

Amateur Angles #20

Six days in Kaohsiung

by Howard Gilbert

In my last column, I wrote that the World Games in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, would be the biggest international sumo event for 2009. This is because this year's Sumo World Championships (SWC) have been cancelled over fears of transmitting influenza A(H1N1), the so-called 'Swine Flu'. While the sumo competition is not of the same size as the annual SWC, being part of the quadrennial World Games provides a different atmosphere for sumo as it sits alongside 30 other of the world's major 'minor' sports.

The 2009 World Games' sumo competition was probably the strongest of the three held so far, with most of the best competitors in each weight class in attendance. As I mentioned back in December, each continent was given two representatives in each weight division, Taiwan received one place as the host nation, and the IFS was to choose the remaining three representatives and any positions vacated by the different continents. This made the Kaohsiung competition twice the size of the 2005 competition in Duisburg, with the 16 competitors expected to fight in their weight class on the first day and then enter the open weight division on the second day.

Doubling the continental allotment meant that the stronger continents (Asia and Europe) were better represented than four years earlier, while there was still room to showcase the spread of amateur sumo by having the other

continents well represented among the 96 competitors from around the globe.

This competition was also special in a personal way because it represented my first truly international event as a competitor after three years of competition at a continental level (where we only attract two countries). Although a relative novice as a competitor, I had previously represented my country as team manager or delegate at the 2004 (Riesa), 2005 and 2006 (both in Osaka) SWCs and was looking forward to renewing the international friendships that I had made through sumo. The rest of this column will be a brief personal diary of the events as I saw and experienced them. I hope the subjectivity will allow you all an insight into the time the competitors spent in Kaohsiung.

Tuesday 14th July

Andrew (the other NZ athlete) and I have arrived in Kaohsiung after a series of flights from Auckland via Sydney and Taipei. This is what the past three months of fundraising have been for. I've been spending at least two nights a week at local bars running raffles for meat packs in order to fund this trip. Three weekends have been spent barbecuing sausages and selling them to the public. In the process I hope I've raised the visibility of amateur sumo as well as the money necessary to get here. The last month in particular has been a blur, what with the raffles, the BBQs, training in between times and finishing my

PhD thesis (on amateur sumo). Having handed it in and then almost immediately jumping on the plane has not really allowed that achievement to set in.

I'm hoping to put in a good showing at this tournament, but I realise that I'm on a hiding to nothing when the experience and training of some of the other athletes is taken into consideration. I'm confident that I've prepared myself as best I could given limitations of funds, training partners and time, but I am also realistic enough to realize that I am probably the lowest-ranked competitor in the middleweight class. Still, I'm proud to be here representing New Zealand and Oceania, and see it as a reflection of my dedication and combined results over the last few Oceania tournaments.

Kaohsiung is very warm, well over 30 degrees, and with stifling humidity. This is certainly a change from the (albeit mild) winter that we've been experiencing in New Zealand. The town itself is definitely a mix of old and new, with large parts of it looking like they have been neglected for decades and allowed to go into elegant decay, while there are many new and shiny buildings that suggest Kaohsiung is waking out of this slumber and seeking a place on the world stage. This is certainly the impression that I get from the way the World Games is being promoted, as an opportunity for Kaohsiung, and for Taiwan as a whole, to gain greater recognition. This is quite fitting

because the sports in the World Games are trying to do the same.

We were greeted at the airport by our own dedicated volunteer, Aava, whom we follow blindly. I speak no Mandarin but find that my understanding of Japanese characters at least allow me the chance to identify some things that are written down. However, with all these volunteers on hand, it looks like we will be OK. We are soon bussed to the registration centre where we are given our credentials. This can only be described as organised chaos as we are moved from one table to the next to check that we have insurance, to issue our athlete registration and then to be handed all manner of pamphlets, instructions, a bag to put it all in, and a couple of T-shirts. We are given a local SIM card with credit for our mobile phones to allow easy communication. Thank you to the sponsors!

