



Amateur Angles #8 And the winner might be...

by Howard Gilbert

In the previous two columns of Amateur Angles I previewed parts of the 2007 international amateur sumo season and then looked at the pedigree of Thailand, this year's host of the World Sumo Championships. In the next two instalments I'd like to take these two ideas and build on them by writing a preview of this November's tournament. In this column I'll look at Europe and then next time I will turn my attention to the rest of the world: Asia, the Americas, Oceania and Africa.

European athletes and fans would have been disappointed to learn that they will once again have to travel half way around the world to compete in the World Sumo Championships. Although the venue has moved from Osaka to Chiang Mai, the distance will mean that the European federations might not be able to send teams as large as they would have hoped. In some ways this is a blessing for countries from other continents because it is the European countries that have performed so strongly in recent years.

Russia will likely be the stand out country once again. In 2006 the Russians won six of a possible ten gold medals. They also won a silver and two bronzes, meaning that they picked up a medal in all but one of the divisions (men's middleweight, as it happens). In collecting all these golds, Russia won the men's and women's team competitions, the men's

openweight, and the women's middleweight, heavyweight and openweight. The next best European country was neighbouring Ukraine, which picked up one gold among a total of five medals, followed by Poland with one silver and two bronze. The Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Germany all won a silver medal, and Hungary and Bulgaria claimed a bronze each.

The easiest way to look at the European contenders might be to take each weight class at a time. It is expected that the athletes mentioned will be the ones in realistic contention for medals. They will face international competition from Japanese and perhaps Mongolian athletes (whom I will mention in the next issue).

In the men's lightweight division, Ukrainian Vitaliy Tikhenko and Russian Igor Kurrinoy both won bronze medals in 2006. Tikhenko was the champion in both 2004 and 2005, and recently captured silver in this division at the European Games, held in his homeland. Two years ago at the World Games in Germany, Tikhenko defeated his older Russian rival in the final of the lightweight division. Kurrinoy's pedigree is strong, having won two bronze medals at World Championships, and this year he claimed bronze at the European Championships in Hungary. However, even though he has some strong form this year,

Kurrinoy might struggle to make a mark at the World Championships because he might not even be on the plane to Thailand! As each country is only allowed one competitor in each weight class (unlike tournaments in Europe), Russia might be represented by youngster Nachyn Mongush. The 19-year old was Junior World Champion in 2006 in Estonia, and has carried this form through into this year as well. At the European Championships he placed second in the under-21 lightweight competition, and then Mongush won gold in the European Games in Kiev in July, defeating hometown hero Tikhenko. Whether or not Mongush negotiates the step up to senior World Championships level this year, he will certainly figure in the future.

Moving up a weight division, the men's middleweight seems wide open in terms of European contenders. The reigning European champion is Russia's Alan Bibilov who did not fair very well in Osaka last year. He was knocked out by Pole Marek Paczkow, silver medallist at the World Championships in 2005. The Polish veteran was also silver medallist in 2002 and captured bronze in 2004. His experience will make him a difficult competitor but whether he will progress through to the medals is difficult to judge. Others to watch in this grade must include a Ukrainian, although who that will actually be is another matter. At last year's World Championships

Kostyantyn Yermakov took bronze but compatriot Pavel Babich took silver at this year's European Champs and followed that up by securing bronze at the European Games. Not to be discounted is 2005 bronze medallist Saber Hussein from the Netherlands, and I like the look of German youngster Erik Hoft. Realistically, though, this division could bring up a number of surprises as it has not been particularly 'stable' in recent years in Europe. Another way of looking at that is that there is always young blood coming through to surprise us.

The two names to look at immediately in the men's heavyweight division are Russian Alan Karaev and Pole Robert Paczkow. Those who follow K-1, Mixed Martial Arts or arm wrestling might be familiar with the name Alan Karaev. He is truly a giant of a man and has carved out an impressive resume in strength sports. His abilities in amateur sumo are also impressive, placing second last year in the heavyweight division, taking bronze in 2005, and winning the openweight division in 2002. In addition he won the open weight contest at the European Games this year, has won European titles in the past, and is part of the juggernaut that is the Russian men's team. Perhaps with an even better pedigree in the heavyweight division is Robert Paczkow. The Pole has won two bronze (1999 & 2006), a silver (2004) and has twice been World Champion (2001 & 2002), all solely in the heavyweight class. Despite now being in the veteran class, he won the title at the European Games last month and the speed and strength that he exhibits from the tachiai is part of the reason he is so successful. Beyond these two champions Europe boosts talents such as Hungarian Dezso Libor (silver in 2005), Russian Arthur Bagaev and Haitham Alsadi from

the Netherlands.

