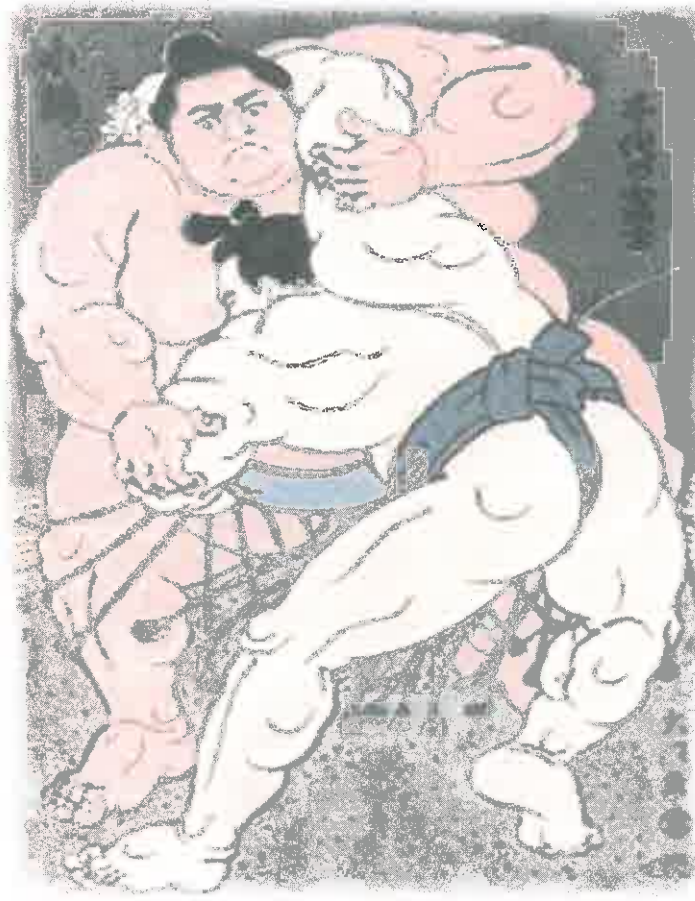


A brief history of Sumo Wrestling



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Brief history and introduction to Sumo wrestling

Karate and martial arts today would be vastly different without the influence and rituals of Sumo wrestling. Since the beginning of time physical competition between men has existed. It seems innate in our makeup to be physically competitive in some form or fashion. Though few written records exist to confirm the actual beginning of Sumo, it is widely regarded to be at least 1,500 years old. Some admirers of the sport claim that ancient paintings reveal that the sport was played in 23 B.C.¹

Due to the continued evolution and prevalence in Japan this essay will focus primarily on traditional Japanese Sumo.

There is no question that Sumo wrestling has deep roots in Japanese religion. Multiple sources of information concur that the Japanese race or fate of the Japanese islands was determined by a Sumo match between two Gods. Sumo matches were conducted with great ceremony and included religious rituals, dramas, dances and poetry. Early matches were held in Shinto shrines and were dedicated to the Gods in hopes of a bountiful harvest. From the shrines Sumo moved to the courts of royalty and warlords. These early matches were a way for the early feudal lords to demonstrate power. The wrestlers *kesho-mawashi*, (ceremonial apron) usually paid homage to the lord for which the wrestler competed.

Early Sumo wrestling, during the late 6th and 7th centuries, was extremely brutal. The matches contained elements of boxing, judo and wrestling. During this early period in Sumo the losing participant was usually required to forfeit his life. During the Kamadura period (1185-1334), a military regime was established. There were many wars fought during this bloody time and Sumo wrestling techniques were included in military training. Most of these techniques focused on forcing an enemy to the ground or breaking their balance. These basic techniques eventually evolved into Jujitsu.

