

Amateur Angles #25

Amateur sumo needs a boost from the professionals

by Howard Gilbert

When I speak to members of the public (ie., non-fans) about sumo, I'm surprised how much they actually know about professional sumo, even though they are usually a little behind the times. They've usually heard about foreign yokozuna ("the Hawaiian guy" and "the Mongolian"), and more recently have heard about some of the scandals that have plagued the sport's image of late – hazing, drug taking and match fixing. I take this to be because many newspapers carry a story or two in passing about sumo every six months or so, probably on a slow news day. Other people still remember Salé the Dump Truck (who we know as Konishiki), which perhaps shows the impact that the Channel 4 TV highlights package had in the early 1990s.

When I talk to non-fans, almost no-one knows about amateur sumo, although I try to make sure they soon get a crash-course in understanding the sport! If they are moderately interested, they tend to ask questions, usually in trying to understand the differences between professional and amateur sumo. The odd person here and there is actually interested enough in amateur sumo to ask more questions. However, a lot of the questions people ask when they know I'm a sumo fan or the local "sumo guy" is to ask about the professional rikishi: what they eat, how much they earn, what they do for training, and how much they weigh.

This kind of interest always make me wonder just how popular sumo

might become if there was regular access to it outside of Japan. Although financially challenging to stage, the foreign exhibition tours that that Nihon Sumo Kyokai undertakes sporadically are also something that piques local curiosity wherever they appear. Is professional sumo something that could hold the world's attention if it was given a proper showing? Or, would it be received a little like the freakshow for popular entertainment that it was in the Edo period (1600-1868)? Would professional sumo remain the same if it became more popular, or would it change because of a worldwide audience?

So, with this in mind, when I was asked recently what I would like to see in the way of changes to sumo, my thoughts immediately turned to globalization. I was actually asked the question with more of a focus on amateur sumo, but it led me to thinking that the best thing that could happen for amateur sumo was for both forms of the sport, professional and amateur, to take the idea of international spread a little more seriously. In a previous column I have suggested certain ways that amateur sumo could encourage a greater number of athletes into the sport. The IFS could also consider having the Sumo World Championships every other year to allow more countries the time to fundraise to be able to attend. However, the focus of this column is what professional sumo could consider in order to promote sumo overseas to raise awareness of the sport across the board.

What I would like to see is the

Nihon Sumo Kyokai showing greater intent in actually promoting the sport outside of Japan, in looking to build an international fan base, and even to think of the revenue possibilities of expansion offshore. I believe that this, in turn, would provide beneficial flow-on effects to amateur sumo in terms of a greater awareness and interest in sumo leading to greater numbers of athletes wanting to try their hand in amateur sumo, and a wider and more knowledgeable spectator base.

For too long, professional sumo has been closeted away in Japan. The advent of the internet and the increase in availability of Japanese TV channels in other countries via satellite has provided a trickle of images for the diehard fans. Unfortunately, there is nothing for the ordinary public, and professional sumo still remains a distant speck (beyond the horizon) for the casual viewer. If the Nihon Sumo Kyokai, or even NHK, was serious about trying to expand professional sumo, or trying to realize a commercial gain from the sport, it would appear that the broadcasting rights need to be "sorted out". Some kind of pay-per-view or paid access to quality internet streaming, as happens with other professional sports, seem to be the best options.

Worldwide access to some form of sumo broadcast would allow not only for greater access by existing and future fans, it would also lead to commercial opportunities for the Nihon Sumo Kyokai, the different heya, and even the rikishi

themselves. The Kyokai could take responsibility for branding the sport how they wished (I'm assuming a more pro-active approach than currently exists), the heya could sell merchandise and/or expand their supporters network, and the rikishi could explore sponsorship opportunities (even if it was through the secondary avenue of companies placing more kensho on their bouts. Even a small step in these directions could also make the foreign tours that happen from time to time more financially viable. These tours could be

undertaken on a more regular basis, perhaps every couple of years, and the more successful tours (perhaps to Mongolia or Europe) could subsidise later ventures to more expensive areas (such as South America or Africa) to assist with spreading the professional sumo "brand".

Is this pie-in-the-sky? Quite possibly. It would certainly take a more entrepreneurial mindset than the Kyokai has shown to date, and it would increase the risk that the Kyokai exposes themselves to. It might ultimately threaten the

Kyokai's support from the Ministry of Education, Sport and Technology and its associated tax-free status, due to the more commercial nature of this approach. However, let us not forget that the Kyokai has had to jump through certain hoops recently to keep the Ministry happy. Ultimately, becoming more professional (as outlined above) might allow the Kyokai to be less reliant on public tax revenues, and therefore to remain more conservative and less open to scrutiny from the Japanese government.