The openweight division can be blurred by athletes who switch between this division and the heavyweight division. Part of this may stem from the fact that Europe runs its openweight competitions as a free-for-all allowing any weight division competitor to take part in their weight category as well as the openweight division, while the Sumo World championships is run under the principle of a competitor in only one division. This makes it potentially difficult to work out who will appear in this division as opposed to the heavyweight division. For example, I have already mentioned athletes such as Karaev and Alsadi who have appeared in both divisions in previous major tournaments.

What is for certain is that 2007 will see no repeat victory for Russian Alan Gabaraev. He has since joined professional sumo and is competing under the shikona Aran, rising through the lower ranks at speed. Czech silver medallist Jaroslav Poriz will be looking to go one better this year to cap off a sumo career of more than a decade. He medalled at the European Championships, and no doubt his regime of keiko in Prague will have him as primed and ready as possible. His European rivals will probably come in the form of whoever represents Russia in Gabaraev's absence (possibly Alan Karaev) and the Polish athlete Jarek Jaracz who just missed out on bronze last year but took bronze at the European Sumo Championships and silver at the European Games this year.

Over on the women's side, the field of competitors is usually smaller in each weight class, but the Europeans provide a wealth of sumo talent. Many of these athletes are reaching their prime

so we might expect a number of repeat medallists from last year.

In the women's lightweight division Alina Boykova must again figure as one of the favourites. The sprightly Ukrainian was World Champion last year and in 2004, was bronze medallist in 2005, won the World Games title in 2005, won silver at this year's European Championships and then captured gold at the European Games. Her main European rival seems to be Russian Nelli Vorobieva, the current European champion and bronze medallist at last year's World Champs and in 2004. Last year's silver medallist was Pole Ewelina Lasecka, who won bronze in 2004. German Steffi Muller, the silver medallist in 2005, must also be rated as a medal chance. This year's tournament will likely be one veteran short as Dutchwoman Claudia De Graauw, always a tough competitor, has hung up her mawashi.

The women's middleweight really presents only four European favourites. Reigning champion Svetlana Panteleeva has won the last three world titles, and was in similar form in this year's European Championships. Hanah Weerkamp of the Netherlands will be looking to knock her Russian nemesis off the top spot after bronze in 2004 and 2005, and an improvement to silver last year. She recently won silver at the European Games to show some early form. The woman who beat her that day was Ukrainian Nadiya Sementsova, who had earlier picked up bronze at the European Championships. Finally, the German veteran Nicole Hehemann is capable of turning in strong results as witnessed by her silver in the European Championships and her bronze at the European Games this year.

Given the small fields in the women's competition and the

above mentioned swapping that can take place between athletes choosing heavyweight or openweight I will deal with both divisions in one fell swoop. Of the European “heavies” two athletes stand out for their veteran pedigree – Sandra Koppen of Germany and Olesya Kovalenko from Russia. Olympic judoka Koppen’s silver medal in the heavyweight division last year went along with winning the heavyweight in 2005, and the openweight in 2004 and 2001. Russian Kovalenko defeated the German in the heavyweight division last year to capture her second world title (after winning in 2002 and taking bronze in 2005). She has also been in fine form this year, winning the heavyweight division at the European Championships and then placing second in Kiev.

In these heavier divisions the Russians have the problem of having three athletes but only two individual places that can be filled. Anna Zhigalova was last year’s openweight winner, capturing her first world title. She has followed that with bronze in the

heavyweight division and silver in the openweight division at the European Championships in Hungary. The openweight winner this year in Hungary was Ekaterina Keyb, certainly the future of Russian shinsumo. Keyb will likely win a medal this year in Thailand, but it remains to be seen whether that is in the individual competition. Despite such quality, and her having won bronze at the Worlds in 2004 and then winning the openweight division in 2005, Keyb was not selected for the individual competition in Osaka last year. She had to settle for membership of the dominant Russian team that won the team’s competition.

Beyond Koppen and the Russians, there are several others who may figure in the medals. Among these are Francoise Harteveld from the Netherlands, Ukrainian Olga Davydko, Bulgarian Tsvetana Bozhilova and Hungarian Gyongyi Kallo. Two who hopefully will return are Britons, and members of the women’s team that surprised the sumo world, and perhaps themselves, with their results in Osaka. Having been

selected through a process that was filmed and later made into a documentary/reality TV show, Adele Jones belied her four months of sumo experience and gained silver in the openweight division. Her compatriot Sharran Alexander lost in the repechage match for bronze in the heavyweight division, but has the promise to do so much better with another year’s worth of experience. Amateur sumo fans certainly hope that these two and the rest of the British team have kept on with the sport in the time since the last World Championships, even if the cameras are no longer on them.

While these names are indicative of the European favourites for this year’s event, I’m sure that in the nearly four months to go injuries or misfortune may play their part. We could see some familiar names not make it to Thailand, or better yet we may see a new talent emerge. Nevertheless, these athletes are only part of the picture – one which I will try to complete in the next edition’s column.

