

Interview Ryan Laughton

by Chris Gould

Chris Gould caught up with menko expert and SFM columnist Ryan Laughton to find out more about his latest creation: a sumo collector's bible, and what menko means to the masses.

CG: What inspired you to write Sumo Menko and Card Checklist?

RL: I had been toying with the idea of writing a book on sumo cards for about four years. When I first started collecting the idea really never crossed my mind, but the more research I did the more I realized there wasn't any resource to guide me or fellow collectors. I was compiling data, checklists and gathering facts from a lot of different sources and decided it needed to be in one place for everyone to benefit from. A great fellow collector, Chuck Finberg, really was behind me to publish a book and the idea just sort of blossomed. I started with my website, but then decided I wanted to get it into book form for eternal preservation so to speak. Also, I spent two years of my life in Japan and came back with an extremely deep appreciation for the country and culture. I wanted to preserve this piece of Japanese history before the generation that can best tell it passes and all that information is lost to time. My ultimate dream is to eventually produce a bilingual edition of the book so that more Japanese collectors can enjoy it to the extent that we can.

CG: What was the hardest part during the production of the book?

RL: The hardest part was

knowing where to draw the line and get the book published. I was always finding new sets and new data so publication always got pushed back. I wanted to have the most up-to-date version printed as the first edition, but a few things happened that really motivated me to get it published even though it still needed some work. I am already working on a second edition. I didn't want to have to prove to anyone that the book was worthy of publishing so I did it myself. It took several weeks of searching around and choosing a company that made it easy to self-publish. Once I figured out how to set up the layout of a book in order to print it, things went very smoothly.

CG: When did you first start collecting menko, and why?

RL: I bought my first sumo menko in the year 2000 down in Kyushu. I was visiting some onsen down in that part of Japan and went walking around one of the towns that evening. There was a dagashiya close by the hotel in which I happened to see a box of sumo menko and decided they looked interesting. The Y5000 price was perfect too so I bought them. I did a little research on them over the next few weeks, but then stuck them in storage until 2005. In 2005 I ran across an old sumo/baseball karuta game on e-bay which peaked my interest again. After some fierce bidding, I ended up winning the auction. The rest is history from there. I exhausted my e-bay resources rather quickly and then expanded out to Japanese auction websites.

At this point too, I really became a sumo fan again. While in Japan I occasionally watched sumo, but not to the extent like I do now. That first sumo box I bought ended up being cataloged in my book as the M581: 1958 Dash 7-8 set and the sumo/baseball karuta set I bought on e-bay is the K541: 1954 Yakyu/Sumo Karuta set.

CG: What is your greatest menko memory?

RL: I have a lot of great memories with menko, but one of my favorites was being invited to demonstrate how menko is played at a Japanese children's festival in Colorado Springs. I spent the day playing menko with hundreds of kids and explaining how Japanese kids used to play this for hours back in the 1880s-1960s. I had such a good time and there were some fierce battles. I can only imagine playing in that era. My arm was sore for days!

CG: Why are menko important to understanding sumo?

RL: Sumo menko were printed over such a wide range of Japanese history, the first just a few years after the shogunate was disbanded and Japan realized it was decades behind the rest of the world in technology. Photos were common in the United States, but Japan was still using woodblock prints. Some of the only images we have of certain rikishi are on menko. The 1930s saw the true emergence of menko as printing technology finally caught up in Japan. Not unlike American kids, Japanese kids worshipped the heroes of the

time and menko was a great medium to capture their hero's images including rikishi. Futabayama was to some a "god". The 1940s were a dismal time in Japan with the war and subsequent defeat and severe economic depression. Sumo popularity was at a low point after Futabayama retired and slowly recovered until the advent of television in the early 1950s gave sumo the boost it needed. Sumo menko production also reached an all-time high during this time and kids were collecting sumo menko

by the thousands. After that, when Japan was on its way to becoming an economic powerhouse with electronics, vehicles, manufacturing and education, the focus of kids shifted. Sumo wasn't seen as a way to get ahead anymore. You can see it today when you go to the kokugikan. There just aren't that many kids there anymore. I have seen numerous photos from the 1950s of kids hanging from the kokugikan rafters watching matches and standing room only. So you can see that different

menko sets are a direct reflection of the state of sumo at the time they were printed. You can tell who the popular rikishi were by who shows up on the most menko. If we want sumo to improve we have to inspire the kids again. Sumo menko are one way to do that!

Sumo Menko & Card Checklist is currently available for purchase. Further details can be obtained from editor@sumofanmag.com.

