



## How I might become a fan Sumo's controversies lead to greater spotlight

*by Andy Williams*

Most newcomers to Japan are deluged with the same primer of Japanese culture that all newcomers have experienced. Our virginal foreign senses are engulfed in the realisation that Japanese cuisine exists far beyond sushi alone. The iconic gaming creations, technological innovations and seemingly endless anime productions as embodied by the excesses of Akihabara, astound like nothing seen in our own familiar countries. Then there is the mysticism that still shrouds the samurai's bushido warrior code which finds vestige in the much maligned but idolised yakuza, another uniquely Japanese establishment.

Sumo wrestling is also a peculiar sight to the uninitiated – of which I am unabashedly truly among. Despite its refined association with traditional Japanese Shinto culture, it suffers from the ignorant impression that it's a sport of fat men pushing fat men – over, and most foreigners asked to name a professional sumo wrestler would most likely summon the name of E-Honda, the fictional Street Fighter character imaginatively created by Capcom. To an enthusiast, this naive

perception may offend or merely display ignorance. Among the Japanese population, sumo wrestling is revered mostly by the older population as a traditional and acutely Japanese sport and cultural practice that pays homage to Japan's fading traditions; whilst Japan's present tentative march to modernity and innovation lulls the youth into more globalised and contemporary pleasures.

Comparatively, the reach of sumo wrestling is perhaps limited due to its intently Japanese style and cultural identity, whereas football, a sport created without deep religious and cultural underpinnings is a sport that has been embraced by the world. But to compare them would be futile. However, I imagine many other newcomers to sumo wrestling who have recently awoken to the sport have done so due to the recent spate of controversies that have shone a spotlight on the sport, for all the wrong reasons. Yet controversy breeds intrigue from the uninterested, just as the recent match-fixing allegations that subsumed the national Pakistani cricket team have shown, giving new impetus to the concept that all publicity is good publicity.

Whether it be match-fixing, illicit gambling with underworld involvement or the highlighted cases of training abuse known as 'hazing' – all have thrust sumo wrestling into the headlines and have garnered a wider, if perhaps a little indiscernible, interest in the sport. As a newcomer to sumo wrestling, this introduction to the sport has exposed the hidden underbelly and shone a light that exposed a less than squeaky clean version of its current practice. Watching sumo wrestling can be alluring and I begrudgingly find myself having a difficult time taking my eyes off the screen, much like the effect snooker has on many a viewer.

To the seasoned sumo wrestling enthusiast these negative headlines may do more harm than good. Yet for the unsuspecting newcomer, the very same headlines provide an opportunity to view this obscure sport and begin to engage with it. To argue that it is good for the sport in general however, would be an exercise in futility and one in which I shall not be attempting to make.