



A Day in the Life of a Sumo Fan

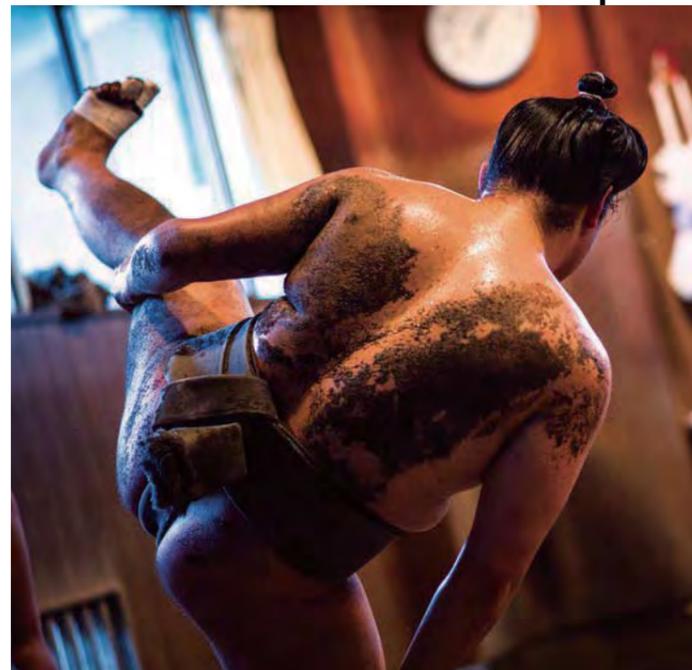
It's one of the world's most unique traditional sports, and there's nothing like experiencing it live.

by John Gunning

Sumo has aficionados all over the globe who are able to follow Japan's ancient traditional sport on television and the Internet. But for the true fan, no experience rivals attending one of the six yearly *basho*, or tournaments. They each last 15 days and three of them are held in Tokyo's Ryogoku Kokugikan in January, May and September. Let's follow the route a true fan would take in order to best experience a day of live sumo.

Having gotten permission to watch morning practice, our day begins at 7:30 a.m. at a local sumo stable, where the wrestlers sleep, eat and train. We sit cross-legged behind the

At their stable, wrestlers take part in grueling practice bouts (above) and hundreds of leg raises (below), before heading over to the tournament site.



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stablemaster, only a couple of meters away from the *rikishi* (sumo wrestlers), who are already sweating profusely from the 300 leg raises that begin each training session. Pushing practice follows, and then the fights begin, starting with the lowest ranks and ending with the higher-ranking *sekitori* wrestlers. Around 10 percent of all *rikishi* that join sumo—there are some 640 at the present time but the number fluctuates—reach this rank and are able to claim a salary.

Soon, the mouthwatering smells emanating from the kitchen signal that practice is almost over. We make our way to the Kokugikan venue, easily spotted by the colorful flags with wrestlers' names that line its entrance. Once inside the arena, we stop a moment to look at the large cabinet filled with trophies. Displayed proudly in the center is the massive Emperor's Cup, made of silver and weighing 29 kilograms.

We've purchased first-floor box seats close to the *dohyo* ring, and looking up past the suspended Shinto roof with its four colored tassels representing various spirits and directions, we can see the giant portraits of the 32 previous tournament winners lining the rafters.

Bouts take place from about 8:30 a.m. to 5:45 p.m., starting with the lowest of the six divisions. There is less pageantry early in the day and things progress quickly with new wrestlers fighting every two minutes or so. The rules of the sport are very simple: Down or out. If you touch the ground inside the ring with any part of the body except the soles of the feet or go outside the circle, you lose. Hair-pulling, eye-gouging, punching with a closed fist and kicking above the knee are among the few rules that are illegal. The clashes between these large men can be earth-shaking, sometimes lasting only a few seconds, occasionally going on for several minutes.

The ring is 4.55 meters in diameter and made of hard packed earth with straw bales. As a throwback to when sumo was performed outside, four of the bales are offset to allow rainwater to drain away. A fine layer of sand around the bales helps judges determine if a wrestler has touched the ground outside them.

We watch the ring announcers, or *yobidashi*, call the wrestlers up to fight, sweep the ring and keep everything running smoothly. While the bouts are overseen by the colorfully dressed *gyoji* referee, five judges in black traditional dress have the final say. When the result is a close call, they step onto the ring for a conference and the head judge will then announce their decision. There are three options: confirm the referee's decision, reverse it, or call for a rematch.

We applaud for our favorites as the higher-ranking wrestlers are introduced to the crowd in ring-entering ceremonies, one at around 2:00 p.m. for the second division and one at around 3:40 p.m. for the top division. These are colorful affairs, as the wrestlers don highly decorative aprons with pictures of cranes, dragons and Mt. Fuji among them. For their bouts, they wear the simple, loincloth-like belt called a *mawashi*.

Like other sumo fans, we appreciate the tense anticipation of the four minutes of preparation time before the match. The wrestlers stomp, throw salt, go to the corner, face off and



At the Ryogoku Kokugikan, the hall where the Tokyo tournaments are held, a large Shinto roof is suspended over the ring.

The ring is made of hard packed earth. The referee, or *gyoji*, oversees the bouts in his colorful traditional clothes.



then... repeat the whole sequence a few more times. We closely watch the referee's *gunbai* war fan, for when he holds it towards the front rather than to the side it means time is up and it's time to fight.

The excitement increases as the day's climax approaches with the bouts featuring the *yokozuna*. Only 72 men have ever attained the rank of *yokozuna*; their entire existence is supposed to embody the spirit of sumo, and unlike all other wrestlers they can never be demoted. If they aren't contending for every tournament title they are expected to retire rather than disgrace the sport.

Today, all the *yokozuna* win and the crowd seems satisfied. As a designated wrestler mounts the ring to perform the bow-twirling ceremony that signals the end of a long day of sumo, we gather our belongings and join the crowd heading for the exits.

John Gunning is a sumo commentator and presenter for NHK as well as a columnist for The Japan Times and other publications. Photos by John Gunning except as noted.