This allowed groups of athletes to attend festivals in foreign countries or to be part of displays that introduced the sport of amateur sumo to new audiences. This exposure, coupled with a travel subsidy to attend the SWC, helped to kickstart the sport in new areas. However, once the incentive money dried up, so did the enthusiasm for the sport in certain countries or among certain people. Many were prepared to take a handout but were not

willing to commit the resources to continuing and maintaining amateur sumo in their country. While the cost of attending SWCs might be an issue, unfortunately member nations are not even attending their regional sumo championships. Europe, with around 25 member countries is the only continent that can claim to have most of its members as active participants in regional championships and/or the Sumo World Championships and the Junior Sumo World Championships. In all other cases, only a handful of the countries appear at their regional championships. Those that compete today are the countries committed to continuing the work initiated and supported by the IFS so long ago.

While the IFS has implemented elements of the Olympic Charter and modified amateur sumo to fit ideals of the Olympic Movement, the sport's future rests upon more than cosmetic changes and a minimum number of members. Amateur sumo is effectively in a battle with other sports to be part of the Olympic Games, and so it must 'convince' the world that it belongs there.

There were 28 sports represented in Beijing, and in four years time there will only be 26 in London. In 2005, at the time that the Games were awarded to London, the sports for 2012 were also decided upon. Each sport was put to a vote at the IOC Session in Singapore and baseball and softball did not reach a majority vote to continue their inclusion in the programme. Also at the same Session, five of the thirty-odd provisionally recognised sports were put forward for consideration as possible alternatives for the Olympic programme. This came after a two year evaluation by the Olympic Programme Commission into possible new sports for the Games. The sports (Roller Sports, Golf, Rugby Sevens, Karate and

Squash) were pitted against each other and finally whittled down to just squash and karate. However, neither was able to garner the two-thirds majority needed for inclusion in the programme.

So, amateur sumo is really going head-to-head with 60 sports to be part of the 26-28 sports that are given a prized place in the Olympic Games. Many of the sports, of course, are seen as integral parts of the Olympics. However, I noticed a lot of discussion among friends and peers, and also in the media, about which sports in Beijing were or were not 'suitable' Olympic sports. Arguments against team sports, those tainted with drug scandals, and sports which might seem 'silly' or anachronistic abound. The fact remains that many of the sports currently in the Olympics are there as part of the tradition of the Olympics and are held to a different standard to those knocking on the door trying to get in. As but two examples, boxing and synchronised swimming do not fit the gender equality provisions that the IOC requires of new sports. Boxing has a long history in the Games and carries with it an attachment to the sports of the ancient Olympic Games. Synchronised swimming is but one discipline (along with diving, swimming and water polo) among the sport of Aquatics, so it is up to FINA, the world governing body, to decide whether synchronised swimming remains an Olympic event. That is, in voting for Aquatics to be in the Olympics, the IOC members put the decision of synchronised swimming into the hands of FINA.

So, where to for amateur sumo? After becoming provisionally recognised by the IOC in early 1998, the IFS was trumpeting possibility of being part of the Olympics as early as 2008. This was because, at the time, Osaka was bidding to be the host of the games that ultimately went to

Beijing. The IFS was working on an assumption that having a Japanese host city would work in their favour of being included in the programme. It had worked for judo when Tokyo hosted the Olympics in 1964. Unfortunately, in the interim the decisions on which sports are on the programme had passed out of the hands of a few prominent IOC members and into the hands of the entire 115 member IOC Session. Also in that time demonstration sports, once a stepping stone for inclusion, had also been abolished. However, although unsuccessful with the Osaka bid, the IFS is pinning these same hopes of inclusion on the bid by Tokyo for the 2016 Olympics. At the 2005 IFS Congress in Osaka, coming as it did just after Tokyo had announced its bid for 2016, it was boldly announced to the members of the International Sumo Federation that amateur sumo would be part of the Olympics should Tokyo win. I am not sure if it is an unfamiliarity with the

systems in place, a sense of overwhelming optimism or an outrageous dose of bravado that keeps this idea alive in Japanese amateur sumo circles, but the reality in Copenhagen in October next year when the decisions on the host and sports for the 2016 Olympic are made will most likely see amateur sumo's dreams put on hold again.

The sentiment that I wrote two years ago seems to hold as much now as it did then when considering amateur sumo's Olympic dreams:

“It would seem that the IFS is a long way from convincing the rest of the world that amateur sumo is ready to be an Olympic sport. For starters, how many people actually know what amateur sumo is (apart from you, my dear readers)? And how many can actually say they know where to find a local sumo club? If sports such as golf, squash and karate are unable to

attract enough attention among IOC members, despite their huge numbers of participants and followers, what hope is there for amateur sumo? What is needed to lift the sport to such exalted heights as the Olympic programme, and what should the IFS be doing in the meantime?

It might appear the easiest answer, but I believe the IFS must wait. Only over time, and with good promotion, will the sport grow. Only after it grows, solidifies beyond Japan, Europe and the Americas, and enters public consciousness can amateur sumo really be ready for the Olympic Games. Just because a sport meets IOC provisional recognition, as the 2005 IOC Session in Singapore has proven, does not mean that it is ready for the next step!

¹ International Olympic Committee, Olympic Charter, 2004, Rule 47, paragraph 1.1.