

Sumo's foreigner debate takes another twist

by Chris Gould

Are foreigners good or bad for sumo? This is the essential question that the managers of Japan's national sport must answer – but seem forever unable to make up their minds. True, the last couple of months have done much to confuse them. March, of course, saw one of the best adverts possible for foreign participation – Baruto's magnificent 14-1 and a well-deserved promotion to ozeki. February, however, saw the acrimonious retirement of problem Mongol Asashoryu, a painful reminder of the tricky situations which arise when foreigners do not accept Japanese sumo values.

In February, the Japan Sumo Association (JSA) created another stir in international waters with its latest announcement on the F-word. Since the summer of 2005, the sumo association has operated a policy of one foreign-born rikishi per stable. Stables with more than one rikishi at the time of the announcement were exempt from the rule, but could not take on any more foreigners until all their existing foreigners retired – or took Japanese citizenship. In recent times, a growing number of wrestlers have chosen the latter option, thereby freeing up extra space for foreigners in their stables. The result was the JSA proclamation of February 2010: that sumotori adopting Japanese citizenship would still be classed as foreigners under the one-foreigner-per-stable rule. One oyakata justified the ruling in the plainest of terms: 'If we don't do this, the sport will be flooded with foreigners.'

Taken politically, such a comment is inevitably classed as 'racist,' and



Yokozuna Asashoryu

many foreign sumo fans sought to highlight this point. But political dialogue and sporting dialogue are parallel universes. The sumo association's rhetoric is no different to that used by FIFA, world football's governing body, which has long introduced various restrictions on foreigner participation – especially in European Cup competitions. Talk of 'a minimum number of home grown players in every team' is common parlance in football circles. So why should sumo be any different?

If anything, sumo has infinitely more justification than football to express concerns about numbers of foreign participants. As no

government in Europe recognises football as its national sport, footballing nations have no political obligation to develop home grown talent. (Emotional and moral obligation is another matter). But Japan's government officially classifies sumo as its national sport. The JSA is affiliated to the Department of Education, and thus receives Japanese taxpayers' money. If a lack of Japanese talent is being produced in the sumo ranks, taxpayers have every reason to question sumo's use of their money.

No-one denies that sumo's relationship with foreigners is a lot better than it was. Rikidozan, a popular wrestler of the 1940s and later an All-Japan pro-wrestling legend, had to hide his Korean heritage and possession in a tiny room of his Japanese apartment, fearful as he was of discrimination. Even as recently as the 1990s, the JSA banned foreigners from joining sumo completely, only to reverse this decision in 1998 when the crowd-pulling potential of Akebono and Musashimaru became indisputable. However, the common theme running through every debate on foreigners in sumo is chronic lack of focus on the all-important question: are they good for the sport?

In 2010, the answer is overwhelmingly: yes. The main argument for immigration in developed countries is that immigrants fill the jobs that the home-grown population simply won't do. Sumo is one such job. The common refrain from youngsters is: why subject ourselves to physical torture when we can have a non-physically



Shin-ozeki Baruto

demanding office job and more secure long-term salary prospects? On more than one occasion since 2007, sumo association trials have been cancelled after attracting zero applicants – a situation unthinkable even 12 years ago when the Waka-Taka boom was at its peak.

The few burly boys who do sign up

come in for scathing criticism from their stablemasters, who oft accuse them of training one-tenth as hard as the greats of yore. In 2004, the ex-Isegahama oyakata claimed in his controversial tabloid interview that for the first time in sumo history, parents of rikishi were visiting stables to complain that their sons were being pushed too hard. Such a situation, however

understandable – and in some cases desirable – is hardly conducive to producing fierce warriors who fight until they drop. (Basically, like Hakuho and Baruto).

The statistics speak volumes. No Japanese has been promoted to yokozuna since 1998, and only one home grown talent (Kotomitsuki) has even made ozeki since January 2002.

The sumo association cannot even begin to address this problem until more young Japanese are convinced that being a sumo champion is a worthy goal. However, these young Japanese need more convincing to join sumo than the many foreigners from poorer financial backgrounds knocking at the JSA's door. By denying these people the chance to compete, as the February announcement effectively does, the JSA risks a sharp decline in total numbers of rikishi – which is the worst possible outcome for the sport.

If Japan's age-old national sport is to be preserved, numbers have to be the priority. Total numbers of rikishi have fallen from over 900 in the early 1980s to just over 700 today. In 2010, many warriors from Eastern Europe, inspired by the successes of sumo's Bulgarians, Russians and Estonians, could help swell the JSA's participant numbers. The JSA should use them to its advantage, invite them in, and turn their successes into a motivational mechanism for young Japanese under the banner: 'Can YOU be the next Japanese champion?'