



Quit beating about the bush

The foreigners ARE largely here for the money

by Eric Blair

Older Japanese sumo fans often put the high numbers of successful foreign rikishi in Ozumo these days down to one thing – money!

The greenback, la lucre, lolly, call it what you will – **MONEY** brings them here according to many in Japan – myself now included.

Money brings them here, money keeps them here! Money is the main reason they even noticed the sport of sumo in the first place and money is the prime reason they are willing to run themselves ragged day in, day out as they dream of makunouchi success and its subsequent steady, respectable income.

But are the Japanese fans and I that claim such way off the mark? Are we blinkered? Ill informed?

Consider:

We have around 60 foreign rikishi in the sport today. Of those 60, around half are Mongolian. A handful are of European or Russian origin and a smattering come from South America, or elsewhere around the Pacific.

Of the lot I would venture that only a few - Kasugao and the his banzuke gai compatriot of South Korea, Kokkai and the lads from Georgia, Takanoyama of the Czech Republic, Baruto of Estonia and Masutoo of Hungary could be deemed from so called 'economically safe' nations. (If in doubt on the Georgian claim –

check the World Bank / UN sites online)

Don't get me wrong, every nation around the world has its own unique qualities; points that interest outsiders and make its inhabitants proud to be associated with the nations in question. Mongolia interests me greatly – as a place. I have a huge interest in the nation that gave the world so much of its early modern infrastructure 1000-years-ago but I just wouldn't, given the choice, opt to live, work or raise children there. Honestly speaking – would you?

The same applies to many of the other lands the foreign rikishi come from. Brazil with its gang infested slums, Russia with its 'ethnic cleansing' sprees in the south and idiots willing to wipe out a generation of kids in a school using bombs and landmines to prove a point.

My being interested in a nation though – IS NOT the same as my wanting to spend any time there – let alone the rest of my life.

Take another trip along honesty boulevard and ask yourselves "What do the rest (of the alien battlers) have on offer back home, things to look forward to that are not already on offer here in Japan – ten times over and then some?

Japan IS the short cut to financial success not offered at home for many foreigners making it to the

top of the pile in Ozumo. Why deny that? Why shirk from reality? Why will the majority of those disagreeing with this, from the nations I refer to above attack my reasoning from a PC in a 'more developed' nation – not the land of their birth or the place they call 'home'? Why do they, like Asashoryu, Kotooshu and Co. not opt to stay home and make things better for their own people?

Read [Kokkai's interview](#) on these very pages a few issues ago. A lovely man by all accounts but just how tough was his life before he got here? How many times has Kotooshu said, straight up, that sumo is a job? Not recently I will admit but in saying so is he not only adopting the attitude of his Japanese counterparts of decades past when so many joined the sport simply to have their belly filled and a place to sleep? The Japanese didn't deny it then, why do so many non-Japanese deny this possibility now?

Personally I am all for the internationalization of sumo but not simply as a means for providing XXL sized folk from around the world with a quick and easy avenue to social rank and (relative) banking riches.

I do, honestly, admire the gumption and effort that propels so many from afar so high up the rankings in so little time - but don't think that a hunger for success is the be all and end all – money is a larger and more

meaningful factor for the majority.

Admittedly many of the post war (and even some pre-war) domestically bred top dogs of sumo were raised along similar lines and entered sumo simply to fill their bellies as I have already said. Did anyone blame them for that? No! Did anyone mock them for that? No! Did these lads / men get all uppity about the reality behind their reasons for joining the professional ranks? No! – and in that last self supplied Q & A lies the difference between rikishi / sekitori and the mentality of many foreign fans – particularly those based outside Japan: it is not, and as far as I am aware, never has been the actual sekitori griping about the popularly held belief that they were here for the yen – they know it is true. They likely accept it. No, it is in the mindset of the pro-gaijin-fans, the them and us fans only interested in how the foreigners are faring that claim a belief along these lines of ‘they are just here for the yen’ to be rude, out of line and even discriminatory.

These naïve foreign fans ignore the many many many Japanese in Ozumo over the years and decades who themselves benefited personally and in turn helped promote sumo thanks to their

joining in such a manner – because of financial / nutritional hardship.

As we stand today, however, Japan and the Japanese being what they are - and being a wholly different nation today to the land of 100 or even just 50-years ago – the young men of this archipelago have no need to enter sumo just to avoid going to bed hungry. They have so much more on offer, so many options, so many avenues towards financial and career based success.

Should the oft stated belief of these Japanese be reason to berate them? Not in my book for they speak the truth.

The Japanese have come through their hard times – they can now sit back and enjoy the ride.

For this reason, among others, for the local lads in sumo – it **is** honour they see as the prime reason so many get into sumo today; the honour of being ‘a man of strength’ through choice, by choice.

THIS – ‘honour’ - **is** the EXACT reason Japanese get into sumo today.

None of them are looking to make a quick yen. None of them are

facing starvation, civil war, internal strife, gang violence or a plain and simple bleak economic future up in Hokkaido, down in Kyushu or elsewhere around the archipelago but unlike years ago, when starvation was a very real problem in rural Japan, do many readers know the leading prefectures in terms of active rikishi numbers? Check and you will be shocked for the majorities are amongst the most prosperous cities dotted around the land – Osaka, Tokyo, Fukuoka!

Education and hard work CAN still pay off in Japan – and has done on a national scale but in doing so it is achieved in an atmosphere of peace and relative prosperity. Can the same be said of the majority of foreign rikishi and the land / city of their birth? I think not but that is just me – and many of my Japanese friends and neighbors.

Let me know what you think – by way of my boss at editor@sumofanmag.com

Ed. Note: The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of Mr. Blair and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Sumo Fan Magazine or other staff.