Throughout the history of Sumo wrestling many aspects and rituals evolved. Early Sumo used a square fighting arena. During the late 1500's the fighting arena was made circular. There were many matches and tournaments during these periods and most were loosely sanctioned. When the civil wars ended in 1603 the next 250 years were mostly peaceful. Samurai warriors, with no way to vent their aggression, were encouraged to hone their skills into art forms requiring diligence and discipline. These men turned their attention to kendo, Sumo and other martial arts and began to follow the code of "Bushido" (the way of the warrior)² During this time "street sumo" was very popular. Unfortunately, determining a winner was not easy and violence erupted as a result of the arguments. This happened often enough that the intervention of the authorities was usually required to restore peace. This led to the banning of "street sumo". It was during the 1700 and 1800's that Sumo was restricted to benefit matches only. These matches were to honor the gods and all moneys collected went to religious purposes, i.e. the building of a shrine or temple.

¹ <http://www.asianartmall.com/sumoarticle.htm>

² The Big Book of Sumo page 12, Mina Hall 1998

If tournaments were to be held the match promoters were required to get permission from a temple before the event could be organized. As the popularity of Sumo spread across Japan these promoters became liaisons between the government and temple officials.

During this era Sumo began to formally organize into more of the sport we see today:

- Training places were established where young wrestlers could train “stable”
- Formation of the official *dohyo* or fighting arena
- Rules for fighting began to take form
- Wrestlers adornment of the ceremonial apron “*kesho-mawashi*”
- Establishment of Sumo Association of Edo
- “*banzuke*” or ranking lists were established

Once formally organized the popularity of Sumo spread quickly from the major cities of Japan to the smaller provinces and villages. The passion and support for Sumo during this period allows us to better understand how this once ancient and ceremonial event could become the national sport of Japan. The organization and formality that started in the 15th and 16th century was combined with the ritual and ceremony that began in the 7th century to give you today’s sport of Sumo.

The Sumo Wrestler

From a Western perspective most Americans would struggle with the concept of a Sumo wrestler being an athlete. Actually being a Sumo wrestler has a price few Americans would be willing to pay to achieve the status these athletes enjoy. To become a Sumo wrestler and hit the “*Rikishi Road*” involves the following

- You must join stable or *heya*
- You must have completed Junior High school
- Be between the ages of 15 and 22, 25 if you are a collegiate Sumo athlete
- Be at least 5’6”
- Weigh at least 165 pounds
- Have parental or guardian consent
- Pass a physical examination
- There is NO maximum weight limit!

Once the above requirements are met the wrestler is expected to move into the stable to begin training. Unlike the NFL and Major League Baseball, the stable a young wrestler enters will be the one he retires from. You are not allowed to trade or move stables once you have joined. The new wrestlers in a stable have responsibilities to serve, assist and attend to the higher ranked wrestlers. This, plus a rigorous training regimen expected of all the wrestlers. The new wrestlers must begin training first and are usually up by 4:30 am to begin their day. The new stable member will have many chores, duties and responsibilities. As they advance through the ranks they will receive more and more privileges. It is during these early years that the athletes come to know the basics, tactics

and rituals required for competition in the tournaments. This also is when the wrestler begins to add weight.

This idea is quite simple, the heavier you are the lower your center of gravity, the harder to move you off balance. The wrestler with this advantage is poised to win many tournaments. But how do you gain weight and remain strong, flexible and in shape? First, the wrestlers are not allowed to eat breakfast. They have a hard workout in the morning followed by a large lunch, which since they did not have breakfast, they are more than ready to inhale. The diet is based of different styles of *chankonabe* which includes a base, meat and vegetables. There are several varieties as different meats and vegetables can be used and interchanged to reduce monotony of the meal. These meals are high in carbohydrates, sugar and protein. Directly following the meal the wrestlers are expected to sleep. This process was repeated again at dinner. Eat, sleep and repeat. This nutritional routine causes rapid weight gain in the wrestler. After years of training and eating in this manner it can be easy to understand how some of these athletes can weight in excess of 400 pounds. Maintaining this weight can come with a price. Though the wrestlers receive excellent medical attention it is important to point out that diabetes, weak circulation and high blood pressure can plague these athletes. Once retired, they are encouraged to slowly shed the excess weight gained while being a *rikishi* (traditional Japanese term for a Sumo wrestler).

