

Amateur Angles #16

The World Games

by Howard Gilbert

A recent email to its continental sumo unions from the International Sumo Federation (IFS) has provided details regarding the sumo competition at the 2009 World Games in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. The event in mid-July caught my attention after I attended the sumo event at the last World Games four years ago in Germany. So, what is the World Games, and what role has sumo played in it?

With amateur sumo being provisionally recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the IFS has subsequently become a member of the International World Games Association. Founded in 1980, the primary function of the IWGA is the administration of the World Games, a quadrennial event that draws a number of provisionally recognised sports together. On the whole the World Games is a sporting mega-event in the same vein as the Olympic Games, albeit less well-known. The World Games seeks to return a financial profit if possible, but ultimately its main aim is to expose its member sports. It is situated within the broader sphere of the Olympic Movement, and perhaps rightly has been called the "Other Olympics."ⁱ

The World Games began in 1981 and its philosophy avoided the commercialism and politics that had started to influence the Olympics. The 1980 Moscow Olympics had been disrupted by the boycott of many Western countries in protest at the invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union. Prior to this there

had been a boycott by African countries of the 1976 Montreal Olympics over continued sporting ties with South Africa by some countries. Montreal was also notable for heavy costs incurred by taxpayers and government in building the venues and hosting the Olympics. Rather than being a high-budget extravaganza in expensive new stadia and full of competitive nationalism, the World Games was to be more practical and austere in appearance.

Unlike Olympic host cities which are usually expected to build new facilities for their Games, the host of the World Games was not required to expand the available facilities or infrastructure. Furthermore, Sport, rather than nationalism, was to be the main focus. Athletes paraded in as representatives of their sport, not behind the flag of their nation; victory was not greeted with national anthems and national flags raised high.

However, this philosophy has changed in recent years as the World Games has become entrenched in the broader Olympic Movement. A Memorandum of Understanding signed in October 2000 recognised the importance of the World Games within the Olympic Movement, essentially as a multi-sport event that is a forum for provisionally recognised sports to compete under the Olympic banner. Along with this has come IWGA recognition of 'the importance for athletes and officials in all sports to participate as a national multi-sport delegation at the World Games'ⁱⁱ

and the return of national representation, anthems and flags. From the IOC point of view, the World Games 'provides participating athletes with the opportunity to join with their countrymen and countrywomen from other sports, in the Olympic spirit, and compete as part of a national team at the highest level.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Amateur sumo has used the World Games to reach new audiences and attempt to show that it can foot it with other sports striving for the same goal: Olympic Games inclusion. As such, the IFS is keen to put on a show every four years to appeal to the public in each host city and country, and to show that it is an efficient and well-managed sport with an interesting product.

In 2001, the World Games was hosted by Akita in northern Japan. This was the first World Games after the IOC had recognised amateur sumo (in 1998) and, although the IFS only became a full member of the IWGA in 2002, amateur sumo was included as a demonstration sport. Having a 'home' crowd helped ease the sport into this new format and, by all accounts, the sumo tournament in Akita was excellent with many good matches.

Fourteen teams from across the world were represented in the men's competition: Chinese Taipei, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Thailand and Uzbekistan from Asia; Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany and Russia from Europe; Brazil, Paraguay, United States and Tonga represented the other

corners of the globe. The men competed in all four weight classes and there was a three-man team contest. In the women's competition, five national teams – Estonia, Germany, Japan, Russia and Thailand – were joined by an Akita invitational team. Due to the lack of competitors the women only had two weight divisions (under and over 80kg) and a team competition.

The competitors included most of the leading exponents of amateur sumo at the time. In particular, there were strong teams from Japan and Germany which included past Sumo World Champions or those that would win world titles only months later in Aomori: Chohei Kimura, Takahisa Osanai, Satomi Ishigaya and Rie Tsuihiji from Japan; Jörg Brümmer, Torsten Scheibler, Peer Schmidt-Düwiger and Sandra Köppen from Germany. However, perhaps the most notable athlete was a Mongolian middleweight who won bronze in Akita. Altangadas Khuchitbaatar was a 21-year-old studying at Tokyo Agricultural University who would enter ozumo only a year later as Tokitenku.

