

Amateur Angles #19

The IFS shuts up shop for 2009

by Howard Gilbert

I had been looking forward to writing this column for two months, as I was going to focus on the 2009 Oceania Sumo Championships held on May 31 on the Gold Coast, Australia. Part of my excitement in writing about this event is that I was involved as an athlete at my first truly overseas international event. However, more than this, I wanted to share what I believe is a rebirth of the Oceania region, the smallest continental sumo union within the IFS.

With only Australia and New Zealand as active members, with Tonga inactive on the periphery, the Oceania Sumo Union is hampered in its activities. However, a new impetus coming from within Australia supported by the old firm in New Zealand means that the Oceania Sumo Union is looking to take strides in coming years. The Australian Sumo Federation has experienced a growth of interest in the border region of northern New South Wales and southern Queensland.

A number of promising athletes have come over from judo, wrestling and rugby to create a pool of athletes that bodes well for the future. Australian sumo has long been based out of Sydney, so having another centre of activity starting up can only help boost numbers, competition and the sport's profile. It is testament to this new activity that the Oceania tournament was held on the Gold Coast in south eastern Queensland, an area internationally known for its warm weather and golden sands.

The tournament itself was a great

success, attracting 23 athletes (male and female) and a crowd of around 100 people. These may seem small numbers in comparison with other continental sumo championships but, with only two countries competing, it was a pleasing result. There had been some media exposure prior to the event, mainly centring on the return of local sumo celebrity Samantha-Jane Stacey from Japan for the event. The silver medallist in the junior women's heavyweight competition at the 2008 Junior Sumo World Championships is currently on a three year scholarship at Tottori Johoku High School, the school famous for producing Kotomitsuki. The return of "Sammy Sumo" was eagerly anticipated by the various media outlets that have been following her burgeoning career.

However, sumo in Australia, and indeed Oceania, goes further than one fifteen year old girl. Seemingly the entire Stacey family was involved, with brothers Blake (lightweight and open) and Hudson (children's exhibition match) and sister Trisha (heavyweight and open) competing, while father Warren and uncle Ron Jones took administrative roles on the day. Mother Sue Warren is the federation's treasurer, and many more family friends lined the stands. The Australian federation president Katrina Watts was seen at the microphone on occasion but was usually busy behind the scenes making sure everything went smoothly. Australian coach, Ken Matsuto, worked tirelessly as a referee and judge, as did Peter Armstrong and Gavin Dickson, both familiar faces from their

concerted efforts in previous years. New Zealand, headed by Oceania Sumo Union president Martin Stirling, sent a team of six male athletes, four of whom have only been competing for around three months. With a haul of five individual medals from a possible 12, and by taking out the team competition as well, the Kiwis were more than pleased with their efforts. The level of competition was surprisingly good considering the inexperience of many of the competitors, and the crowd left entertained by the standard of the bouts.

Results

Women's Lightweight

1st Caitlin Szantos (New South Wales)
2nd Stephanie Wong (Queensland)
3rd Renee Robinson (NSW, junior)

Women's Middleweight

1st Jayde Porter (NSW, junior)

Women's Heavyweight

1st Samantha-Jane Stacey (NSW, junior)
2nd Trisha Stacey (NSW)
3rd Amy Carroll (NSW, junior)

Women's Open

1st Trisha Stacey (NSW)
2nd Stephanie Wong (QLD)
3rd Caitlin Szantos (NSW)

Junior Women's Open

1st Samantha Stacey (NSW)
2nd Amy Carroll (NSW)
3rd Renee Robinson (NSW)

Men's Lightweight

1st Blake Stacey (NSW)
2nd Travis Bligh (New Zealand)
3rd Dwayne Lewis (NSW)

Men's Middleweight

1st Yoshi Ashida (Japan)
2nd Joe Saunders (QLD)
3rd Howard Gilbert (NZL)

Men's Heavyweight

1st James Mihaere (NZL)
2nd Andrew Perenara (NZL)
3rd Drew Weeks (QLD)

Men's Open

1st Andrew Perenara (NZL)
2nd Joe Saunders (QLD)
3rd= Yoshi Ashida (JPN)
3rd= John Traill (NSW)