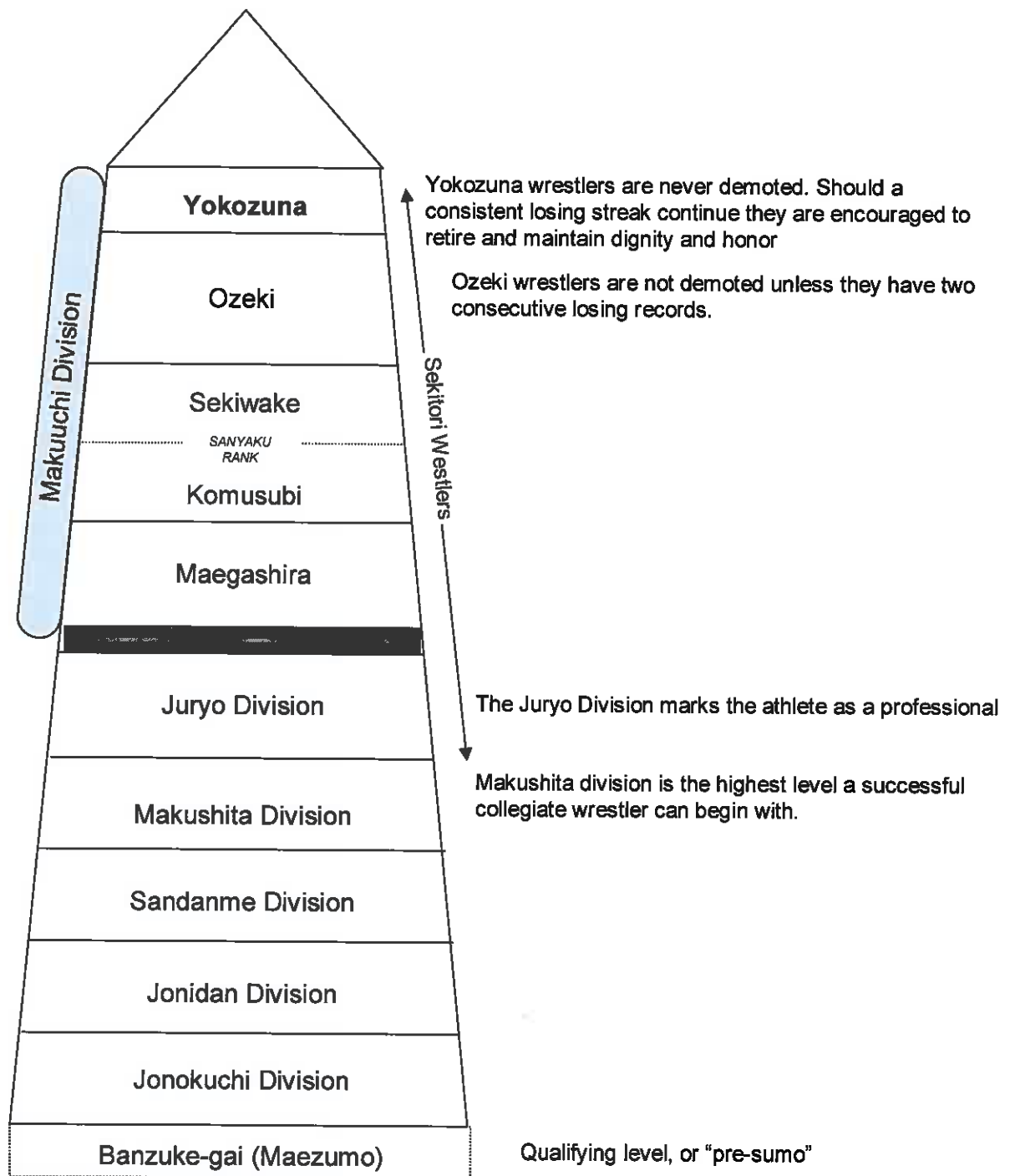
Sumo ranking and promotions

The general style of living a wrestler will enjoy depends completely on his rank. Within the *heya* or stable a wrestler's rank determines all aspects of treatment including the bathing schedule, personal affects, number of assistants and even the ability to marry and have children.

What determines this rank? The basic tenet of the pyramidal hierarchy is as follows: A *kachikoshi* wrestler is one who has a winning record; a *makekoshi* wrestler would have a losing record. For tournaments at the Makuuchi Division (Figure 1, next page) the tournament has fifteen bouts therefore a winning record would be anything better than an 8-7 record. For the lower divisions (Maezumo through Juryo Divisions) there are only 7 bouts per tournament where 4-3 would be a winning record.

How do you begin? Unless you have an outstanding college record all wrestlers must enter at the bottom of the pyramid, Maezumo. Wrestlers with a winning collegiate record can enter no higher than the Makushita level. New wrestlers are introduced during a tournament with a ceremony know as *shusse hiro*. For this occasion the new wrestler will borrow a fancy *kesho mawashi* (ceremonial apron) from a *Sekitori* wrestler within their stable. At this opening level only new wrestlers compete against each other. A *Sekitori* wrestler is any sumo athlete that has achieved a rank of Juryo or higher.

Sumo Ranking Hierarchy



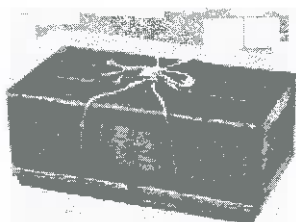
Juryo-the move into the “Big Time.”

The closest analogies to achieving the rank of Juryo would be a “AAA” ball player being moved to the majors, going from second string to first string in the NFL. In other words, it’s a BIG step for the Sumo wrestler. In Japan they say “the difference between the top of Makushita and the bottom of Juryo is like ten to chi or “heaven and hell.”