

Amateur Angles #7

Introducing your host...Thailand!!

by Howard Gilbert

Ten years ago Thailand hosted its first national amateur sumo tournament on a plastic mat dohyo. Later it hosted the Asian Sumo Championships in 2001, the first to be held outside Japan. This year the South East Asian country is lining up to hold the 2007 World Sumo Championships, after the original host of Lausanne, Switzerland withdrew. The reason is not altogether clear, but it seems to be due to trouble on the Swiss side. However, as mentioned in February's issue (Issue 11) of Sumo Fan Magazine, part of the problem could stem from lack of sponsorship and media coverage due to a date change by the International Sumo Federation.

For the athletes of Europe, not to mention the European fans of amateur sumo, it means a lost opportunity to have the World Championships close to home for the first time since 2004 in Riesa, Germany. However, all is not lost for the Europeans as Rakvere, Estonia, the host of the very successful 2006 World Junior Sumo Championships, is lined up to host the World Championships in 2008. The praise for the event and the organisers was glowing from all quarters, especially the IFS, so the amateur sumo world awaits a return to Europe next year.

This year's World Championships will be held for the third successive year in Asia; however, instead of the industrial climate of Ohama Sumo Stadium in Sakai City, Osaka, the world's best exponents of amateur sumo will gather in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai. This year's tournament will also be the first that incorporates the

World Junior Sumo Championships within the same weekend as the senior competitions for men and women.

Chiang Mai was originally to host this year's 9th Asian Sumo Championships and the 4th Asian Shinsumo Championships in July. However, with the World Sumo Championships, World Shinsumo Championships and World Junior Sumo Championships now coming to the city in November, the Asian regional events will be held on Friday 16th November, the day before the World Juniors competition. The weekend wraps up with the World Sumo Championships and the World Shinsumo Championships on Sunday 18th November. ¹ This will keep the athletes quite busy, particularly those representing Asian countries, and especially if any junior male competitors are to represent their country in the senior competitions as well.

Chiang Mai will provide an interesting venue for amateur sumo. The temperatures in northern Thailand in mid-November are expected to range through 19-29°C, which is far more comfortable than the rather chilly 2-8 °C temperature range Lausanne was promising. November brings the cooler northern weather cycle and little rain is expected. The city is Thailand's second largest, and it is the administrative hub of the northern part of the country. Chiang Mai also has direct flights to many of the main neighbouring Asian cities, providing teams with several approach points. In addition, by hosting the tournament in Thailand, the costs

on the ground are expected to be a lot lower. For many federations this is a major bonus as the sport is not flush with money or institutional support from government agencies.

So, what of the host nation and its sumo pedigree? In recent years Thailand has been a consistent performer both at the World Championships and at the Asian Championships. At the latter, its athletes, particularly the women, have placed for medals. At last year's World Championships, Chalermthip Saguna took bronze in the women's middleweight division, repeating her effort from 2005. Also in 2005, Jakraphong Chaorungmethee won silver in the men's lightweight division. These results point to sumo talent within Thailand, and all indications are that this is a country that is improving on the world stage. Much of this can be attributed to a growing awareness of amateur sumo as a competitive sport within Thailand.

Such successes are also an indication of an active Thai Sumo Federation. Just last year the Thai Sumo Federation opened its new training facility in Bangkok, complete with a clay dohyo. Gone are the days of placing a mat dohyo in a borrowed facility like a university gymnasium to allow the athletes to train. Now each Sunday afternoon up to 40 athletes of all ages, including a surprising number of children and teenagers, gather to learn the sport and develop their skills.

Amateur sumo in Thailand has been assisted greatly by Japanese input. This has come from one or

two Japanese individuals resident in Thailand, and then from their contacts within amateur sumo back in Japan. One such person is Kurasawa Sumio, the President of the Thai Sumo Federation. Mr Kurasawa has been in Thailand since the early 1980s and he runs the chain of Tokyo-do Japanese language bookshops in the country. This company has supported the growth of sumo in Thailand through sponsorship, and Mr Kurasawa has been active in coaching and promoting the sport.

However, perhaps just as important to Thailand's sumo development are Mr Kurasawa's links with the Shizuoka Sumo Federation, originally through his high school team-mate Shimomura Katsuhiko. Mr Shimomura was the president of

the Shizuoka Sumo Federation, and the group has helped the Thai federation with donations of mawashi and mat dohyo, as well as sending out personnel when there were major tournaments held in Thailand. Through this connection and the efforts of people both in Japan and Thailand, the sport has grown.

With the venue now settled and the dates set, the world awaits the fruits of these labours and the expectations of a stiff hometown challenge put forth by the Thai athletes in Chiang Mai later this year.

(Written with information from the 30 November 2000 issue of Chikara, the Thai Sumo Federation homepage <http://thaisumo.hp.infoseek.co.jp> and Bangkok's The Nation

newspaper http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2006/05/28/headlines/headlines_30005104.php)

In writing this issue's column I have realised that it is now a year since the first Amateur Angles appeared. I would like to thank all of those that have assisted with insights and information, as well as the editors I've worked with (three to date). I hope you, the fans, also continue to find something of interest in this column each issue.

ⁱ Currently only the dates have been released for the weekend encompassing the World Junior Sumo Championships, the World Sumo Championships and the World Shinsumo Championships; however, based on previous tournaments in recent years this is the expected schedule.