

# Amateur Angles #24

## European Sumo Union has the right idea

by Howard Gilbert

At present, the global sporting landscape is awash with activity. We're in the early stages of the FIFA World Cup, basketball's NBA has come to a climax, and Wimbledon is just around the corner. These sports, and many others, have the kinds of global exposure and following that amateur sumo, and even professional sumo, can only dream of. While there are many factors that converge to make this happen, what has struck me is that each sport has a wide base of popular support often stemming from participation in the sport.

Yes, we marvel at the goal scoring abilities of Wayne Rooney, the high-flying dunks of Kobe Bryant, and the precision of a host of top tennis players of both sexes. Part of the appeal is our fascination at their spectacular abilities, and much of that admiration is because we, at some time, have picked up a racquet, kicked a football or shot a basketball and found out how hard it really is, or how enjoyable the sport is. We might have even been pretty good at these sports, and so can appreciate just what it takes to reach the upper echelons.

Undoubtedly we, as sumo fans, would like to see easily accessible broadcasts of ozumo on our TVs, and who out there hasn't tried to convince our friends what a great sport sumo is to follow by showing them a highlights reel we have available? What will really see sumo take off, I believe, is increased participation. Not only will this develop future amateur (and possibly professional) athletes, it will create a broader fan base by exposing more people to the sport and letting them

understand what it is all about. Pie in the sky? Perhaps.

However, the current system of international amateur sumo has most countries, apart from Japan, Mongolia, Russia and a few others, represented by a handful of athletes who are not only the cream of the crop in their country, but often the entire crop as well. Part of the problem lies in the limited number of competitions in any one year for athletes in most countries. It is hard to maintain the interest of amateur athletes in training if they only have the opportunity to compete in a couple of tournaments in a year. Also, the current system of having only four weight classes for the Sumo World Championships further reduces opportunities for new athletes. Effectively, any new athlete(s) has to be able to surpass the incumbent athlete in their weight class to be able to compete in these competitions.

My argument is a simple one: international amateur sumo needs more competitions and/or more weight divisions to keep a larger pool of active athletes in each country. All going well, this will provide a trickle-down effect over time that builds the base of athletes coming through the ranks, and also provides a larger pool of former athletes, some of whom may remain in the sport to coach and help out. To this end, the recent European Sumo Championships show how a larger number of athletes have been accommodated in regional competition, broadening the athlete base on many of the European countries. Rather than the IFS mandated weight classes of lightweight, middleweight,

heavyweight and open weight, the European Sumo Union added two extra weight divisions for both men and women:

Women: under 55 kg, under 65 kg, under 80 kg, under 95 kg, over 95 kg, and openweight.

Men: under 70 kg, under 85 kg, under 100 kg, under 115 kg, over 115 kg, and openweight.

For the women, there was a "featherweight" division added below the lightweights, and a "light heavyweight" inserted above the middleweights. For the men there was also a "featherweight" division and a "welterweight" division between the lightweight and middleweight divisions. I use boxing terminology here to give an impression, even though these new divisions were not named in this way. The new divisions reduce the variance in weight between competitors, producing a more level playing field, especially in a division like the men's middleweight (okay, so I'm biased!).

These additions, added to the under-21 and under-16 divisions that the European Sumo Championships has (and with under-14s to come in the future), show a real commitment to allow more athletes to compete at regional level. In many of these divisions, the ESU also allowed two athletes from each country to compete. Suddenly, almost double the number of athletes are competing, compared to the four athletes of each sex at the Sumo World Championships. This type of inclusive policy can only be good in the long term for the growth of amateur sumo.