³ For every ten Sumo wrestlers only one will make the rank of Juryo. This big step involves many changes for the athlete. Now they are no longer apprentice competitors but are considered professional wrestlers or *Sekitori*. At this rank they now begin to receive a monthly salary and bonuses. The following is a partial list of additional amenities a Juryo Sumo athlete can look forward to:

Can now wear a white mawashi during practice	Can now wear a silk mawashi during tournaments	Is assigned two tsukebito(attendants) to take care of personal needs and errands
Will receive a ceremonial apron <i>Kesho-mawashi</i>	Will receive a bamboo trunk or <i>akeni</i>	May now participate in the ring entering ceremony <i>dohyo-iri</i>
May now carry an umbrella and receives a private room in the stable	May now have an “official” fan club.	Has the stable master’s permission to marry.

The move to Juryo wrestler also comes with greater responsibility. Most important is that the new Juryo athlete always behaves with honor and dignity. His very presence is cause for a public spectacle. Imagine Tiger Woods having dinner at the table next to you. The expectations at this rank are quite comprehensive. It includes, but is not limited to, buying dinner for younger wrestlers in training, giving appropriate gifts, donations of time and money to charity and public appearances. Japanese companies will pay handsomely for wrestlers of this rank to make appearances at company functions, give speeches and offer photo sessions with employees. To the Japanese these athletes are almost worshipped. As I covered earlier, Sumo is the National Sport of Japan. They view the highest ranking Sumo wrestlers in the same manner we view our sports heroes. One primary difference is their culture places a narrow view on any deviant behavior by these athletes, plus the athletes themselves would never knowingly act in a manner that would embarrass their stable, the stablemaster or the Sumo Association.