Wednesday 15th July

At breakfast it is apparent that many other countries have arrived in the late hours of the previous day. The friendly bustle of the registration centre must have been a nightmare late at night or in the small hours of the morning! The athletes for the World Games are all housed at local hotels, with particular sports staying all together at the same hotel. Our hotel has sumo, ju-jitsu and rock climbing, among others. The sumo athletes from outside of Asia were to arrive yesterday, but few were as early as Andrew and I. The Americans have arrived, as have the Australians. The Germans, Ukrainians and Hungarians are also sitting at breakfast. This is a time to renew friendships or to nod in the direction of acquaintances. Most look a little tired or jetlagged, but they will have the rest of the day to acclimatise.

I'm glad that we have had plenty of time to adjust to our surroundings,

although perhaps not the heat. It has given us a chance to experience some of this city aside from the sumo competition. Last night we had a chance to check out a night market and try the new sights and smells of this country. There was also a little sampling of some of the food on offer, although a few delicacies might be best sampled after the tournament in case they don't treat us well. This morning will be used for shopping and buying souvenirs for our families and getting a better 'feel' for Kaohsiung.

The city is awash with posters and flags publicising the World Games, and there are several large scale murals of action from the 2005 Duisburg event to highlight the sports on offer. In particular, schools and other public buildings are festooned with flags for each sport, each with the cartoon mascots taking part. Walking the streets wearing our accreditation tags raises some interest from passer-by and we are asked which sport we are competing in. There are several nods when they see Andrew's size (he's a heavyweight) and perhaps grudging acceptance when they see my middleweight frame. This is the heaviest I've been in my life, I'm sure, and I'm interested in the weigh-in tomorrow to see just how much I tip the scales at.

I'm lucky that I haven't had to watch my weight for this competition. In fact, I've tried to take on board a couple of extra kilos through working out and training. It has been handy also to each whatever I like, knowing that I have at least 7 kilos or so to play with under the 115kg weight limit for middleweights. The difficulties for the lightweights and middleweights who are currently over their weight limits is plain to see at meal time. In the morning we are fed a varied buffet at our hotels. While many of us get to eat whatever we like, there are several athletes eating small amounts of

fruit and taking only a small amount of liquid. For lunch athletes are bussed to a nearby hotel, where the banquet room has been turned into a giant catering centre for a group of athletes. Only certain sports are represented here because there are several catering centres around the city, each catering to the hotels closest to it. We see the Canadian women's softball team and the Bulgarian rhythmic gymnasts among the identifiable teams.

Returning to the hotel in the late afternoon, it is clear that the Japanese contingent has arrived, along with other remaining teams. It's nice to see the Japanese athletes unencumbered by the presence of officials, all of whom are housed at another hotel to make sure of separation from the athletes. Things seem a little more relaxed than a couple of the SWCs that I have been to before. In the spirit of this festive mood, plans are made with friends from various teams to get together for a drink later that evening – the last chance to really relax before focussing on the competition which starts on Friday.

Thursday 16th July

Last night's party in the Germans' room went very well and headed into the wee small hours of the morning. We had Australians, New Zealanders, the Americans and Germans, as well as cameo appearances from a couple of other nationalities. Some of us decided to get a little more sleep than others, and the faces at breakfast told this tale very well. Once again the Spartan eaters were conspicuous, but their agony will only last a little longer as today is weigh-in day. It is the official training day and the tournament draw will also be held this afternoon. Perhaps the most interesting of all is the chance to view the competition venue itself.

The Kaohsiung High School gymnasium is being used for the

sumo tournament, and we are dropped off by its side entrance for the afternoon's activities. Entering the building, the stairs upwards lead to the competition floor while going down the stairs takes us to the athlete waiting area and the training venue. It is here that the weigh-in is taking place. The athletes crowd into the air-conditioned comfort of the training area and some begin their work out.

