

Let's Hear From You! What Made You A Fan?

by Ben Doolan of Australia

*Each issue of SFM, We'll ask one of you
to tell us something about you and sumo.
Think you have something readers would like to know?
Write our letters section! Enjoy.*

While I have been interested in sumo for as long as I can remember, I can't claim to have been a real fan until January 2006. I figure that the blame for this lies mostly with the fact that while Australians on the whole are sports mad, sumo generally doesn't rate a mention here.

The change from being merely interested in sumo to being an avid fan happened when I was visiting my sister-in-law who was at the time living in Japan. Being my first trip to Japan, I had a long list of things that are quintessentially Japanese that I decided needed to be done while I was there - one of which was going to watch a live sumo tournament. Not knowing where sumo tournaments are held or how to go about getting tickets, I was incredibly thankful that my sister-in-law procured some tickets to day 13 of the 2006 Hatsu Basho.

While travelling around Japan before arriving in Tokyo I had watched the NHK sumo telecast whenever possible, but though exciting, this television presentation couldn't have prepared me for the real thing. Having no Japanese language skills past the ability to say 'konichiwa' made it difficult for me to work out when to arrive at the Ryogoku Kokugikan and what to expect when there.

Not wanting to miss any of the

action I arrived quite early in the morning and made my way inside. Locating my seat was a trial but I assume that I found the right one as no-one told me to move during the day. While I appeared to have arrived before all the people who knew what was going on had got out of bed for the day, it gave me an opportunity to peruse the sumo museum and watch the dohyo preparations for the day.

When the action finally started, only a smattering of spectators were in attendance, and the first rikishi appeared little more than teenagers. Despite some of the early contests appearing to be fairly lacklustre affairs, as the day progressed the crowd grew, along with the intensity of their cheering, and the action became more and more exciting as the giant rikishi enthusiastically crashed into each other and then tried with all their strength to dominate their opponent.

By the time the makuuchi division began there was an enormous crowd in attendance, and many of the wrestlers were those that I'd seen each day on the NHK telecast. It wasn't hard to pick Asashoryu with the ring entering ceremony and the extensive collection of portraits he has hanging around the ceiling of the Kokugikan, and many others were easy to spot as well.

The intensity of each bout was

amazing, and the crowd really got behind the rikishi with cheering and shouting, especially in close contests where rikishi held on at the edge of the ring in desperation trying to defeat their opponent.

In the last matchup of the day Asashoryu needed to defeat Ama to retain a realistic chance of winning the basho, though he failed to do this. As soon as Asashoryu hit the ground, spectators began throwing cushions from all sides of the Kokugikan while attendants scurried around trying to keep them off the dohyo. I'm not sure whether this reflected their elation or their disappointment with the result, but it definitely was a spectacle to behold.

Attending a day of live sumo was a great experience, it allowed me to experience all the ritual and culture that is intertwined with sumo, and also gave me an appreciation of the sheer size and skill of the rikishi.

It was also a good day to attend, as the Emperor was in attendance and the yusho race was still wide open. The Japanese hope Tochiazuma managed to stay in the lead by defeating Kotooshu, which excited the crowd immensely, while the then up and coming Hakuho remained in the hunt. The experience also transformed me from being merely interested in sumo to being a fan.