One of the great honors of making the Juryo class is when the wrestlers you started with give you your *akeni*. This is your trunk for storing personal effects and it travels with you to all tournaments. It is one of several outward signs of a wrestler’s rank.



³ The Big Book of Sumo page 34, Mina Hall 1998

After successfully competing at the Juryo Division, wrestlers will have the opportunity for continued advancement. After Juryo there is *Maegashira*, *Monusubi* and *Sekiwake* divisions. Each promotion involves a higher monthly salary, improved tournament winnings and larger bonuses. As a *Sekiwake* you will have the opportunity to advance to *Ozeki* when you have won three times in three tournaments. The Sumo Association will hold a meeting to approve your *Ozeki* promotion at which time a messenger will be dispatched to your stable with the good news. There will be a ceremony which includes representatives from the Sumo Association, your stablemaster and his wife. You will receive *meiyokin* (honor money) during this promotion.

The final step is promotion to Yokozuna. An *Ozeki* who wins two tournaments in a row (or equivalent record) is evaluated by the Council and, if unanimous, will be awarded the rank of Yokozuna. As with each promotion, the salary increases, the bonus increases, and your *meiyokin* is \$10,000. Usually there are no more than three Yokozuna ranked wrestlers at any one time. On to the acceptance ceremony.

The Yokozuna advancement ceremony is so sacred in nature that it is held at Tokyo's Meiji Shrine. This event is attended by thousands of dedicated fans and spectators. The Yokozuna candidate then performs his own *dohyo-iri* (ring entering ceremony, covered in greater detail under tournaments). The Yokozuna is then presented with his Yokozuna tsuna belt. The belt is one of two styles and is custom made by the wrestlers stable mates.

