

Let's Hear From You! What Made You A Fan? One of the first, one of the few, one of the lucky

*by Phil Sherman – a man who can date his
sumo watching back half a century*

*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.*

My interest in sumo began when???

I am a product of the 1950's. My friends and I were, and still are, sports fanatics. We heard about sumo and understood that it was about huge wrestlers pushing each other until one stepped over a 'certain line'. We gave it a try but we were actually doing what they called Indian Wrestling at the time – a game in which you and your opponent would grasp one of the other's hands and try to pull him over a line drawn in the sand. Balance was the key. Whoever crossed the line first was the loser. As you can tell, we knew nothing about sumo.

Then, in the late 1950's or early to mid-60's, Wide World Sports (a weekly TV show featuring all different types of sports) hit the airways and very seldom did we miss a show. Once, they did a story about sumo and it was the first time I actually learned something about the sport. The show gave a lot of background information on sumo as it was then and I always remember mention of the best wrestlers coming from northern Japan as the men in that region had to walk through deep snow year after year and thus developed good balance, strong legs and very strong hips. They showed clips of some of the matches and I was hooked right away.

The sad part is that back in those days there was no such thing as the Internet on which we could

'look up' the subject. That said, sumo still had a strong hold on me.

In the 1980's, and after decades had passed, I was working with a Japanese man who had only been in the USA for a short amount of time. His English was very good so he answered the numerous questions I had about sumo.

Next came a very big surprise. One day, he knocked on my door and came in, with - you guessed it - a video sent to him from his family in Japan. The commentary was in Japanese so he explained the goings on so I would know what sumo really was and how the ranking system worked.

Chiyonofuji and Hokutoumi were yokozuna at the time and Konishiki was an ozeki, Kirishima too. The first time I saw Chiyonofuji I said to myself now there is the perfect definition of a yokozuna. If I had been asked to close my eyes and imagine a yokozuna, having never seen Chiyonofuji, I would have pictured an individual who looked just like him.

To this day I have still not seen a rikishi who looked the same as Chiyonofuji. His dohyo-iri was a form of 'living art' and I often wanted a photo of him doing this. I would love to own a huge photo of him doing the ceremony in a large frame hanging on my living room wall. If any one knows where I might find a photo or even a good poster of him please let me know!

I watched that tape over and over again! I lost track of how many times but I will keep it as long as I live - alongside the second I received 2 weeks later.

Another knock on my door, this time on my birthday and in walks my friend again accompanied by his wife. Another tape was gift wrapped and presented to me. Upon opening the package I learned the tape in question was of a sumo exhibition put on in Sao Paolo, Brazil.

Footage covered the time from their departure in Japan right through to the end of the exhibition. It was the first time I ever saw a dohyo being built from scratch. They had to get the clay from somewhere in Brazil because the earth in Sao Paolo was not of the type needed to build a dohyo.

One of the many bouts I saw showed Chiyonofuji lifting an opponent straight up - like you would lift a child - and he not only threw the opponent down on the dohyo but the opponent went flying off right after the initial impact. I couldn't believe it. I am surprised I didn't wear out the replay button on my VCR. That is the second tape that will be with me for the rest of my life. So, in going from the 1950's to the present, my interest in this sport has never waned. I don't even want to think how many years that is as I feel old enough already. Anyway – onwards as ever – to the Sept. Basho of 2007. I can't wait!