Most of the lighter athletes are worried about making weight and rush off in the directions of the scales. For those that pass, it is off to find something to eat and to restore some of the weight and energy they have been losing until this time. Some athletes have yet to make weight and train to try and shed the extra grams. Others are also training, although most of the assembled athletes just stretch and push lightly against compatriots. Very few seem comfortable in showing off their skills in front of tomorrow's rivals.

Having weighed in, I decide to have a light training against a couple of the Americans – just enough to get the body moving well and to break a sweat. Within a couple of minutes I have sweat pouring off me and the air conditioning fails to cool me. I struggle through half an hour, alternating between towelling down and catching my breath between short bursts of activity. The tournament draw is about to start, so I retreat to the shower and move upstairs. The stifling heat is almost unbearable upstairs. There seems to be no air conditioning working and the outside heat is coming in through the doors we used to enter the building. Given that the competition floor will be observed by an amphitheatre of spectators, I'm beginning to wonder how we will survive the heat of several hundred extra spectators!

The draw proved to be nothing out

of the ordinary. It is a pain-staking process of making all actions seem above board and fair. Heads of the different national federations represented are asked to come and draw names for different parts of the draw. We all scribble down the information pertaining to our athletes or particular weight divisions. Personally, I'll be facing an Egyptian in the first round of the middleweight competition, and a Mongolian lightweight in the first round of the open weight. No easy matches here! Still, I'm hoping to put in a good effort and see what comes from that.

The main excitement for today comes in the shape of the Opening Ceremony later in the evening. Because our competition starts tomorrow, on the first day of the World Games, the sumo athletes were given the chance to decide whether or not they wanted to participate in the parade of athlete. Andrew and I both decide that we wouldn't miss this for the world! It is a long and draining process, but one which neither of us will probably ever experience again. Kaohsiung has built a superb new stadium for these Games, and it is a real showpiece for, and of, the Opening Ceremony. The different athletes from each country paraded in behind their flag, got a cheer from the capacity crowd and then listened to a whole bunch of speeches from dignitaries.

We had missed a lot of the entertainment and spectacle while waiting outside for our entry, but the sheer enthusiasm of the crowd was electric. The even was very gruelling because of the hours that we spent on our feet in the heat. Andrew and I snuck out well before the end so that we could go and get water and rest. We thought that we might also be able to easily find where the buses back to the hotel departed from and get on the earliest one. We were thwarted because they went in order of various sports and sumo

was well down the list. Nevertheless, it was a fantastic experience that was well worth the sweat and discomfort.

Friday 17th July

The day of reckoning has arrived and I'm a little nervous. We are at the competition venue before noon, with the parade of athletes scheduled to open proceedings. Each country files in with athletes in their mawashi and we stand while there are speeches and the official opening of the sumo tournament. I'm struck by how long the Taiwanese speak for. I noticed this last night at the Opening Ceremony and it is the same today at the sumo. Perhaps they are just so proud of having the World Games in Kaohsiung and want to pour out all their thoughts. Whatever it is, the standing around is tiresome, especially after last night's experience in the heat.

The competition is soon underway and the usual suspects are to the fore. Andrew and I go up with the other Australians to cheer on our regional brothers. We know each other pretty well and genuinely hope that each other does well and represents our continent well. Unfortunately it turns out to be a mixed day for the Oceania team. The two women, the least experienced of the group, both manage to get a first round win before losing in the second round. Each then gets through to the repechage but is knocked out. The men all lose in the first round of our respective divisions, although a couple get a chance via repechage but succumb quickly.

Personally, I was too slow and tentative from the tachiai. I had been ready to start but my opponent really took his time. I stood up again so that we could reset and think I lost some of my initial composure. From the tachiai I stepped in with my right foot but was a bit too slow to counter his right hand aiming for

my throat. I was hit well and didn't regain my forward momentum, which was too slow anyway. He was able to turn me around with his initial thrust and I was pushed out quickly after that. Damn!! I've come all this way to be dispatched in a matter of seconds!