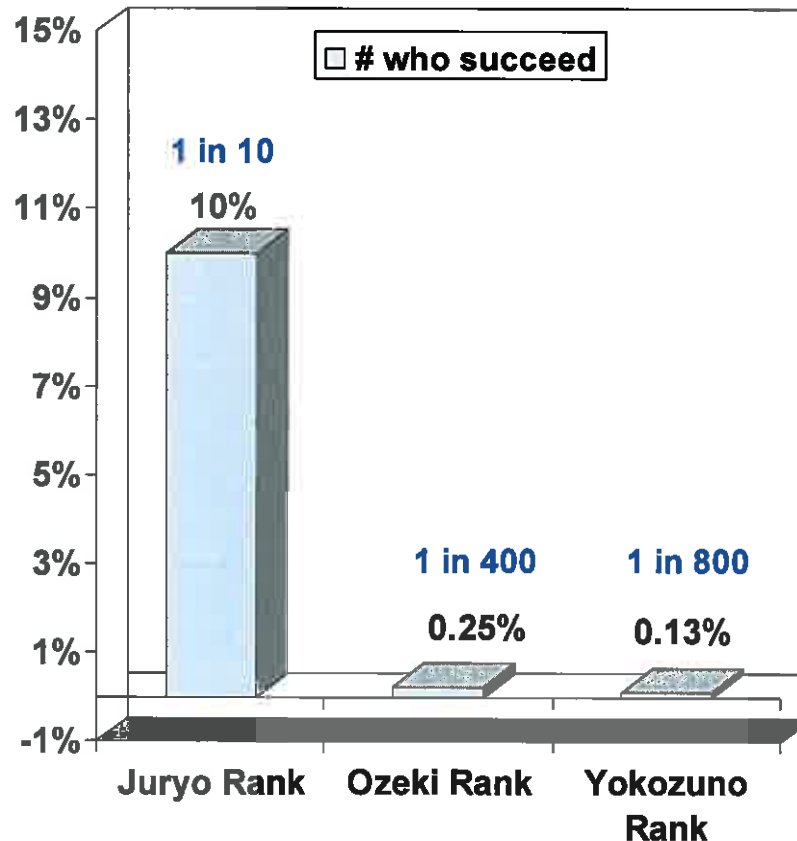


This belt is made from hemp rope which is rubbed with powder to soften the fibers. It is then woven and twisted with silk and cotton fabric. This process can involve up to 15 men to accomplish. Yokozuna Akebono is fitted with a tsuna belt for the last time at his retirement ceremony. Notice the number of attendants required to assist the wrestler. This cremonial belt can weigh as much as 40 pounds. Each one is custom fit for each Yokozuna. This apron can cost several thousand dollars to make and The Sumo Association provides an allowance to help defer this costs to the stable.

Figure 2: Photo courtesy of: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chadwick_Haeho_Rowan

Based on the latest figures from The Big Book of Sumo pages 34-41, Mina Hall 1998, here are the current odds for the three key advancement divisions.

Odds of Advancement



The Tournament “Hanbasha”

A *hanbasha* is the term given to any of the six official professional sumo tournaments held each year. Only hanbasha results matter in determining promotion and demotions for sumo wrestlers.⁴

The following is the tournament schedule and location:

The Tournament Calendar		
MONTH	TOURNAMENT NAME	LOCATION
January	Hatsu Basho (First)	Tokyo: Kokugikan
March	Haru Basho (Spring)	Osaka: Osaka Prefectural Gymnasium
May	Natsu Basho (Summer)	Tokyo: Kokugikan
July	Nagoya Basho	Nagoya: Aichi Prefectural Gymnasium
September	Aki Basho (Fall)	Tokyo: Kokugikan
November	Kyushu Basho	Fukuoka: Fukuoka International Center

Calendar source: The Big Book of Sumo page 51, Mina Hall 1998

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honbasha>

In addition to the above the wrestlers participate in *jungyo* or exhibitions which are held all over Japan and in other countries. The results of these *jungyo* tournaments have no bearing on the wrestler's ranking.

The media coverage for these events is worthy of mention. For comparison, the tournament media coverage is equivalent to Monday night Football, U.S Open Tennis, or Soccer in the U.K. The matches are carried by government owned radio, plus network television. Sumo Tournaments also have their version of the pre-game show, known as the "Sumo Digest" hosted on Asahi Television.⁵

As with most major sporting events the tickets for a Sumo Wrestling Tournament can be difficult to acquire. The Tokyo tournaments are held in the Kokugikan stadium which can accommodate approximately 13,000 spectators. The seating availability is structured much the same way as a larger NFL stadium. On the last day of the tournament or *senshuraku* the winner is announced and awards or prizes are given to the wrestlers.



Photo Courtesy of http://www.unep.or.jp/ietc/publications/urban/urbanenv-2/img/photo_01_Kokugikan.gif

Seating is arranged as follows:

Sunakaburi seats-first six rows, usually not offered to the public. Known as sand covered seats due to proximity to the dyhyo

Masu-Zeki seats-known as *tatami* boxes with cushions. Seating in this area is very expensive and usually goes to larger corporations. Includes food, drink and usher service

Second Floor seats- traditional seating with armrests, far from center circle but a great view of the action

Tojitsu-Ken-these are upper row 2nd floor seats sold only on the day of the tournament

