

Amateur Angles “Four More Years!”

by Howard Gilbert

In this edition, the Amateur Angles column was going to feature a talk with Jesse Moerkerk, a Dutch friend of mine with a background in amateur sumo. He has competed internationally, spent a period living in the sumo club at Nihon University whilst conducting research for his graduation project, and has recently begun a sumo blog in Dutch. I'll save that insight for a future issue because I want to address a couple of recent developments and tie up loose ends from previous columns.

Back in June, I mentioned that this year's Sumo World Championships had been cancelled due to the influenza A (H1N1) outbreak. In late May, when this decision was communicated to the worldwide amateur sumo community, Japan was coming to terms with outbreaks of this strain of influenza (colloquially called “swine flu” in English). There had also been a number of cases in Mexico and North America, as well as outbreaks in New Zealand and Australia. Part of the reasoning behind the IFS's decision to cancel the tournament in Egypt was the fear that attendees might contract the disease during their air travel to the event. Another fear was the prospect of the disease intensifying during the change to autumn in the Northern Hemisphere.

In hindsight, the IFS may have made a prudent move to cancel this year's Sumo World Championships. Certainly, the powers that be in the organization

would have been concerned about the steps they would have had to take to ensure the participants' well-being. This would have been logistically difficult, and could have cost a lot of money. It would also have been difficult for the participants to have travelled to the event safely, because many insurance companies are now excluding pandemics from the terms of cover for travel insurance.

It seems strange, then, that a small Japanese team participated at the Sumo World Cup, hosted in Poland recently. Organised as a stop-gap measure to compensate for the cancelled Sumo World Championships, the tournament was held on the weekend scheduled for the SWC. As might be expected, those that took part came predominantly from Eastern Europe, but a team of eight Japanese athletes were also present. Although this was a nondescript team, lacking the current prominent names in Japanese amateur sumo, how the Nihon Sumo Renmei (the major players of whom are part of the International Sumo Federation) was able to justify this trip precisely when travel halfway around the globe was seen to be too risky for many nations remains unexplained. This also twists the knife for some European nations who offered to step in to host the Sumo World Championships when it was first cancelled. They were told that the whole process of moving athletes around was too risky for all concerned.

Given such anomalies, there remain suspicions that the

cancellation of the SWC was motivated by issues with the organization or financial viability of the tournament in Egypt. Without knowing more about the discussions within the IFS halls of power or between the Egyptian organizers and IFS officials, we are left to speculate that the swine flu pandemic may have proved a convenient smokescreen to avoid any potential difficulties identified with hosting the tournament in Egypt. Subsequent handling of any request by the Egyptian federation to host the event again may provide the answers.

* * *

“Four more years!” Australian Wallabies captain George Gregan uttered these words in the final minutes of a semi-final at the 2003 Rugby World Cup when it was apparent that his team would beat the New Zealand All Blacks. His words reinforced the fact that the All Blacks were consigned to another period of dwelling on what might have been and waiting for their next opportunity to win the World Cup.

A similar thought might be running through the amateur sumo community recently with the decision of the International Olympic Committee to award the 2016 Olympics to Rio de Janeiro and to admit golf and rugby sevens to the Olympic programme from that year. Sumo remains in much the same position as it has been since being provisionally recognized by the IOC in 1998: on the shelf, waiting to be picked for the Olympics but behind many other contending sports with

greater and stronger claims.

As I have written before, the International Sumo Federation is pinning its hopes of inclusion into the Olympic programme on a successful bid by a Japanese city to host a future Olympics. However, as I have already explained, this is an erroneous assumption because the host city and the sports included in each Games no longer have a connection, and have not done so since the abolition of demonstration sports over a decade ago. Baseball and softball did not lose their place because London won the right to host the 2012 Olympics. Instead, it was a decision by the assembled members of the IOC Congress. Likewise, Rio being host did not influence the choice of golf and rugby sevens as part of the line-up. Indeed, if this were the case, amateur sumo would have had a stronger claim for inclusion in Brazil. It might actually have been a nice setting for amateur sumo to make its Olympic debut in a country with a large Japanese diaspora.

However, we are kidding ourselves if we think that sumo is close to acquiring Olympic status. There are almost 30 sports that sit in the same position as amateur sumo, including many which are legitimate contenders to being part of the Olympic Games. So what should amateur sumo do until it is an Olympic sport, or to heighten its chances of becoming one?

If golf and rugby sevens stand as examples, then certainly a strong worldwide following (in the case of golf) and an entertaining package are important. Sumo potentially

has a strong claim, particularly given that it is easy to understand and could draw a good crowd. It probably could not, or need not, alter itself to appeal to a wider audience. The International Rugby Board specifically put rugby sevens forward because it is faster, simpler and more entertaining than the traditional 15-a-side form of the game. Cricket has talked of pushing for Olympic inclusion with its short, sharp Twenty-20 version. Sumo is already fast-paced and seemingly made for TV (as the excellent camerawork and coverage at the recent World Games showed).

It seems then that the IFS must work on growing the participant base of amateur sumo and develop the sport's infrastructure. At the moment, sumo seems years away from having the internal robustness and international strength to justify being included in the Olympics. A growth in numbers and stronger organizational practices and procedures, mirroring those in other sports, are both essential for realising the "Olympic Dream".

So what tangible results can amateur sumo aim for? The 2009 World Games showed sumo can sit comfortably alongside the other sports that are provisionally IOC-recognized, at least in terms of its presence at that particular event. I would like to see the IFS and the continental sumo unions work together to get amateur sumo into other crowd-drawing events to boost its popularity. I could see the potential of the IFS trying to get amateur sumo into the Asian Games, for example. This would be making use of Japanese and

Mongolian interest in the sport, not to mention comparatively strong sumo federations in Taiwan, Thailand and Hong Kong. It would also see the introduction to this event of a sport with its roots in Japan, and with similar styles in neighbouring countries. A move of this sort would seem practical and logical, and might be achieved with little difficulty. I could also see something similar being tried with the South Pacific Games, where the cultural connection would be replaced by having the sport appeal to the larger frames of many Polynesian peoples.

The IFS originally sought IOC recognition in the hope that becoming part of the Olympic Games could help promote sumo to a higher level of global recognition and introduce the sport to new audiences. However, the Olympics now aims to be representative of the major sports worldwide, albeit with some allowances made for 'heritage' Olympic sports. Inclusion in the two events that I have suggested above would give significant boosts to two areas that are currently starved of sufficient tournaments for its amateur sumo athletes. Couple this with an already growing interest in sumo in Europe and the potential television exposure that the United States could offer, and the future would suddenly look much rosier for amateur sumo. Recognition would be a lot greater, and the sport could justifiably aim for the Olympic Games. That's my two cents' worth, and I urge others who cherish this fine sport to consider other creative options for the future.