

Fan View

by Carolyn Todd

First off, this is me writing Fan View as myself, not with my Editor hat on, so any rants I'm about to have are mine alone and aren't made in the name of SFM, so if you don't like anything I say, please direct your comments to me as an individual, not the magazine.

And now to the tale. When I first lived in Japan, I had four jobs. I was fascinated by sumo (and all other trad. Japanese activities) but I hardly ever got to see it on TV, never mind going to a basho, even if I'd known how to get tickets. My friends, who had never been, told me that it was totally impossible to get tickets, and I believed them. At that time I had no computer, and no idea of an online community of fans so I had no sources of information.

When I came back to live in Japan, I had a different job (in which it's accepted that, during basho, I'll be leaving at 3pm in time for juryo on TV), a computer and therefore access to incredible sumo websites where I got a very rapid education, and it became an obsession. As soon as I could persuade someone to get me a ticket (and let me tell you, the Japanese mostly have no clue how to do that - something the Kyokai should look at if they want an audience), I went to a basho.

Now, the advantages of watching on TV are that you have the best seat in the house, and if you blink and miss something, you've got the slowmo replay to see who hit the dirt first. You get the commentary, the background info., the stats. But the first time I walked into a basho

and saw the dohyo, I stopped dead and grinned stupidly, something that I still do every time. And then there's the clack clack, shush shush, flap flap that tell you there's a rikishi coming down the corridor, the smell of the bintsuke, the yobidashi's (better or worse) singsong announcement of the rikishi, the slap slap of flesh as rikishi warm-up in the hanamichi, the huffing and gasping as they come sweating back to the shitakubeya.

The opportunity to talk to rikishi and go to asageiko and basho doesn't make someone a better fan or a more knowledgeable fan, but it does give a more intimate experience and greater insight into the life of rikishi and how they are off the dohyo – just young guys, away from home and happy to talk (except the usual miserable suspects).

As I live in Kyoto, it costs me a ridiculous amount of money in travel, hotels, tickets etc to go and see a basho and take photos, but when a live basho is only a couple of hours away, it's hard to resist, although I'm trying to be more responsible these days and budget for things like rent... On the other hand, I can sit on the sofa and watch for free, although then I can't take photos to share; I know I'm lucky that I have that choice.

One of the big differences between fans who live/have lived in or visit Japan frequently, and those elsewhere, anywhere, has been demonstrated very clearly in the last few weeks in the varying responses to Asagata from the

viewpoint of culture and society.

I would never presume to speak for anyone else, but I'm pretty sure that, for those of us in Japan, the form of Asashoryu's punishment, while maybe harsher than some might have liked, came as no surprise.

Barely a day goes by in Japan without someone in the public eye, a Japanese actor, singer, newsreader or sportsman, being punished by their employer, often involving the apology, seclusion, house arrest route, but frequently the sudden ending of their career, contracts cancelled, CDs scrapped, fan clubs disbanded – poof, just like that, gone. And usually not for some heinous crime against humanity, but for transgressions such as being caught by the paparazzi smoking a cigarette, dating the wrong person, or underage drinking; if they did that in the UK or US, the ranks of entertainers would be decimated. And however famous this person has previously been, their name is rarely spoken of again in polite society after they've made their public apology, and bowed, and looked contrite, and maybe even shaved their head.

It might be weird for people outside Japan, but here, if you do something that society in general would disapprove of, and particularly if you disrespect your employer and make them lose face, better start practising your apologies while you pack for the trip back to obscurity.

People have asked whether what

the Kyokai is doing is legal, could Asashoryu have a case against them? I laughed out loud! The Kyokai employ him, they can do whatever they want to him, that's how it is here, get used to it.

Employers in Japan have a lot of power, and an employee's activities on and off the clock reflect on their company and can be punished accordingly. A car accident? A drunken fight on a Saturday night? If news gets back to your boss, expect punishment of one form or another, whoever you are. And that's also what's important, 'if news gets out.'

Public image and face are everything in Japan, smiling at people you hate, bowing to bosses you despise, maintaining the honor of your employer and your society. Of course, it's the same everywhere to some extent, but here, you can't do anything worse than let your private, and maybe dodgy, activities come out in public. If you do, it's the duty of society, the police, your employer, to show you the error of your ways and you're expected to repent in public to an appropriate extent. After a decent interval, you might be accepted back into the fold, rehabilitated and debt paid. Or maybe not. Remember this is the country of seppuku...

This idea can be pretty hypocritical because you can actually get away with a whole lot as long as you keep it quiet. Often it's not the crime itself that's being punished, it's the fact that it got out, and it has to be seen to be punished.

Given that, and given that many sumo fans are living in Japan and experiencing this culture, it's bemusing to read some of the

comments by fans outside Japan who don't know this society and seem completely unwilling to have it explained to them, insisting that their interpretation is correct. If they don't learn about the culture, how can they ever expect to understand sumo, which is so much part of traditional Japan?

Complaining that sumo or Japanese society is backward and should operate in the 21st century is just dumb. Just because a country doesn't have the same rules as your society doesn't always make it wrong. If you think it does, to be frank, you need to get out in the world a bit more and see just how different from your country other societies can be. I guarantee that Asashoryu's house arrest will pale in comparison.

If you don't like it, OK fine, you don't have to, but guess what? That's how sumo works and if you don't understand that, I'm not sure why you're watching, because the cultural background and societal requirements are the very basis of sumo.

And for those who think that this is a vindictive racial attack against a foreign rikishi, you're joking, right? As I said above, these punishments are doled out all the time to Japanese in the public eye who are expected to set an example. And if it were racially motivated, Asashoryu would have been punished long ago for his numerous transgressions. People have said that he hasn't been punished previously because he was holding the yokozuna fort on his own, but think about it, yokozuna have been made to intai before for behaving badly, and if the Kyokai had forced Asashoryu out, they would undoubtedly have

had one, if not more, Japanese yokozuna.

From a more general observation of fandom, can anyone explain the 'fans' who feel a need to flame other people? What's with that? Abusing a person you've never met about a sport you're not involved in? How empty does your life have to be for that to be an intelligent use of your time? And why on earth would you think other people would waste their time reading your sad rantings, or anything else you ever post again? What's scary is that people join in – bullying and mob culture are alive and well, it seems. There are some weird people out there masquerading as fans and, whatever their motivation, it's not sumo. But hey, that's the Internet for you; attracts all sorts with nothing better to do.

On the positive side, the fans, from all over the world, who offer statistics, TV/newspaper translations, photos, background info., history, anecdotes, inside info. or just plain enthusiasm for sumo are awesome. They often do huge amounts of work in their free time and offer it to the community. The depth and breadth of their knowledge is amazing and I benefit from it every day.

So, for me, what makes a fan is enthusiasm and a willingness to learn and share knowledge about sumo with other fans, regardless of whether you've been watching sumo for 30 years or 3 days, whether you live 5 minutes or 5 continents away from the Kokugikan, and whether you spend all day in the tamari getting squashed or never set foot in a basho.