

Amateur Angles #23

A picture paints a thousand words

by Howard Gilbert

Amateur sumo will be one of the events included in the SportAccord Combat Games in Beijing at the end of August. This tournament will provide sumo with another opportunity to be part of a multidisciplinary sports event, much as happened at last year's World Games.

In 2009, the emphasis was to place amateur sumo among the pantheon of sports recognized by the International Olympic Committee. In 2010, however, the sport will line up alongside other martial arts and contact sports such as wushu, taekwondo, sambo and Muay Thai.

The field for the sumo competition is 80 athletes, with only one representative guaranteed from each continent in each weight class (and one for host country China). The remainder of the field is hand-picked by the IFS according to form in recent Sumo World Championships and the World Games. There will be 12 competitors in each of the men's and women's lightweight and middleweight divisions, 16 in the heavyweight division, and all athletes are expected to compete in the openweight competition.

Given the selection criteria, the field is likely to be slightly stronger than at the World Games, and the event will no doubt provide a new audience for amateur sumo. It will also, hopefully, give further kudos to the sport as requiring similar qualities of speed, balance and skill as the other sports on display.

Placing sumo amongst these other sports (as an event like the World Games also did), provides not only

a chance to promote the sport but also one for amateur sumo and the IFS to be judged in relation to the other sports on show, some of which are Olympic and others of which are competing with amateur sumo to be promoted to the Olympic programme in the future. Already, amateur sumo is lacking in its ability to showcase the sport globally via the internet.

The Combat Games website www.beijing2010.org does amateur sumo a disservice by putting on a lot of information about professional sumo and the lifestyle of rikishi. It also doesn't help that they write about the gender controversy in (professional) sumo, which tends to contradict the fact that there will be women's divisions on show in Beijing. Nevertheless, the information given by the IFS in the 'bio' of the sport is clearly misguided, if not downright false. For example, they state:

"IFS regularly update our information / championships calendars (national member events) through our website www.AmateurSumo.com. But currently, our website is under renovation. Will advise once ready."

This could not be further from the truth. The IFS website has for so long been a static and outdated front piece for amateur sumo that it is embarrassing. The original site was constructed and maintained by a European athlete/administrator, who did a wonderful job of posting results, photographs and videos to the site. Unfortunately, the IFS has not had the ability or the vision to keep

this site going. There have been very minor, piecemeal additions to the information on the website, most usually by way of an announcement at the bottom of the frontpage. There has been minor updating of links, but most of the information seems to have stagnated around 2001 or 2002. When I first went looking for information on amateur sumo in 2003 for my research, I found the website and it provided some use in establishing contacts and communicating with the IFS. Unfortunately it has, except for the results of the Sumo World Championships and a piece on drug control in the sport, become increasingly anachronistic to the sport's development.

While a website is now the norm for almost any business or organisation that wants to promote itself, the type of space-holding website that does not remain regularly updated is passé. In fact, it even becomes detrimental to the organisation because of what it says about their ability to remain current, to provide information and because of the message it sends in terms of its values and the values it places on its customers/members/those who wish to access it. The lack of commitment to keep the IFS website regularly updated demonstrates that there has been no time, effort or skill put towards this task. Furthermore, it belies a lack of planning to future-proof the sport and to grow interest virtually, as the first step to growing the sport in reality.

Yes, it will take some time, money and ability to create a serviceable website. It will also require

ongoing maintenance and at least a bi-lingual format. Where these resources will come from is the question. However, if the IFS is serious about amateur sumo

staking a claim as a future Olympic sport, or even to be considered seriously alongside the other sports on display in the Combat Games, it needs to do more than

give a good performance in the gymnasium. It needs to think of the marketing of the sport and grapple with the hearts and minds of the internet generation.