

Sumo, An Increasingly International Sport

Sumo is Japan's traditional combat sport. At present, the majority of the highest rank of Sumo is monopolised by foreign nationals. For several years now, Japan has not had a wrestler achieve tournament victory, or the coveted title of *Yokozuna* – Grand Champion. There are those involved with Sumo who are seeking to protect Japan's traditions, and at present, Japanese Sumo is standing at a crossroads.

At the end of February 2010, the Japan Sumo Association reinstated a restriction of one foreign Sumo wrestler per stable. The first time this restriction was implemented, in 2002, the number of 'Japanese' foreign-born wrestlers continued to increase as some wrestlers acquired Japanese citizenship. For this reason the restrictions have become stricter, with 'foreign' defined as anyone born outside of Japan, regardless of citizenship. This raises the question of why restrictions are considered necessary at all.

The first foreign-born Sumo wrestler to compete seriously in contemporary Sumo was Hawaiian-born Takamiyama, who first set foot in the ring in 1964. Eight years later, in 1972, Takamiyama became the first foreign national to win a tournament and, in 1993, his protege, the Hawaiian Akebono, became the first to achieve the supreme rank of Grand Champion. During the same period, popular Grand Champions Akebono and the Japanese Takanohana were in the spotlight when they competed against each other in the ring. Non-Japanese involvement in Japanese Sumo has continued for almost 50 years, with foreign wrestlers, who learned Japanese and embraced Japanese culture, accepted with good will.

The number of foreign-born wrestlers has continued to increase, and currently there are wrestlers from eleven countries, who make up approximately 8 percent of the sumo wrestler population, with the majority being from Mongolia. The number of non-Japanese Grand Champions has also increased, including the Mongolian national Asashoryu, who boasted outstanding strength in the world of Sumo. Throughout his career, Asashoryu won 25 top division tournament championships, ranking him as the third-highest Grand Champion ever. In February of 2010, he announced his retirement.

Despite his exceptional success, Asashoryu was often criticized as 'Not behaving in a manner befitting a Grand Champion, nor providing a good example for other wrestlers'. His sudden retirement followed allegations that he was involved in a drunken assault outside a nightclub in the middle of a tournament, and this is perhaps one of the



Grand Champion Hakuho, left, throws his opponent Tokitenku out of the ring during their bout at a Sumo tournament. Photo: © AP

chief reasons the Japan Sumo Association is concerned.

For Japanese people, Sumo is not merely a sport. Since approximately 2,000 years ago, the role of Sumo has been passed down through generations. Initially, Sumo was a ceremonial ritual that took place at festivals, and as representatives of the people, Sumo wrestlers led the ritual. The Grand Champions in particular displayed not only supreme levels of strength, but also the highest levels of propriety and dignity, which are still demanded today.

Since the retirement of Takanohana, newly crowned Grand Champions have uniformly been foreign-born wrestlers, with the emergence of not a single Japanese Grand Champion. Compared to the relatively finely built Japanese, physically robust foreign wrestlers advance their careers very quickly and, at present (October 2010), 16 of the top 41 wrestlers are foreigners. Suddenly, it has become common for the final confrontation in the championship match to be between non-Japanese, and since the 2006 achievement of Japanese wrestler Tochiazuma, no Japanese national has claimed the title of Grand Champion. There are quite a number of fans who believe that Japanese traditional Sumo is being taken over by foreign-born wrestlers, who have an unfair advantage in their build, and who don't always seem to respect the traditional spirit of Sumo.

As a result, the Japan Sumo Association has voiced a statement to the effect that Japan should seek not to discover foreign disciples of Sumo, but rather put their efforts into fostering exemplary wrestlers from within Japan. The onus, they say, is on Japan to "create Japanese Grand Champions".

But the Japan Sumo Association, while a powerful voice, isn't the only one. Many young Japanese admire Asashoryu and other 'foreign' wrestlers for both their skills in the ring, and their refusal to do what they are told outside of it. Traditionally, Japanese society is restrictive in terms of people's speech and behaviour, and some young people see the Sumo behaviour as being indicative of a freedom they crave.

Regardless of opinions on both sides, global culture can hardly be avoided in sports these days. While the number of new Japanese hopefuls is decreasing, it would be remiss to neglect foreign nationals. But to pass Japan's traditional Sumo on to future generations, for whom, and in what form, should Sumo be maintained? For the authorities, the deliberations continue.