

My first time ... First Time Seeing the Big Guys

by Eric Draven

All Americans know Sumo of course. It is also safe to assume that most, if not all, of the foreigners that come to Japan have it on their list of things to do. I finally checked it off my list. I saw my first action at Ryogoku during the New Years Tournament. The fact that it took me about six years to do it makes it even more special.

My casual interest in Sumo goes back a while. The first time I can recall seeing it was on a family vacation to Hawaii in the summer of 1992. It was on TV then, late at night when my parents had gone to bed. In the years that followed, I would occasionally catch a bout on ESPN in America.

My interest peaked a bit in College when I tried to do some research on the sport. Not too surprisingly though the Libraries in Texas did not have a single book on Sumo. I wanted to find out the rules and what type of move was allowed. I would later come to find out. The rules are quite simple. As far as the moves go, aside from a closed fist, anything pretty much goes.

It does surprise me that with Japan being such a rule based society that sumo doesn't have more of them. It seems that there is nothing stopping a sumo combatant from just stepping out of the way of the oncoming sumo freight train. I may be from Texas, but if I was in that situation, I would step out of the way as well. So there are no rules against doing a Texas two step on your way to victory, but it is not considered to be an honorable victory. It is however a smart one. There are

other less than glorious ways to win match, most seem to resolve around using your opponents momentum against them.

When I came to Japan six years ago I very much wanted to see Sumo. Why it took me so long to do, I blame on a few things. First, simply just my not being motivated enough. Second I must say should be attributed to how inaccessible Sumo is in Japan.

While there are several tournaments throughout the year, most of the matches are during the week in the day. In a society that proudly considers itself to be made up of workaholics, I am not sure who the target audience of Sumo is.

I did see wrestling at Ryogoku several years ago. However it was not sumo, but the other extreme spectrum of wrestling. That would be the scripted world of pro wrestling. Of course given the recent match fixing scandal in Sumo, have the openly scripted sport of pro wrestling in the same building is a bit ironic. It was at the other Wrestling that I first learned the danger of first floor seats at Ryogoku. Not that I was in any physical danger of being hurt, but I learned to choose my seat more carefully. I found myself sitting in a cold-steel-bar-sanctioned box with three other Japanese people I didn't know. In America the higher-price seats are better!

Sumo tournaments last all day. With people lining up at 6am to get a very reasonably priced

general admission ticket, maybe nobody else wants to get stuck in pens either. The same-day tickets are of a limited number so people do need to come early, and they do. Hot Tokyo summers and cold Tokyo winters don't deter the faithful.

Standing outside the elements to get a ticket is one thing, actually watching the opening matches is another. Once inside the opening day sellout crowd was no where to be found. While the wrestling starts at 8am, the arena is about as full as a minor league baseball batting practice. Only the most die-hard friend and family of the wrestlers sit through the early matches. In pro wrestling we call these "dark matches," as they are not televised. These early matches in Sumo are not televised either.

It takes a while, but as the day goes on, the place fills up. The fans reactions get louder with each bout. While I had seen a fair amount of wrestling on TV, a few things still surprised me. For one, the impact. There is not as much of the before mentioned two stepping going on as one would think. The sound of the two goliaths impacting each other can be heard all the way to the cheap seats.

Also I couldn't help but be surprised by how quick the bouts would be over. A match lasting 12 seconds was not uncommon at all. If the fixing allegations are true, couldn't they plan to make them longer? The ring introductions often lasted longer than the match itself. Reminds me why I prefer

the scripted type of fighting.

Despite the caged in seats in Ryogoku, the arena is quite impressive. The whole design really makes you feel like you are taking a step back in time. The feel of history is all around you, as is the feeling that you are seeing something very special. Seeing sumo here is an event to say the least. The Emperor being in attendance was one of the more obvious

points of making the day unique. However the smaller ones such as eating the preferred soup of the sumo gods, as well as watching them arrive were just as special.

As a side note I was really surprised at how accessible things were from a foreign fan perspective. Being a fan of baseball here since day one, I know that English at Japanese sporting events is rare. This is not the case at Sumo. Everywhere you

turned you were likely to run in some one that would ask you if you needed help finding your seat or if you wanted a English pamphlet.

I do hope that I see Sumo again. It may take me another six years, but I will happen. I am already thinking of which I will do next. Will I get to the Arena at 6am again or will I have to sit in a cramped in box with three other strangers?