

## Sumo, My Friends and I

### SFM's Man in France continues his quest to spread the sumo gospel

by Dorian Marcellin

It has been over a year since I became a fan of sumo. Yet, on a regular basis, I come up against my relatives' disconcerted looks, when they learn of my passion. Sumo interest in France remains quite limited, although it had its "moment of glory" under the Chirac presidency.

I have already experienced unusual feedback about my interests. When I was a teenager, my parents had to contend with my passion for wargames and role playing. It was not very common, less than video games anyway. That said, at least with that, my friends were in the same boat as me, since I was playing with them! At 25, being a fan of sumo... that's another story. I am not part of a group, and I found this martial art alone, as I said in my first article for SFM.

First reaction: my other half. Despite her initial surprise, I think it went pretty well: after all it was a bonus that I was not a football fan. I think that over time, my excitement at the approach of, and during, the Basho must have become contagious. And I confess to have been astonished when, at the last tournament, my beloved exclaimed: "Kotoshogikuuuuuuuu" when the shin-ozeki entered the lists. It was then that I realized that the positives had conquered the setbacks of the sumo world in 2011.

With my friends, the reactions were somewhat different! The first time I talked about it (said like that, it's almost like it is a shameful disease, sorry ...), it was to my childhood friend, last spring. We were watching some friends play a game of tennis,

sitting on the grass in the sun. The topic of conversation drifted to sports tournaments and there I was, explaining that the honbasho was canceled in March, and insisting that it was for the first time in sumo since WW2. Silence.

I argued a bit more, explaining that sumo is a monument of traditional Japanese culture, which has recently been through a lot of trouble, and that it was just my luck to have become a fan at this precise time! Silence again.

I could see from his expression that he wasn't getting my point. Then he said: "But you're a fan of sumo? Is it that great?" I must admit I was relieved to arouse some curiosity (even alloyed with incomprehension) rather than derision! Looking back I realise that I got a little carried away and I described all the points I love in sumo. I had partly forgotten that he had always expressed great reservations about my interest in Japanese culture! Nowadays, at last, when we talk about sumo, he sometimes asks for more details. I think that represents a great victory for me!

Anyway, it's a much more recent experience that gave me the idea for this little article. With my office colleagues, we recently ate in a Japanese restaurant in Rue Saint-Anne in Paris's "Japantown", where you can find probably the best Japanese specialties, with many popular restaurants and upmarket ones too. We have the advantage of working next door. After placing our order, we had to laugh at one of the guys who had ordered two dishes plus a starter for a simple lunch at noon. You can probably

guess where that led: I could not resist telling him that he would appreciate a good chanko. And inevitably, I found myself in front of them, describing the specifics of sumo wrestling.

It took me a while to realize that my audience was listening attentively. After several explanations, the colleague with the impressive appetite began to ask me questions about the physical capabilities of sumo wrestlers. I was able to explain that their awesome weight often concealed exceptional flexibility and strength. Finally, we came to discuss the training of rikishi and their way of life... until we returned to the office. And he asked me to lend him my videos so he could see an entire basho – rituals included.

I admit I was surprised again. I thought that, in the French Kingdom of the Baguette, Wine and Cheese – where a majority of people do not want to make the effort to differentiate countries in Asia – most responses to my passion would be based on stereotypes. "It's a sport for fat people," "It sounds too codified, it must be wheezy," "not a martial art," "talk about football instead" etc... So far, I've never been unfortunate enough to meet overly negative opinions. People have usually been quite interested, even when I have gone a bit overboard.

I conclude this quite personal (once again!) article with the following advice: Never hesitate to talk about sumo around you! It feels good and it is often more productive than one might think!