

Amateur Angles #11

Emanuel Yarbrough speaks to SFM

by Howard Gilbert

A search online for the name Emanuel Yarbrough brings up many, many hits. You will find photos, videos and his sumo record, which shows him to be one of the most successful international amateur sumo athletes ever. He was Sumo World Champion in 1995, runner-up in 1992, 1994 and 1996, and captured bronze in 1993. His was a blitzkrieg that dominated the openweight category at the earliest Sumo World Championships. He is perhaps still the face of amateur sumo globally, even though he has not been seen in international competition for a number of years.

However, in addition to his sumo feats, there is ample online material about his forays into the entertainment industry: movie and TV roles, guest appearances on TV and radio talkshows, and even a stint as an agony aunt of sorts. These show something of the diversity of the man who hails from New Jersey. The former Sumo World Champion has turned his sumo fame into a career as a minor celebrity. He even has an agent!

Now, the biggest man ever in sumo and the record holder as the World's Heaviest Athlete is contemplating a return to the dohyo. He took time recently to respond to some of the questions that I posed via email. This is the first instalment of a two-part "interview" across the next couple of issues. In this month's column, Emanuel (EY) reflects on some of his experiences in the sport.



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HG: What has prompted you to think about returning to sumo?

EY: I am getting back into sumo in conjunction with getting in better physical shape. When my weight was over 800 pounds I was not able to do much, but now with dieting and exercise I have gotten down to below 700 pounds. I figured wrestling one more year would go hand in hand with the program I am on. Sumo was a way for me to pursue my health goals and also provides me with a challenge. My ultimate goal is to pursue the Sumo World Championship one more time.

HG: When was the last time you competed regularly in sumo?

EY: My last competitive time was in a wrestling tournament in Idaho in December 2007. I ended going 4 and 2.

HG: What have you been doing since you stopped competing in sumo?

EY: The last couple of years I was still doing demonstrations in sumo. I travelled to India, the Czech Republic, Poland, Canada and England. I've developed my own reality show and am trying to sell it at moment and I've also pursued a few speaking engagements. I've participated in a couple of non-profit children's events and started living a new lifestyle and begun sumo training again. I had a small part in an upcoming movie with Charlie Murphy which was produced in 2007. I also toured the country in 2006 to educate the nation about obesity.

HG: You had a lot of success in the early Sumo World Championships (medalling five times, I believe), what attributes

made you successful?

EY: My main attributes were size, strength and balance. Being a former football player, judo player and wrestler, I combined the skills of the three sports along with balance. Determination, hard training and [Coach] Yonezuka's guidance and coaching also helped me gain early success.

HG: What were the early Sumo World Championships like? What sort of training or preparation were you given in Japan?

EY: The early championships were mixed: Japanese competitors, who were extremely tough, and the rest of the world a bit behind their skills. As an example, one of the first guys I fought in Japan wound up becoming an ozeki in pro-sumo and another competitor I fought was a 145 pound man from Mali. In the beginning we were treated very well by the Japanese and were exposed to all aspects of sumo, from training in a beya to eating chankonabe. The early training consisted of fighting lower-ranked pro-sumo wrestlers. The experience was invaluable and I learned so much about the sport that I developed a greater appreciation for sumo in general.

HG: How did you train? Could you find opponents who could give you enough competition?

EY: My initial training consisted of a series of hitting and pushing exercises and actual sumo matches. I found people to be very competitive. My opponents were not necessarily big, but they were determined and that is when I learned that size is not the only factor in sumo to win. In Japan, wrestling with the lower-ranked pros provided enough competition

to prepare for the World Championship.

HG: You became something of a celebrity during your sumo career. What was that like?

EY: It was fascinating, I must say. Through sumo I was allowed to travel to many different countries and surprisingly I was well received. Through all my travel I learned about different cultures and different ways of life. It was a remarkable life experience but the most outstanding memory was my trip to New Zealand and experiencing the Maori culture. That is a memory that still stands out today. Sumo also led me to other opportunities such as acting and speaking engagements. It has been a worthwhile and memorable life-trip over the years.

HG: Related to this, you were the poster boy for international amateur sumo. How did that come about? Were you asked to play this role by the International Sumo Federation?

EY: Initially it came about by me being the largest person out there. They never asked, but a couple of years into it they related to my sensei that they would like for me to be involved as long as possible. I was actually honoured that they chose my picture to use and promote.

HG: Have you noticed any changes in the sport?

EY: The change that I've noticed is that the caliber of athletes is better from the other countries and the world has become a little closer from a competitive standpoint. The one major change I've noticed is how matches start. In the beginning we started out like the pros: when each wrestler

which match would commence. Now the rule is that the referee will start the match when the wrestlers are set.

With the caliber of athletes, the sport has gotten much better and if more athletes train in Japan

their skills will get better also.

Having had some insight into the past, the next issue will look at what Emanuel thinks about the future of the sport, and also where he sees himself going. I'd also like to extend the opportunity to you,

the readers, to have some input into the second part of the interview. Send your questions to editor@sumofanmag.com and I'll pick out some of the best questions to ask Emanuel.



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