

SFM Interview: Andrew Freund Director of the California Sumo Association

Interview by Chris Gould

Sitting in the SFM interview hotseat this issue is Andrew Freund, Trustee of the US Sumo Federation and Director of the California Sumo Association, a leading player in the world of amateur sumo.

CG: Andrew, how did you first get interested in sumo?

AF: I had a background in sports like soccer, track & field and basketball, as well as with martial arts like kendo, tai chi, and aikido. When I started working in Tokyo in 1990, I knew nothing about sumo. I didn't get out much there, but before returning to California, I decided to at least see a few sights and I found an event listing for "sumo" in Tokyo Journal. It showed the Kokugikan address, the ticket prices, the 15 days of the basho and times of 9am-6pm.

So, I naively showed up at the Kokugikan one weekday morning at 9am, bought my cheap seat (about 2,000 yen), and wandered into an empty arena, where I sat for seven hours straight, watching an endless sequence of matches. By 4pm, fans started trickling in, so I kept watching the final two hours, but I didn't understand much of the whole spectacle. I guess it was kind of comical that I followed the listed schedule to the letter, without thinking that maybe the early matches weren't the main attraction!

I attended another basho while in Japan, but became a more serious fan when I started watching every basho on TV (in California) in 1997. I actually picked up a good deal of the Japanese language from sumo TV broadcasts! I also



Los Angeles jungyo: Andrew Freund with former sekiwake Akinoshima and Takamiyama

started practicing sumo pretty seriously that year, which developed into a passion that has continued in various ways for quite a few years.

CG: When and how did you found the California Sumo Association?

AF: I formed the California Sumo Association (CSA) in 1998 and set up regular practice sessions at UCLA (where I am a teacher) three times a week. By 1999, we founded the UCLA Sumo Club (officially recognized and registered as a UCLA club by the university), which as far as I know, was the first and only officially recognized university sumo club in the United States. At first, we only had two or three guys at each practice and sometimes I was the sole attendee! I persisted, though,

and eventually we built up a good core group.

Over the years, CSA has been involved in diverse activities, holding close to 1,000 practices, several hundred demonstrations and performances, and many special appearances all over the United States. We have had practices coached by legendary Hawaiians Konishiki, Akebono, and Musashimaru, as well as at least six other former rikishi.

In the realm of amateur sumo, CSA has recruited and hired international champions as coaches including two-time lightweight World Sumo Champion Svetoslav Binev (Bulgaria) and two-time heavyweight World Sumo Champion Byambajav Ulambayar

(Mongolia). The long-term contributions of these world-calibre athletes and others have helped a lot of Americans develop their own sumo skills.

One of the most important things to me is to maintain the authenticity, respect, and protocol of the sumo tradition, whether professional or amateur. In addition to going to great lengths to bring the Hawaiian stars and to recruit world sumo champion athletes, we have also brought Japanese amateur teams here on several occasions, and have gone on week-long tours to high schools and colleges, demonstrating the beauty and discipline of sumo to Americans who have never seen it before live.

Some people who try sumo may just throw on mawashi and try lunging forward, but we have tried to take things more seriously over the years. Now "Byamba," with five years of ozumo experience (under the shikona "Daishochi") practices with us and shows us much of what he learned about sumo and Japanese culture in general during his time in Japan. The athletes who train with him have definitely shown marked improvements in their sumo technique.

CG: What is it like to be responsible for staging a major amateur sumo event?

AF: After we developed a good group at practices, I decided to start the first US Sumo Open in 2001. On a whim, I invited Konishiki (who I seriously didn't think would even respond) and he accepted our invitation! So, while holding down two nearly full-time teaching jobs, I spent six months producing the first US Sumo Open from scratch: soliciting sponsors, renting a venue, renting equipment, contacting media, inviting athletes (including a team from Japan), creating flyers and

programs, building a website, negotiating with Konishiki's people, and much, much more.

It was a one-man job, and I slept just two or three hours a night for months before the event. The first Open itself was a pretty big step for amateur sumo in the US, as the first US competition with female competitors and an audience of nearly 1,000, generated from word of mouth and from me driving around town for weeks to every Japanese restaurant I could find, posting flyers by hand!

In the aftermath of that event, I was virtually bedridden for weeks, and completely sapped of energy for months. I also found myself in debt, with loans and post-tournament bills that took one year to pay back. Most of the money I made at my day jobs went toward paying costs for the Open.

With the heavy toll of producing the Open, it might have been prudent to call it quits, but a year later, I produced the second US Sumo Open in much the same fashion. Once again, there were numerous challenges. On the plus side, the competition level was extraordinary and we got plenty of positive feedback from fans, media, and athletes.

Looking back, it seems that every annual US Sumo Open since then has continued that cycle: the event itself has continued to get bigger and more spectacular, but even though I keep expecting it to break even, the harsh realities are disillusioning!

Nevertheless, I have felt encouraged by the support of some Japanese companies, the heart-felt support of our tournament guests like Konishiki, Akebono, and Musashimaru, and the encouragement of so many athletes and fans. I feel like I have been raising a child: no matter how much hardship you face, you

can't give up on something that you have put so much heart into. On that note, we'll see if we can make the Open happen for the 9th consecutive year (in 2009)! More to come . . .

CG: What have been the highlights of your role as Director of CSA?

AF: Certainly the growth of the US Sumo Open has been one of the major successes. In recent years, the Open has been held at the Los Angeles Sports Arena (the same venue for the 2008 ozumo jungyo, a few months after our US Sumo Open there). Audiences have been in the 2,000-3,000 range and the competition is always intense. Many former and current world sumo champions, multiple continental champions, and dozens of national champions have competed in the US Sumo Open, including athletes from about 25 countries.

It has also been fun to be involved with sumo on TV commercials, TV shows, and movie projects like "Memoirs of a Geisha" (where we worked with Mainoumi, among others) and "Ocean's 13" (where we brought in Akebono and Musashimaru). Among dozens of nationwide performances, including live shows for over 150,000 people total during the past decade, showing sumo at the Arnold Sports Festival (in Ohio) was one of the most memorable. At this annual Schwarzenegger event, Arnold himself joined us on the dohyo for photo opps, and also hosted a luncheon with the sumo wrestlers, where we each got to meet him in person.

It was an honour to work closely with the Nihon Sumo Kyokai on the 2005 Las Vegas jungyo and the 2008 Los Angeles jungyo. In both cases, we coordinated much of the PR, held promotional events, took care of VIPs like Musashimaru on media tours, and more. I enjoyed

being house announcer at both events, too.

Within the context of all these activities, though, the most gratifying aspect has been the opportunity to share something of authentic Japanese culture with an American audience. When people watch our tournaments and

demonstrations, they are invariably surprised by the athleticism of the wrestlers and realize that this is not just “two fat guys bumping bellies!”

Amateur sumo will always be separate from professional sumo, but I think a lot of the exposure we provide generates interest in

ozumo, too, where fans can learn even more about this remarkable tradition.

No-one knows for sure where amateur sumo will end up, but it sure has been an interesting ride for me so far! One step at a time . .

[California Sumo Association](#)



2006 US Sumo Open, Los Angeles