

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

by Chris Gould

How does an eight year old boy from England possibly become hooked on Japan's national sport in a pre-internet age? I became interested in sumo in the same way that most British fans did: via the legendary Channel Four broadcasts of the 1980s.

In the UK, it has been a time-honoured tradition for fathers and sons to watch sport together. Sumo's sudden appearance on British television evoked many memories in my dad, who had actually performed sumo as part of his judo class in the 1960s. His guest sumo teacher was the then British judo champion Syd Hoare, who later became the sumo commentator for Eurosport. My dad and I have mainly watched football together, but that day, over 20 years ago, he suggested we watch sumo together. We did just that, and the rest is history.

Now that I live in Japan, the locals

keep asking me the same question: what exactly do you like about sumo? After several dozen responses, I have developed a pattern to what I say.

Firstly, I like the rituals. They remind us that sumo is much more than a sport. It is a form of deference to Shinto customs, as shown by the throwing of salt, the garb of the gyoji and the clapping and stamping of the combatants.

Secondly, I like its appearance, the mage of wrestlers and the clothing of gyoji underlining sumo's status as one of Japan's few surviving living links to the samurai era.

Thirdly, I like the dignity of the wrestlers when on stage. Of course, sometimes, this dignity eludes them and some very high-profile scandals have resulted. But, generally, in defeat and victory, sumotori show far more dignity than those based in

western sports, and this really contributes to the special feel of the show. Finally, I like the absence of weight divisions. Most combat sports see athletes of the same weight pitted against each other. Not sumo. If the smallest is skilful enough, he must tackle the biggest, and may even win! The wonder surrounding a Mainoumi-Akebono match (for example) is unmatched in most other sporting arena.

Although I have not always been able to put such thoughts into words, these are the sources of content that were circulating in my head, even as a child. It is like a strange dream come true, finally being able to live in the locality of the sumo stadium, to treat the sumo restaurants as my 'locals', and to share my love of sumo with an abundance of Japanese friends both inside and outside Ryogoku. And, of course, SFM is a lot of fun too!