I'm really disappointed that I wasn't able to give a better performance in the match, regardless of the result. It casts quite a cloud over me for the next couple of hours while I watch the other matches. I am slightly buoyed by seeing my Egyptian opponent do quite well against the Japanese athlete before losing a good match. Later, in the repechage, he also fights well and so I think that perhaps the result of our match was due partly to his abilities and not solely due to my inadequacies. Still, I'm sure I'll dwell on this long and hard back at the hotel.

Saturday 18th July

Having reviewed my match on video, I can see a few matters to improve. I don't know if I'll do any better today, especially as my Mongolian lightweight opponent took the bronze in his weight class yesterday. Nevertheless, I want to attack more out of the tachiai and I work on this with Andrew and a couple of the other athletes downstairs before the competition. I had been wanting to do this yesterday but got out of rhythm by the delayed start of the bout. I'm pretty sure the Monoglian will be coming after me without any delays.

When the time comes for my match I am surprisingly calm. I don't really remember much of what happened but do know that I had a much better tachiai and got a reasonable grip with my right hand and followed that up with my left. We moved around a little and I felt like I was making ground against him. I was probably a little too high because he was able to

execute a throw at the edge and win the bout. However, I take some solace in the fact that he did this in his half of the dohyo. I had at least been able to initiate some of my moves during the bout. A loss is still annoying, but I feel far better with this loss than with the one the day before.

The sumo event over the two days was of a really high standard, with the final rounds of the open weight being particularly spectacular. I feel that we, as a collective, have been able to show the audience a really good account of our sport and that we have entertained them along the way. I am truly impressed by the quality of the TV coverage that is being shown on the replay screens at the venue. There is some slick editing on display, and it suggests what a truly interesting sport amateur sumo could be for a television audience as long as the producer knew what they were doing. It has been a heartening showing indeed.

Sunday 19th July

The party after the sumo tournament had started with a few drinks at the hotel and a bite to eat. It then transformed into an all-night dance session at a local nightclub recommended by our trusty local guides. For a small entry fee (even less for the girls), we were let loose in one of Kaohsiung's best nightclubs with an all you can drink menu of beers and spirits. While the queues for the bar were long at the beginning of the night, as the evening gave way to the morning the queues disappeared and the drinks flowed. The sumo contingent made their presence felt on the dance floor and on the podium in front of the DJs.

The really great thing about sumo people that I've found is that they like to enjoy themselves after the competition has finished and even the toughest looking athlete generally warms into celebrating

with sumo comrades. As a case in point, at the nightclub we had New Zealanders, Australians, Americans, Germans, Mongolians, Brazilians, a Hungarian, a couple of Norwegians and probably a few others I have missed.

The excesses of the night before meant that the last day was a terrible grind of packing, dosing up on water and paracetamol and whiling away the time before our flight. Andrew and I took in a couple of softball games at the stadium almost right next to our hotel. Sitting in the cool breeze was the perfect tonic to revive our flagging bodies and heads, and to reflect on the time in Kaohsiung.

Above all, it was nice to get a sense of the rest of the World Games by seeing another sport in action. I'd also been lucky enough to see canoe polo competition early one morning, and through this you get a sense of many different groups in minor sports struggling in the same ways as a lot of us in amateur sumo do – finding the resources to compete, gaining recognition from others for your efforts, and having to educate the general public about your sport so that it can be accepted. Certainly the citizens of Kaohsiung have been exposed to 30 sports that many of them would never have seen or heard of, and, in turn, we have benefited from their interest, their warmth and their hospitality during our stay.

I probably won't get the chance to attend the next World Games in another 4 years. Furthermore, my international sumo career may be on hold after this one tournament, especially given the new chapter in my life that family and finishing my studies represent. However, I will treasure that I can say I was an athlete at the 2009 World Games and have had a small taste of what it must be like for the athletes that we see so often in the Olympics.