



Europe, The New Wild West



by Eduardo de Paz

In the 18th century there was a piece of land next to the Pacific in the northern part of the new continent, in which only the natives were living, and the immigrants and conquerors from the old Europe thought twice about entering due to the 'dangers' they imagined within.

In the beginning, the Spaniards entered the area and slowly began to colonize the land, followed by the former British colonists then independent under the banner of the bars and stars (not many stars yet on their new flag).

Of course, today everybody knows today that cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver and Oklahoma are highly industrialized centers full of all life's mod-cons, but only two centuries ago this whole area of the current United States was called the Far West, in movies the Wild West – an abandoned and unexplored zone.

In the world of professional sumo, Europe has become the new Wild West, an area far from the capital of the sumo world, that, it seems, those in power are not too interested in visiting because, perhaps in part, it is unknown and unexplored.

As such, European sumo fans are really being abused by the folk who guide Japanese Ozumo. First of all, and for reasons I personally have no knowledge of but it is certainly connected to economic issues, Japanese television doesn't broadcast in open form in Europe. Instead, broadcasts are relayed through a TV channel called TV Japan which is rather costly given that the main reason for most

tuning in will be to view just 15 days of action every two months – and then for just over 2 hours a day. Installing a satellite dish, buying a special decoder and paying an abusive monthly fee does not seem the best solution increase the numbers of those watching sumo in this manner.

There are some other countries that are fortunate enough to receive a free signal from NHK and able to enjoy it without great economic outlay, but that possibility doesn't seem to have been offered to the residents of the Far West – of Europe.

Luckily Europeans had a form of access and were able to watch the sumo bouts on the Eurosport channel (summaries of about 15 minutes a day each honbashi but often delayed until two months following senshuraku), as late and as little as it was.

This ceased, however, in December 2007, when Eurosport said that the economic demands from Japan for contract renewal were just too high and so, despite sumo having an audience all over Europe, they had no choice but to pull the plug and stop broadcasting these programs.

Once again the people of the Far West suffered at the hands of the people guiding sumo. Thousands and thousands of fans were then unable to follow the development of the great fighters, some of them Europeans who, curiously, had actually learned of sumo thanks to the transmissions of Eurosport. Europeans could now enjoy the exploits of a compatriots; Bulgarian Kotooshu for example as the first European ever to

secure an Emperor's Cup victory.

There was a glimmer of hope, because finally the Japanese seemed to have thought about the old Europe while looking beyond their borders, and after many years with one eye on Asia, and the other eye on the US, they announced an exhibition tournament in London set for October 2009. Finally finally the Europeans were going to have the opportunity to see some of their idols, in the flesh, in one of the most important cities of the world.

But, once again, the house of cards tumbled down and in December, 2008 it was announced that the tournament would not go ahead because, as they said, the international financial crisis made it economically impossible to move the sumo caravan from Japan to the Far West, so, once more, these people living in these remote areas will have to wait to watch sumo live.

I am not going to criticize any economic issue regarding these decisions (or, perhaps inaction), but I think that NHK and the leaders of the NSK should start to think that in this Europe, in this Wild West so recently abused by those who guide the world of sumo, thousands of sumo fans live and they don't deserve to be treated as they are now. It is curious that sumo wants to be an Olympic sport yet, at the same time, it is refused a perfect promotion opportunity in a continent home to more than 750 million people.

If somebody goes to the Kokugikan one morning to watch the bouts

during a honbasho, he/she will realize that many viewers in the early hours of the day are foreigners, many of them coming from, you guessed it – far away Europe. It's easy to hear some groups of people talking in languages as diverse as English, Spanish, French, German, Italian... even in some of the Slavic languages. All these people visit the Kokugikan having been attracted by the beauty of sumo and the chance to see one of the most traditional parts of ancient Japan up close. And of course, if ask each one of those foreigners where had they heard about sumo, mostly certainly would answer you 'by way of Eurosport transmissions.'

Are the NSK / NHK combination really not interested in the number of Europeans who come to watch the great sumo battles? Don't they realise they are here in Japan (and

paying for tickets) tournament after tournament? In these times of financial crisis, would it not be more logical to open up potential markets of spectators instead of closing them as they have done in Europe? Moreover, I would even suggest to the NSK / NHK that the idea should not be to secure new agreements to broadcast summaries of just 15 minutes per day of competition, but would be even more interesting to offer to Eurosport the chance to broadcast live the two hour of makunouchi, with all the rituals before the fight, with the dohyo-iri, the awarding of the trophy ceremonies...

Have no doubt that interest in the world of sumo will be even higher among Europeans and, indeed, the entire Kokugikan and Ryogoku district could be a tourist route to add to potential future trips to Japan that everyone interested in this sport wants to make.

I do not know if someone with decision making power will read these comments, and, even if they do whether they will really care or not, but I dare to say that nowadays, to close the door to potential new customers is one of the worst mistakes a company can make.

Perhaps when someone realizes the error of sumo's ways it will be too late to remedy. It will be wonderful if someone, somewhere, by way of these comments will be made aware of this situation as it stands now – now that they still have time to correct the mistakes they have made.

If they don't, it is possible that in future years the Wild West of Europe will no longer be the old Europe, but rather an area sometimes incomprehensible to things Japan and Japanese.