

Sumo Fandom: Tale of the Unexpected?

by Chris Gould

Chris Gould looks at the changing nature of sumo fandom, and uncovers an interesting contrast between ends and means.

Introduction

At first glance, innovations such as the Internet, with their focus on spreading information to the common people, would seem rather a nightmare for organisations which aspire to be secretive. The Japan Sumo Association (NSK), for example, would be expected to despise the prospect of the once harmless, esoteric sumo rumours of smoke-filled izakaya being extended to multi-national online discussion forums. But, of course, the information revolution is forever a tale of the unexpected, of unintended consequences. The greatest strengths of news-diffusion products are often also their greatest weaknesses. And so it has come to be that the NSK, initially with much to fear from the Internet, has actually much to gain.

The more general question that is begged is an intriguing one: are the fans of today, blessed with the trappings of the information technology society, anymore closer to their sumo heroes than the fans of yore? Perhaps surprisingly, the answer appears to be: no.

The insignificant invasion?

On September 23rd 2007, sumo's privacy was supposedly breached as never before. A deluded female spectator, intent on distributing random polemical leaflets unrelated to sumo, skipped through the Kokugikan's team of pony-tailed security dolls and touched the sacred dohyo before a match between Goeido and

Takekaze – in an act which flagrantly disregarded Shinto tradition. Although some broadsheets refused to confirm whether the individual was a woman, and denied that the dohyo had been touched, tabloids treated the incident as a 'world first,' a sorry example of the excesses of liberal sumo fandom. 'Never before had a spectator vaulted the revered barriers between warriors and mere fans,' came the official tabloid line. Access to the stars had supposedly never been greater. In actual fact, little could have been further from the truth.

That very evening, Ryogoku's Hana-no-Mai restaurant coincidentally re-ran footage of a 1960s bout which was gate crashed by a crazed spectator (who was subsequently marched out of the ring by incensed yobidashi). In Japan, TV cameras often innocently reveal what newspapers guiltily fail to report. Of course, TV cameras rarely pick up even half of the tatemae society's hidden gems. One foreign sumo fan claimed to be embarrassed for his fellow countryfolk after observing their early-morning Kokugikan antics. 'I have seen first-time spectators walk up and touch the dohyo before the start of the day,' this fan said, 'and a yobidashi frantically scurries towards them to make them stop.' Tatemae only knows how many similar such incidents have gone unreported over the years, and how time-honoured a tradition unauthorised access to the dohyo actually is.

Hanamichi heartbreak

Sumo fans old enough to remember the Chiyonofuji-era and before will remember a time when

the shitaku-beya hanamichi were lined with well-wishers of all ages – and a particularly large cohort of young children. Several sumo fans in their 30s and 40s have shown me the pictures they took when they were knee-high of 70s and 80s superstars striding out of their dressing rooms. Some even speak fondly of being slapped or pushed out of the way by highly-focused sumotori, perhaps a little annoyed at the pint-sized inconveniences blocking their paths to the ring. Fast forward to 2008 and no such activity can be witnessed. The shitaku-beya, as revealed in the previous issue of SFM, are now strictly off limits to regular fans, on the grounds that the wrestlers' concentration must not be disturbed prior to their dohyo shift. The result is that sumo fans are thus less connected to their heroes now than even 20 years ago, and must rest content with split-second (and often long-distance) sightings of makuuchi stars entering and exiting the Kokugikan side entrance.

Jungyo drift

Once upon a time, jungyo was sumo's principal public relations exercise, allowing sports stars and regular fans to mix more intimately than in any other NSK environment. Countryside fans positioned far away from honbasho venues were most appreciative of the exercise, dreaming of the day they could tell their grandchildren that they saw great yokozuna in the flesh. Those days are long gone. True, jungyo still provides many intimate sumo moments, but much of its spirit has been thrown to the wolves. Many of the fans who attend jungyo – particularly in the Kanto and Kansai areas – are those who

attend honbasho anyway. There is also less jungyo in Japan now than in the past. For example, the NSK used to play to audiences in Sapporo for three consecutive days until as recently as the 1990s. Now it exhibits for just a single day in Sapporo, and even that single day was cancelled in 2000.

Many observers attribute the decrease in Japanese jungyo to a lack of demand alone. However, a large chunk of responsibility must be shared by the suppliers of sumo, who have made no secret of concentrating on overseas jungyo since the 1970s. At present, the NSK seems determined to hold two overseas jungyo a year, thus further limiting the time wrestlers can spend among their Japanese heartlands. When we consider who overseas jungyo are actually for, the relationship between sumotori and ordinary fans appears yet more strained. Outside of Japan, sumo is chiefly sold as a novelty event to the reasonably wealthy who are fascinated by difference and view experience of other cultures as a status symbol. If a recent US article advertising the LA jungyo – which inexplicably suggested that Kotooshu would win promotion to yokozuna if he won a jungyo match – may serve as a bellweather, overseas jungyo are prostituted mainly to people who know nothing about sumo. At the same time, genuinely sumo-literate audiences, such as those in Mongolia, feel cheated upon discovering that their overseas jungyo might actually be for the benefit of wealthy individuals and their families.

In a cyber-filled age when personal touches assume added importance, it remains baffling why 21st-century practice tours have done little to strengthen relations between sumotori and their fervent admirers.