Men's Team

1st New Zealand 1
(Perenara, Mihaere, Bligh)
2nd Australia - NSW
(Lewis, Stacey, Traill)
3rd Australia - QLD
(Ashida, Weeks, Saunders)

However, despite the success of the Oceania Sumo Championships, for those within amateur sumo the tournament's activities were largely overshadowed by the announcement on Thursday May 26, the day most of the competitors arrived, that the annual Sumo World Championships had been cancelled. While the announcement itself did not interfere with holding the Oceania Sumo Championships, the spectre of the cancellation certainly dampened some of the enthusiasm. The assembled athletes and officials face the rest of this year with their goals of competing in Egypt now dashed. They will have to do without competition later this year, or organise their own to fill the void.

The notification from the International Sumo Federation came as some surprise, even though there had been rumblings that Egypt may be struggling in its attempt to host the tournament or that there may be contract disputes between the organisers and the IFS. However, neither of these reasons was cited, the blame instead being on influenza A(H1N1), better known as swine flu, that is occurring around the globe. As the virus has been spread particularly by air travellers, the "IFS executive board... considered deeply, to prevent any unexpected serious problem in the future, to

decide to cancel ALL Sumo World Championships 2009." According to the same e-mail, this move was taken in response to projections that the cases of infection may increase sharply after September 2009 even though they are relatively steady at mid-year.

Without wanting to get into the debate of the severity of this outbreak, and whether the public fear is justified, influenza A(H1N1) is certainly making its mark around the world. When the IFS made their announcement on May 26, there had been 12, 954 laboratory-confirmed cases and 92 deaths from the disease.ⁱ In the two weeks since this announcement, the number of cases has more than doubled to 27, 737 and there have been 141 deaths.ⁱⁱ This increase includes the first cases confirmed in Egypt, the host of the now-cancelled tournament, even though it could not have possibly influenced the IFS Executive. What is more likely is the hundreds of cases in Japan triggered a very real awareness of what influenza A(H1N1) might mean for the Sumo World Championships. Two students from a high school near Tokyo were infected on a trip to New York,ⁱⁱⁱ while initial outbreaks in the west of Japan are believed to have been spread by school volleyball teams meeting for competition.^{iv} The thought of athletes converging from all around the globe before living and competing in close quarters doubtless gave the IFS cause for concern. Interestingly, however, the same fears have not been raised about the upcoming World Games in Taiwan, where four confirmed cases before the IFS cancellation has now increased to 24 cases. In part, the decision is out of the hands of the IFS because the International World Games Association is in charge of the entire event. Also, with the rate of infection feared to be worse towards the end of the year, perhaps it is deemed a calculated

risk to allow the World Games to go ahead.

The decision to cancel the Sumo World Championships means that for the second time in less than a decade they have been cancelled due to a global outbreak of disease. In 2003 the SARS pandemic forced the cancellation of some lead up events throughout the year, before forcing the cancellation of the Sumo World Championships destined for Moscow. However, there was speculation that this provided a convenient excuse to cover difficulties the Russian hosts were having in bringing the event together to the satisfaction of the IFS. Certainly, Russia has not been on the agenda as a host for any of the World Championships since to make up for having missed out in 2003. This suggests that issues surrounding the organisation of the tournament remain unresolved or impassable. Whether something similar has befallen the Egyptian authorities is uncertain as there has been little information about this year's Sumo World Championships beyond the announcement of the cancellation.

Whatever the reason for the cancellation, it is a major setback for a sport that is looking to build its profile. The sumo competition at the World Games in Kaohsiung, Taiwan now becomes the focal point for international amateur sumo for 2009. The next column of Amateur Angles will bring an in-depth report on this tournament from inside the event itself. We can only hope that Poland in 2010 is ready and the world can keep its sneezes to itself!

ⁱ http://www.who.int/csr/don/GlobalSubnationalMaster_20090526_0800.jpg

ⁱⁱ http://www.who.int/csr/don/Map_20090610_0800.png

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20090522a2.html>

^{iv} <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20090519a6.html>