

Numbers game: Sumo's new challenge

by Chris Gould

In an ideal world, sumo's key virtue should be that as Japan's national sport officially supported by the government, it should not need to debase itself with publicity stunts and excess commercialisation. And yet the great paradox surrounding sumo in 2011 is that if it rests too much on its national sport laurels, it will cease to be a national sport.

Like it or not (and some sumo executives appear to relish exacting revenge on thorns in their side) the dismissal of Asashoryu in early-2010 has had a damaging effect on the sport's popularity. In late-2009, Asashoryu was spearheading the sport's regeneration drive, appearing on talk-shows, giving deep interviews, even shedding the odd tear when reading a letter from his mother. Two months later and sumo's grand regeneration plan was shattered like the jaw of the person he allegedly assaulted. Gone overnight were the crowd-pulling stories of Good Yokozuna-Bad Yokozuna, the titanic struggle between Hakuho and Asashoryu that would forever come to a climax on the tournament's final day. Gone instantly were the scores of passive onlookers who tuned in to see whether the man who oft exhibited thuggish tendencies would get unceremoniously beat. And gone were the thousands of fans who appreciated his mere genius in the ring.

That he deserved to be punished was unquestionable. But that he deserved to be thrown out of a sport which permits seniors to assert their authority by frequently punching juniors, is more

doubtful. The debates about a sumo wrestler's public image aside, the central issue was whether or not to dispense with the association's major marketing asset: and the association chose to drop him with no back up marketing plan.

True, attempts were made to regenerate sumo under Hakuho and the gang in late-2010, with some degree of success on commercial television. But then came the match-fixing scandal which saw appearances by sumo wrestlers on popular entertainment shows completely dry up. Another marketing ploy bit the dust, and the September 2011 tournament exposed the full grimness of the situation. Even on the first day, traditionally one of the tournament's most popular, tickets were still readily available just five days before the action commenced. On the 14th day, also on a weekend and thus normally brimful of fans, sizeable numbers of tickets remained unsold even at 4.50pm – according to an SFM spot-check!

But there is also another problem that the sumo association appears yet to pick up on, but that internet sites appear to express all too clearly. On reading Dorian's piece for this issue, you almost imagine that he is a Japanese fan from the Showa Era (1926-89), such is his passion for even middle-ranked wrestlers. But people like Dorian are sadly a minority. In marketing itself as a tourist attraction, sumo is generating more foreign ticket sales, but it is not generating any fans. People are simply coming one-time, ticking it off on their "things-to-do box list" and scarcely

thinking about sumo again save for uploading crass videos on YouTube.

What sumo has also failed to spot is that foreign fans are different from Japanese fans. It's a simple question of geography. If a Japanese person falls out of love with sumo, it's exposure on Japanese television could still ensure that that person's offspring will become sumo lovers. But if a foreign fan falls out of love with sumo, that is – as Graham Greene would say – *The End of the Affair*. It is virtually impossible to get them back on side, and even more impossible to get their offspring involved. And that is why commercially reckless decisions such as firing Asashoryu matter so much.

It is not merely the lack of superstars or Eurosport coverage that is dampening foreign interest. It is the format of tournaments. Foreigners generally respond to the football-style ranking system, whereby teams are judged on their performance in a single league or tournament – irrespective of how well they have performed before. It is the possibility of a Juventus being relegated to the second division, or a Blackpool mixing it with the big boys that makes football so unpredictable and attractive to anyone who has an imagination. But sumo has two ranking systems: the tournament leader board system, and the official ranking system (because in Japan nothing exists unless it has a rank). And the problem is that the systems (outside of the Yokozuna) appear totally unrelated. There are no genuine surprise promotions or relegations

among the top-two divisions: everything has been building up in a sea of predictability for too long to keep the fan's interest. Of course, it's Japanese culture not to let a big boy fall too soon, or not to let a young upstart get too big for his boots on the first try, but the current tournament system may actually be draining the sport of all possible excitement.

Which is why the sumo association would be careless not to consider changing the tournament format. For example, why not make it

more difficult for Hakuho: only allow him to fight on 13 days while his rivals fight 15. Were he to win a championship under such circumstances, it would really be some feat! Introduce a more exciting promotion-relegation system between the divisions, with 10 wrestlers moving in both directions each time. Scrap the archaic system where wrestlers' matches are based on rank and have a random draw. It might even be more exciting to have the same two wrestlers facing each other more than once in a single

tournament. How might the loser of the first match react in the second? What new genial tactics may he deploy? And finally, do tournaments really need to last 15 days? How about confining all the action to the six weekend days in the existing tournament period, thus allowing for weekday breaks in between for the media coverage to build up into a frenzy? It's just an idea, but something must be tried to bring in more fans – both at home, and abroad.