Four years afterwards in Duisburg, Germany, amateur sumo was included as an official sport in the World Games for the first time. It was an opportunity for the IFS to promote sumo to a largely novice audience in a city that was embracing all manner of new and unheard of sports. In the estimation of the IFS, 'the sumo event in Duisburg was a great success.'^{iv} However, the format had changed dramatically since Akita. In Germany, 48 competitors took part, with eight in each weight division from lightweight to heavyweight. With such select numbers, the IFS had decided that each division would be fought in a round-robin format, with the top four athletes

progressing to knock-out semi finals. Unfortunately, that meant the competitions dragged on and many of the heavier athletes were exhausted by the end of the group stage. There were also several one-sided matches as the weaker opponents were not knocked out until they had fought all their matches. On the second day, all athletes competed in a knockout format to determine the open division. This was an easier-to-follow affair, but signalled a major departure for an IFS-run competition, where usually an athlete is only able to compete in one division.

Furthermore, the composition of the athletes was greatly changed from four years before. The eight athletes in each weight division were to be one representative each from Europe, North America, South America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. In addition, Russia (as a particularly strong sumo nation) and the host nation, Germany, were given the remaining two spots. This was designed, I believe, to symbolize sumo's status as a global sport and to show it belonged in the World Games.

What this meant, however, was that the athletes assembled were not solely the world's best eight in each division. Additionally, not every continent could field an athlete in each division. Oceania had no female athletes competing at the time so the IFS appointed Japanese, Bulgarian and Russian athletes respectively to take these places. However, there were still only seven athletes in both the women's lightweight and the women's middleweight competitions because an athlete did not make weight in each. Thus the athletes on show came from countries as diverse as Japan, the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Mauritius, South Africa, the United States, Cuba, Poland, Ukraine, Brazil and

Paraguay.

So what of the event in Taiwan, next year? Well, the IFS agreed at its last Congress in Rakvere to double the size of the World Games sumo competition for 2009. Each continent will select two athletes for men's and women's lightweight, middleweight and heavyweight competitions. The host country will have a representative in each weight class, and the IFS will boost the numbers with its recommendations of three athletes per division (and presumably more if any of the continents cannot provide two athletes for any division).

Each weight division will therefore have 16 competitors, based upon a knockout format with double repechage as is used for the Sumo World Championships. The open division competitions on the second day will see all 48 men and 48 women competing for the prizes. The athletes are to be selected by each continent based on the results of the last continental championships and the recent Sumo World Championships before the February nomination deadline. The IFS will nominate its selections after the continents have decided, based on the results at past Sumo World Championships.

The proposed format and the doubling of the numbers of athletes involved will have interesting results for the competition. For starters it will see more of the world's best athletes competing, while also satisfying the continental representative aspect that the IFS has chosen for the World Games. By choosing a knockout format there will also be fewer one-sided matches, and fewer matches in total. This should mean that the entire package is snappier and

more tightly run, thus improving spectator engagement and potentially media coverage of the matches. Let's hope the athletes rise to the occasion!

Although it comes only once every

four years, the World Games is becoming an important exercise for the IFS to take its place amongst other international sports. It provides for the athletes something of an air of what the Olympic Games might be like, and

it gives sumo an opportunity to showcase its wares to new audiences. This might be as close as sumo gets to the Olympics in the foreseeable future.

ⁱ Ogasawara Naoki, "Akita Embraces The 'Other Olympics'", n.d., available at

<http://www.worldgames-iwga.org/vsite/vcontent/page/custom/0.8510.1044-164435-181652-30398-123205-custom-item.00.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.worldgames-iwga.org/vsite/vcontent/page/custom/0.8510.1044-163570-180785-20096-73890-custom-item.00.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.worldgames-iwga.org/vsite/vcontent/page/custom/0.8510.1044-114776-116043-12239-35950-custom-item.00.html>

^{iv} Issue 6 of Sumo Fan Magazine, available at http://www.sumofanmag.com/content/Issue_6/Amateur.htm