Why sumo matters when earthquakes strike

by Chris Gould

Sumo can inspire in times of earthquakes. Ask the Kansai folk who attended the 1995 Osaka Basho. Less than two months earlier, on that now fateful day of January 17th 1995, the Kansai region had been rocked by the Great Hanshin Earthquake, which claimed the lives of over 6000 people. The town of Kobe was particularly badly hit, with subsequent history filled with tales of tremendous volunteer spirit, as residents and businesses clubbed together to get essential supplies to homes without water.

The earthquake struck during the January 1995 tournament and raised a debate about whether the sumo should be halted as a mark of respect – even though it was taking place some 500 kilometres away in Tokyo. At the time, the sumo association felt that the best way to show solidarity with Kobe was to continue fighting, to showcase its members as pillars of strength in times of need. Then, down in Osaka two months later, sumo served up an inspiring tournament for the Kansai folk in desperate need of a pick-me-up. Akebono and Takanohana enthralled audiences right until the final day with some breathtaking sumo, before facing each other for the title. The national psyche would have received a further monumental boost had Takanohana collected the cup for Japan, but a ruthless display of windmill tsuppari from Akebono's giant arms, followed by a devastating crush-out cast the auditorium into silence. Nevertheless, a successful sumo show proved that Kansai was bouncing back, and the accompanying jungyo tour also allowed sumo wrestlers the chance to personally reassure worried local residents.

It should be remembered that the spring of 1995 was particularly disastrous for Japan, as in addition to the earthquake, five deranged individuals – four of whom amazingly came from leading universities – decided to stage a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo metro which killed 13 people, severely injured 50 and temporarily injured several hundred. This attack happened during the March basho, giving sumo further reason to raise dejected spirits.

This time, in 2011, the sumo world reacted strongly to the Great Tohoku Earthquake, the biggest even in Japan's long earthquake-prone history. Hakuho led the way, famously donating Y10 million which was used to buy 100,000 cup noodles for people in stricken regions. Hakuho and other wrestlers also gathered together hoards of sumo memorabilia, especially hand prints and bath towels, and sent them to the worst-hit towns such as Otsuchi. It is hoped that some sort of charity tournament will also be staged to raise further funds for earthquake victims.

And if any template were needed for how sumo should react to an earthquake crisis, it is the way in which Japan's national sport helped rescue Ryogoku's economy from the brink in the 1920s. Having seen its Kokugikan burned to cinders in 1917 and a reconstruction attempt fall foul of a typhoon shortly afterwards, the sumo association was nearly bankrupted by the events of 1st September 1923. On this day, the most deadly earthquake in Japan's history struck, with an epicenter just 100 kilometres from Tokyo. At least 100000 were confirmed dead and another 40000 were never found. Worst of all, 40% of the confirmed dead were from the Ryogoku area. The major tragedy occurred when 38000 people huddled in an evacuation point near the Kokugikan, and were massacred by city fires raging in the swirling winds.

The Kokugikan itself suffered extensive damage and cost a fortune to repair, but there is no doubt that the sumo association's steely resolve in seeing the project through largely rescued Ryogoku's disintegrating economy. The present sumo association was established in 1925 and soon played to jam-packed audiences in the refurbished Kokugikan, ushering in the Golden Era of Musashiyama, Minanogawa and – of course – Tamanishiki.

Sumo wrestlers, by virtue of their gargantuan physiques, are powerful symbols of strength and protection. They have performed herculean tasks in helping Japan to recover from earthquakes before. In 2011, we look to them to do so again.