

Fan View

by Mark Buckton

To date, this column has worked along the lines of a 2-person debate and has seen a few of the most respected names in sumo fan circles go head to head on issues surrounding the game. Sometimes we have provided an opportunity to relative newcomers still learning their way around the sport to reach tens of thousands each month, even if they aren't yet qualified in the eyes of those longer in the tooth in this still, semi-feudalistic world of oshi / yotsu.

*We're going to tweak the debate slightly for a few issues and will be taking a look at what exactly it means to be a sumo fan, why some on the Sumo Forum and Sumo Mailing List are at loggerheads over the qualities and qualifications necessary for modern sumo fans.**

Any and many of the aspects of fandom – or non-fandom as it may turn out – could come up and, to get the ball rolling, I'll take the first steps on a path likely to be littered with pitfalls, 'what ifs' and the like. Let's see where I end up as I explain just how I see sumo fandom in the early 21st century.

**if interested in having your comments preserved on SFM and likely to be read more here than on the much respected forums, let us know before you start writing and we'll work to create the space you need.*

I am a sumo fan. I can't claim to have been a fan all my life and I won't try.

I first saw sumo on TV back in the late 80s when growing up in the UK. Live experience, in Japan, came a decade later - in the mid-90s - a touch over ten years ago now.

Does that 'live experience' make me a better fan than a person for

whom sumo remains the sport of a far-off land accessible only by PC or TV? I honestly don't think so, not better, but definitely different – I do believe that.

I can't count the days I have spent watching sumo live over the years; I've really let it get under my skin. I've never even tried to count. I did once try and remember all the venues where I've seen the pros do their thing and got confused. So many times, so many places – primarily in the Kokugikan of course – so many faces. And this, he says, starting with 'and' even though his English teacher back in South Manchester would cane him for doing so, is just the professional game.

Amateur sumo came much later for me but, when it did, it came thick and fast. I donned the mawashi for a while with Sumo Forum's Nishinoshima, until family circumstances put pay to being able to attend as often as I would have liked. I scored my first victory on an amateur dohyo at John Gunning's expense, although he later got his own back and remains in the lead numerically. I hurt myself badly just watching amateur sumo in late 2006 and was picked up – literally – by Rowan Klein of Sumo Oz fame. Returning to the same event after a spell in the hospital, the renowned SF member, ilovesumo (Verena), who's been in Japan this past year, helped my incapacitated self.

Sumo, like many other sports, is about time put in. Sumo, however, and unlike many other sports, is about one nation – it is about Japan. Barring trips to entertain those elsewhere, sumo on a

professional level is centered on the 4000 islands of this archipelago and, like it or not, fans based here have a distinct advantage over those in the EU, US or elsewhere.

This doesn't make these fans better, as I said before, but it does make them different, and that difference is the key to my own understanding of sumo fans and the way I view them.

Anyone can be a sumo fan. You don't need to be rich, or of a particular physical form etc etc. If not here in Japan, you do need some sort of access to TV from Japan or a PC with Internet access. In Japan though, the TV will, at some time, carry sumo reports and even coverage of the honbasho; PCs aren't a necessity.

Knowing what you are seeing and enjoying it makes an observer into a sumo fan in my book. Simply knowing what is going on isn't enough to label an individual, who passes by a TV and understands the images, a fan.

That said, the issue must turn to the 'types' of fans out there and there are some I like, some I respect, and some I just accept.

Is an all-knowing, all-seeing fan in a basement somewhere in Europe worthy of the same respect afforded a person in the thick of it in Tokyo or elsewhere in Japan?

As a person, yes; as a sumo fan, I don't believe so.

Think about it – you meet someone who speaks your own language almost perfectly while on a visit to their (not your own)

country. You compliment them on their linguistic skills whereupon they tell you that everything came from classroom study and listening to CDs. They have never actually set foot in the land to which the language is attributed.

You go home and meet another person, coincidentally from the same country that you've just visited. They have never really spent much time cooped up in a library, arrived in your motherland speaking 2 words of the language in question (likely; hello and thank you) and developed their own fluency by hard work and usage.

Which person do you respect more? Why?

At this point I will not say I respect the latter more as a person as that is just not true. What I will say however, is that the person who opted for the best teacher in the world - experience - would receive my own undivided attention whereas his counterpart back home in cubicle 12a of the local library would get, perhaps unfairly but so be it, a lesser degree of acknowledgement.

Almost every day in Japan I am afforded the fantastic opportunity to interact with Japanese men and women in their 20s / 30s / 40s and up to their 90s who have no clue or interest in win / loss ratios, promotion criteria or jonokuchi records from 1948 Natsu Basho. Oddly though, many of these non-declared fans have lived with sumo much of their life and don't even have to pay full attention to a bout to know who won or who would win.

They have something ingrained – something I think I am learning

and something that is growing in me about what sumo means, what sumo is and what sumo leaves imprinted on the psyche of its real, dohyo-side, up at 5am to see asageiko, fans. Something that stays forever in the minds of Japanese.

NONE of this – NONE of it takes away from the role of fans beyond Japanese shores and many times I have enjoyed watching sumo with first-time visitors. Many times I've watched them and not the dohyo as they have sat, mouth open like kids looking for Santa as the yokozuna dohyo-iri takes place. I often envy their order of fandom; their awareness and depth of knowledge of the sport prior to their first chance to see it live.

I became a fan because I saw it live – because I was there when it happened in front of me. The proverbial grass being greener as the cause of my envy? Who knows?

We are all fans – if we are still reading at this point. We are just different and live different lives linked by that common denominator - sumo.

I, like you all, judge my fellow fans, but in the four months since retiring myself from the Sumo Forum have found less of a need to do so as I look at what we all bring to the game – the difficult part is seeing and accepting the contributions of others as of similar worth to our own.

Do those I once ID'd as stattoos qualify for respect if they recall or have it written somewhere which ozeki wore a penguin-decorated kesho mawashi on the day he made his sanyaku debut and that

that same kesho, 43 years and 271 days later, was used by another rikishi who went on to have the exact same career win / loss average?

Can you only be deemed a 'real fan' if you have seen sumo live - at the Kokugikan - a certain number of times?

Is a ticket stub to each of the 6 basho a pre-requisite to true fandom? Or, is a full 15 / 15 attendance record at one basho better than 15 over a given year?

Do true fans fly to jungyo in the middle of the Pacific, spending thousands of dollars in the process?

Are the hardcore fans the men and women who drag themselves out of bed at early o'clock and onto the first train in the grey light of a Tokyo morning to watch jonokuchi men perform 300 shiko before 6am?

Is it necessary to be friends with a sekitori and to tell the world in every post you make on the Internet?

Is a mawashi in the cupboard and experience as an amateur the way to earn fan stripes?

Is it by party hopping on senshuraku and rushing home to announce it to Sumo Forum etc that creates real fans?

Answer these questions your own way but as much as I see us all in this together, I do see some as more worthy than others. The man who doesn't think in this way - deep down - I have yet to meet.