Ticketing travails

When sumo was plagued by falling

popularity in the 1930s, not least during the onset of the Great Depression, several commentators became convinced that the illiberal nature of sumo fandom was to blame. Criticisms were twofold: too many tickets prices were fixed with the wealthy in mind, and too many tickets were available via special contacts only. During the Depression, the numbers of kanemochi ('wealthy persons') willing to watch sumo plummeted, leaving hoards of premium seats unsold each basho. However, as those businessmen who did attend far preferred to cosy up to geisha rather than common folk, ticket prices for unsold seats remained un-cut.

By the mid-1930s, sumo dramatically regained its popularity and calls for a liberalisation of seating policies subsided, only to return again in the late 1950s. Back then, a Japanese Diet Investigation into seat distribution found that the chaya 'teahouses' affiliated to sumo were commanding an unfair monopoly over tamari and masu-seki sales. Worse still, many such chaya were affiliated to the wife of the NSK Chairman Dewanoumi (who tried to disembowel himself after the public exposure of this fact). The conclusions of the Diet Investigation supposedly marked an historic turning point in NSK ticket distribution. From henceforth, at least according to new NSK Chairman Tokitsukaze, decent seats would be opened up to the masses as never before.

Alas, 50 years on, this Brave New World of Ticketing has yet to be realised. The chaya and senior NSK figures still have immense control over the allocation of prize tournament seats. The likelihood of obtaining a prize ticket increases exponentially for a person with connections to a chaya-san. Few, if any such well-connected people, would have joined the rank-and-filers at 11pm on Thursday 7th August for a

camping party outside the Kokugikan, and thus wait nine hours for the few-dozen numbered tickets which entitle ordinary fans to make advanced bookings for coveted Aki Basho seats. Even this token gesture to the masses has been subverted by the elite. One seasoned member of the all-night queue informed SFM that the same faces could be seen at the very front every year, often poking out of the tents that the NSK website specifically advised them not to bring. Indeed, the NSK website's ticketing information is one of the most bizarre facades ever erected. The democratic appearance of detailed ticket information is laughably undermined by the fact that Internet bookings are still forbidden (as is the posting of tickets to addresses outside of Japan). Were it not for the long-term dip in sumo's appeal and the consequent glut of empty weekday seats, obtaining decent sumo tickets would be equally as hard in the 21st century as in the mid-20th.

The blogosphere bunker?

In the early-21st century, sumo fans have never had so much information about their heroes' daily lives. If Kotoshogiku goes fishing or shopping for cakes, his blog provides a commentary and relevant photos to the world. Even the succession rights to Azumazeki Stable were nonchalantly leaked via the blog of Nishikido Oyakata, who had dined and discussed the matter with Azumazeki (his former stablemate) some nights before. Sometimes, even wrestlers' families jump in on the act, with – for example – Kitazakura's wife frequently staying up until the small hours to write a 'zakura' family blog. Several fans are understandably convinced that they have never felt cosier with their sumotori idols. In theory, never has the sumo association struggled so much to maintain the image of sumotori as special beings, aloof from normality,

uniquely focused on developing their supreme strength and taking over from the samurai as protectors of the nation.

Yet in practice, even in the blogosphere, sumo's deepest secrets remain safely intact. Blogs may reveal much more about sumotori as people, but evidently fail to reveal much more about the realities of sumo life. It is ironic, indeed, that the blog of Toyonoshima, widely regarded as one of the best and most informative, emanates from the stable which was accused of chronic 'cover-ups' in 2007. In fact, the Tokitsukaze scandal led to a blanket reduction in wrestler blogging activity last summer – thus raising serious questions about a sumotori's freedom to blog. Around the same time, another respected blog – that of Miyabiyama – portrayed his stable as a picture of fun and laughter... at exactly the time that its management was being criticised for excessively heavy handling of

novices. It seems that by filling net space with trivia, sumotori blogs have diverted fans' attentions from more serious underlying sumo issues. The general shock which greeted the death of Tokitaizan certainly indicated that sumo fans of the blogosphere were no more enlightened to sumo's inner workings as were their counterparts of previous generations.

Conclusion

In theory, the modern-day sumo fan experiences unparalleled levels of liberation when it comes to courting his or her heroes. Every wrestler's stats and heya address can be retrieved at the push of a mere button. Unique insights into the personal lives of sumo stars and coaches can be pored over in the same way thanks to the expanding sumo blogosphere. But yet, as cyber contact between fans and sumotori becomes evermore intimate, it is doubtful if the same can be said for personal contact.

The dressing-room hanamichi are now off-limits. Less jungyo are taking place in the Japanese heartlands. Some heya, most notably Takasago, continue to ban regular spectators from watching asa-geiko. In a world where human contact is worryingly diminishing in importance, it is highly possible that most fans rest content with treating sumotori like Internet friends. If so, then there is nothing to prevent sporting authorities from further restricting access to their stars in the future, safe in the knowledge that such actions will not attract an uproar. The Internet is, unfortunately, an excellent tool for making its users think that they have knowledge. The question is: what sort of knowledge? In sumo's case, while today's fans may know much more than their predecessors about Kotoshogiku's love of cakes and Nishikido Oyakata's favourite restaurants, more serious issues like the mistreatment of young novices somehow still slip under the radar.