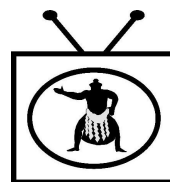


The Great Debate TV coverage

by Chris Gould



We learned, during the course of the recent broadcasting debacle, that NHK – Japan’s state TV channel – owns the rights to live sumo shows until 2013. The question that should be asked next time the rights come up for issue is: ‘Does NHK attract sumo viewers, or put them off?’ Most sumo fans from across the age spectrum appear united in their verdict.

There are – as in any walk of Japanese life – huge obstacles towards reforming the system. As sumo is officially recognised as Japan’s national sport by the government, and affiliated to the Ministry of Education, it would be highly embarrassing for the state-managed NHK not to broadcast it. With both sumo and NHK having exclusive ties to the government, which have doubtless become more secure than a Kotooshu belt-grip over the past 60 years, it is difficult to see how a commercial TV company from outside the circle could possibly muscle in. There have been previous attempts to broadcast sumo on commercial TV, and they have ultimately failed through an inability to compete with NHK.

This is a shame, as history suggests there is much to be said for commercialising sports coverage. Whereas state TV can get away with making non-commercially viable programmes, commercial TV is persistently in a ratings war and must innovate relentlessly. It must go for the sensational over the sensible, the big picture over the small details,

the zero-sum game over the subtle trade-offs. Few can possibly argue that this is not what sumo needs.

The 2010 World Cup was another glaring example of how innovative, commercial TV coverage has transformed the fortunes of world football – at both club and international level. Twenty-five years ago, football was still a reasonably working-class pastime, confined to a specific stratum of society and in danger of a declining fanbase. Now, after the influx of commercial television, stories of falling global fanbases seem mythical, as do the images of crumbling stadia – now transformed into glossy, cosy, all-seater venues. Commercial TV helped extend football’s reach into the middle classes like never before, buttressed its appeal to women like never before, and transformed a once struggling sport into a guaranteed multi-billion-dollar industry year on year.

It is ludicrous, of course, to suggest that sumo could become a multi-billion dollar industry. But it is not ludicrous to suggest that commercial TV, freed from competition with NHK, could generate significant extra investment and extra fans. Commercial TV would be forced to look for more exciting sumo storylines, build up the personalities of wrestlers more, and try to bring out the human side of sumo – encouraging its participants to talk more rather than less. It would be forced to look at the optimum time for

scheduling of matches, if necessary using its negotiating power with the same brutality as Sky TV in the UK. It would be forced to sex up the broadcasts, drawing on Japan’s many cute and beautiful young females to conduct interviews, or make sumo more acceptable to young women. Best of all, commercial TV could easily sign deals with entertainment companies such as Yoshimoto, ensuring that some of the best comedians can commentate on sumo and make people laugh.

It is the calibre of guests on the current NHK show which is most conducive to turning people off. The guests seem hand-picked to appeal exclusively to Japan’s over 95s. I cannot recall ever seeing a young comedian as a special guest, even though all evidence shows that this is the type of TV star to which the Japanese relate best. It is almost as if NHK and the sumo association believe that Japan’s national sport is so sacred and serious that no-one can even make light-hearted comments about it. The result is a highly stultifying broadcast which no TV channel seriously intent on attracting viewers would ever screen.

Unless NHK jazzes up its broadcasts, and tailors sumo commentary to a modern audience which doesn’t necessarily remember Emperor Hirohito’s moustache, commercial TV should have the right to ensure a treasured national sport commands the viewer attention that its intrigue and uniqueness deserve.