

Amateur Angles #13

How time flies... some historical reflections (I)

by Howard Gilbert

The preparation of my thirteenth instalment of Amateur Angles (unlucky for some) has coincided with being asked some questions by a French journalist about the history of women's amateur sumo. As such, it struck me that, entering my third year writing about amateur sumo for SFM, that I should take some time to reflect upon the history of amateur sumo. This seems (to me) to be long overdue, especially when you consider that I am trained as a historian.

A further impetus for the way this edition's column has taken shape is that I am casting my eye forward to the coming amateur sumo 'season' in many countries. This is the time when the northern hemisphere has truly shaken off the winter hibernation and is revelling in the warmer weather. Along with this comes greater activity in amateur sumo circles as well: the European nations begin holding regular tournaments and are gearing up to the European Championships, while in Japan the university sumo year is gaining momentum with nationwide invitational tournaments attracting the best athletes to compete.

However, instead of gazing at a crystal ball and seeing who might win certain tournaments, picking who to look out for, or even taking a long range view of the approaching Sumo World Championships in Estonia in October, I decided instead to explain how amateur sumo became so strongly established in Japanese universities (as opposed to community clubs or business organizations like other sports in

Japan) and what then helped the sport to become established in so many other countries. This will necessitate two column's worth of writing, and so this first instalment covers amateur sumo establishing itself in Japanese universities and the next edition will look at the international growth of amateur sumo in different ways during the 20th century.

As professional sumo was developing during the Edo Period (1603-1867), and the rikishi became specialists in their field, local level performances of sumo in festivals and religious celebrations continued as they had done for centuries. One name given to such sumo was shiroto sumo, literally 'amateur' or 'novice' sumo, implying the practitioners were not professionals or specialists. Around the turn of the 20th century, educators and literati who were sumo fans worked to organise the sport outside of ozumo. They established sumo as a form of physical training and as a modern sport while also respecting the rules of the sport that were current in professional sumo. Based around the educated and privileged youths and young men from elite schools, this was originally known as 'gentlemen's sumo' (shinshi sumo) or 'literati sumo' (bunshi sumo).

This movement of establishing 'gentlemen's sumo' took root in the universities of the country, most of which were based in Tokyo or other metropolitan areas. Sumo was advocated by the principal of the Tokyo Higher Normal School, Kano Jigoro, in 1900 as a

necessary part of the physical education curriculum. Kano was the founder of judo and a leader in amateur sports organization in Japan. His efforts at his school meant that from 1901 the college began extracurricular sumo practice. This was followed by more and more schools around the country, and sumo was incorporated into sports days and commemorative ceremonies at these schools as well. Because of its stronghold in the higher education system, this sport became known as student sumo, or gakusei sumo, and this is really the beginning of what we now consider amateur sumo. It also explains why the roots of amateur sumo in Japan are so strong in the university competitions.

However, gakusei sumo was still very much in its infancy. In schools, student-athletes from other sports, such as the more established school sport of baseball, were often co-opted into school sumo teams when needed. The lack of solely sumo-dedicated athletes at this time perhaps indicates the place of sumo as just another of the sports on offer for students within the curriculum. Although took its inspiration from the individual competition apparent in ozumo, at this time the team competition also emerged in gakusei sumo. Given the competitive inter-school rivalries that were prevalent at this time in sports such as rugby, rowing and baseball, the appearance of a team competition in sumo, to sort out the dominant school in any contest, is perhaps not surprising.

The first official student sumo

tournament was held in Osaka in 1909, followed the next year by two further tournaments in Osaka, and similar ones in Tokyo, where there were also Waseda-Keio intercollegiate events. Such tournaments began a flurry of activity within collegiate amateur sumo, necessitating the establishment of organisations to administer the sport. In 1912, the Tokyo Student Sumo Group (Tokyo Gakusei Sumo-dan) was established to run the Tokyo Student Sumo Championships, and this group was instrumental in setting up the first East-West Student Sumo Tournament, held at Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine in November, 1913. In this tournament both halves of the country were represented by a team comprising athletes from the different schools in that region. This was the first combined activity of the two geographical spheres of student sumo in Japan and it helped to integrate the progress and development of amateur sumo throughout the country. By 1919 there was a bona-fide national student sumo tournament (Zenkoku Gakusei Sumo Taikai) in place.

To this point, the efforts in organising student sumo had been in planning and running the student sumo tournaments each year. However, in 1920 the Kanto Gakusei Sumo Renmei (East Japan Student Sumo Federation) was formed, and this gave the sport the beginnings of greater long-range planning. In 1925 the

Kansai Gakusei Sumo Renmei, the Western Japan equivalent was founded. The two bodies, their respective tournaments and administration remain today. In 1934 a national organization (Nihon Gakusei Sumo Renmei) was formed to take an overarching role for student sumo throughout Japan.

Although a national organization for student sumo was created, there was no national body that combined all the different facets of amateur sumo at this time. The sport was controlled separately through the student sumo organizations, local and regional associations (e.g. in districts, towns and cities), and the sumo clubs of businesses and the army and navy. However, despite this lack of organizational integration, there was still interaction across these different spheres of amateur sumo in the shape of regular tournaments. For example, annual invitational tournaments were held from around 1926 until 1940 between representatives of the combined armed forces and the national student sumo body. Furthermore, the most prominent tournament at the time was the sumo competition at the Meiji Shrine Athletic Meet (Meiji Jingu Kyogi Taikai), which began in the autumn of 1924. It was a national tournament that brought together the best exponents from among the student, workplace and adult clubs in the country.

This tournament also arguably

promoted the establishment of regional organizations to oversee amateur sumo in their respective areas. The need to send athletes to this national tournament created structural frameworks which became prefectural sumo organizations. It also promoted the formation of other organizations, not solely based on geography, as can be seen in the establishment of a West Japan workplace sumo organization in 1936. This group administered covered the various sumo activities within different companies and businesses within the region.

Although now the ubiquitous controlling body of amateur sumo in Japan, it was not until September 1946 that the Nihon Sumo Renmei (Japan Sumo Federation) was formed. The interruption and destruction caused by the war enabled this new body to be created when amateur sumo organizations were being re-formed and restarted after the war. Today the NSR oversees all forms of amateur sumo in Japan by being an umbrella organisation that encompasses regional and prefectural sumo federations, as well as the student and corporate sumo federations. Given the long history that sumo has had in Japanese tertiary education, it is not surprising that the Japanese university sumo scene still plays an important part nationally. In the next instalment we shall see how the NSR also helped to spread amateur sumo overseas.