

Amateur Angles #22

Dutch sumo blogger: Jesse Moerkerk

by Howard Gilbert

I first met Jesse Moerkerk nearly 5 years ago in Rotterdam, where I had gone to observe the Netherlands sumo team training as part of my research into amateur sumo groups outside of Japan. At the time, he was a 24 year old university student who would drive down twice a week from Haarlem for national team training.

As a judoka since five years of age, Jesse had been junior national champion, the number one ranked junior heavyweight in the Netherlands, and a top ranking senior heavyweight. However, seeing that he had perhaps reached his peak in judo, and looking to challenge himself in a different way, Jesse began sumo in 2003 after an approach from Stephen Gadd, the Dutch national coach.

I had the opportunity to interview Jesse for my research in July 2005, and afterwards we had a long chat about amateur sumo as a research topic. Jesse wanted to use his experiences as an amateur sumo athlete, a graduate student, and having spent short periods of time in Japan training at Nihon University (Nichidai) to launch a research study based around amateur sumo. The resulting study was based on a period of living in the Nichidai sumo club premises for three months across the Japanese winter of 2006.

There he joined in the daily practices and routines of the club and experienced first hand probably the closest thing to a sumo-beya that amateur sumo

has to offer.

Five years on, Jesse has now graduated, is working, and no longer competes in amateur sumo. However, he is using his experience as a sumo athlete, and the time spent at Nichidai, as the basis for a Dutch language sumo blog that he began a year ago: www.sumoblog.nl.

I recently “interviewed” him in very different circumstances, via email, to discuss his blog and his interactions with sumo today.

HG: What is your vision for the blog? How much time do you devote to your blog, and is it a hobby or more serious than that?

JM: *I started the blog just as a hobby. I noticed I am one of the sole aficionados of Sumo in the Netherlands and I felt the need to share my passion and knowledge. Sumo is very unknown and sometimes misunderstood. My second reason is my Masters thesis I wrote at the Free University in Amsterdam on the social hierarchies in sumo. And since I have no illusions of somebody reading it in the library of the University, I decided to put it on the blog in readable parts. The blog is mostly meant to inform the Dutch people of the wonderful sport of sumo. I try to cover the basics, as well as an in-depth look into the sport.*

I try to blog every other day, and during a Basho I write an article every day.

HG: What do you like to write

about? Is there a particular focus on anything and/or anyone?

JM: *I like writing about sumo's history... I already covered that in my thesis, and the blogs I extract from that... My favorite subject must be the technical analysis of sumo-matches. From my background as a competitive wrestler I can see turning points in a match and maybe point out mistakes made during a match. So the 15 tournament-days during a Basho is my favorite time to write.*

HG: Do you regularly watch the basho live streaming or by satellite/cable TV? Or do you rely on matches loaded to youtube or elsewhere? Where do you get the photos from?

JM: *I try to watch as many fights as I can live on the stream, so I can see the interesting fights to write about. Then I try to collect them from the internet, so I can analyse them on the blog. I also read online comments, but not as a way to get opinions, more to see if I missed something. I mostly use pictures from [Martina Lunau](http://MartinaLunau.nl).*

HG: You said earlier that one of the aims of your blog was to get Dutch people interested in sumo. What are your thoughts on the visit last year by Sadogatake-beya to put on an exhibition in Holland?

JM: *I think the visit was great. They put up good show and demonstration. Sadly it was hard to get in and not promoted well. Also the coverage in the press was*

(gladly not as bad as it used to be) a bit on the entertaining side of the whole thing. Not too much about the sport in a serious way, even though they had a very interesting link with 400 years of commerce between Japan and Holland. It was also a shame not many Dutch people got into the demo. Most of the spectators were Japanese people living in Holland.

HG: For your research, you spent time living in the Nichidai sumo club; do you pay particular attention to any of their guys who are now pro?

JM: *I really try to follow the careers of all the guys I spent rooming with. For several reasons I bunked with a lot of them and it is very nice to see them performing well. It is also a fact the group that was training at the time was a very successful class. Guys like Yamamotoyama, Ichihara, Sakaizawa, Daishoumi, Takateru, Fukao, Minami and Kamei were my daily training partners. And when I was there, I shared a room with another sole*

Gaijin, a young Georgian guy who now goes by the name of Tochinoshin. A lot of stong competitors to follow.

HG: What was it like living in the sumo club with them? How did it improve your sumo?

JM: *It was quite bizarre, since living in the Nichidai house is socially built up in a way I didn't know from Holland. I had specific sumo practice everyday and it really improved my sumo. I practiced a really European style, but I soon discovered that the traditional way is more effective. Sadly, this is also very hard to learn and keep in practice, so it was a tough time.*

HG: Why did you stop competing? Any plans to start again competitively?

JM: *I stopped competing because I was challenged by the common reasons; time and career. I had to put in a lot of effort for a few competitions a year. And because the training-venue was a fair drive away, all things added up to*

the decision to quit. I would like to do recreational sumo, but that is hardly possible in Holland, since serious competition is only to be found with the National Team and their trainings.

HG: Lastly, where to from here?

JM: *Hard one to answer. The page views are not stunning, and I fear this won't get any better in the near future. I have a small hardcore group of readers and the rest of the visitors come through Google. But I like writing on sumo, so I will continue no matter what, and maybe I'll switch to English one day.*

I'd like to thank Jesse for taking the time to answer my questions, and would recommend that you peruse the sumo blog. Even if your Dutch is non-existent, as mine it, it is easy to get around the language barrier with the help of Google translate. Let's hope that Jesse's blog captures the hearts and minds of an as-yet-unconverted group of new fans.