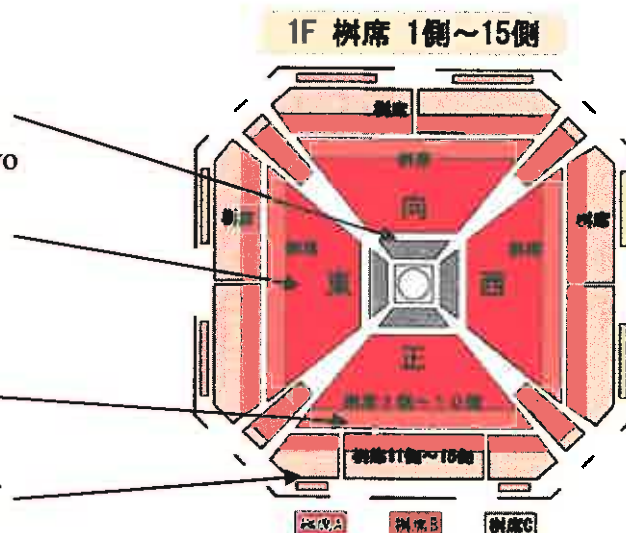


Photo Courtesy of 1
http://www.sumo.or.jp/ticket/img/kokugikan_1f-4.gif

⁵ The Big Book of Sumo page 50, Mina Hall 1998

The Dohyo-iri ring entering ceremony

The beginning of a Sumo tournament begins with a ring entering ceremony. This ceremony is known as the *dohyo-iri*. All wrestlers of Juryo rank or higher will participate in the dohyo-iri ceremony and will wear their traditional *kesho-mawashi*. This practice dates back to the Genroku era 1688-1704, when wrestlers wore the *kesho-mawashi* to proudly display the name of their sponsoring lord.⁶

The procession begins toward the dohyo with the referees, *gyoji*, going first then followed by the wrestlers in reverse order of rank. After the highest ranked wrestler has taken position on the dohyo the athletes turn inward and in synchronization perform a brief ritual. The yokozuna ranked wrestlers do not participate in the above ceremony as they have their own ceremony which takes place after the above.

The wrestlers will then circle the ring counterclockwise performing their ritual movements. The significance of this event is based in Japanese religion. The dohyo-iri gives the spectators an opportunity to view the wrestlers and for the Sumo rikishi to show off their *kesho-mawashi*. The leg, hand and body motions that can be linked to Shinto origin. The clapping acts to alert the gods and for purification of the event. When the rikishi raise their arms it is to show that no weapons are carried and that they have the honor to “play fair.” The frequent high leg stomping serves to drive out evil spirits.

The Yokozuna Dohyo-iri

Due to the rank of these Sumo wrestlers they have earned the right to enter individually and perform their own personal dohyo-iri. Not all Yokozuna rituals are the same. Each wrestler combines the ritualistic movements with their own distinct flare.

The Dohyo fighting ring

The matches take place on a *dohyo* or fighting ring. This ring is elevated above the floor and usually sanctified by the referee during a ceremony known as the *doyho matsure*. It is a square platform constructed of clay and sand onto which a 14 foot 10 inch circle is marked using half buried bales of rice straw.⁷ Above the dohyo is suspended a structure resembling a Shinto shrine which illustrates the degree of religion this event embodies. There are 2 painted white lines which are slightly over 2 feet apart positioned on the East and West sides of the ring. These lines are the starting point for the match.



⁶ The Big Book of Sumo page 56, Mina Hall 1998

⁷ http://www.tooter4kids.com/Japan/sumo_wrestling.htm

The Pre-bout ritual

Just prior to the match each wrestler performs a specific “pre-bout” ritual. This ritual is as follows: The *yobidashi* or ring attendant will sing out the names of the competing wrestlers. The wrestlers will bow and then return to their corners. Each wrestler will then clap their hands and do two *shiko* or leg stomps to drive out evil spirits. For a Juryo level and above match the wrestler will take some *chikara muzu* or power water. This is not to drink; but is used to rinse the mouth and is then expelled. “Because the matches are believed to be fought in the presence of the gods, a wrestler’s body and mind must be pure. Each time he enters the circular fighting area of the ring, he throws a handful of salt. According to Shinto beliefs, salt drives out evil spirits and has cleansing power.”⁸ The wrestlers will go to the East and West sides, squat down, clap and extend their arms horizontally to show that they carry no weapons. Finally the wrestlers will approach the center ring and crouch with their knuckles on the floor. This begins the *niramiiai* where the Sumo wrestlers begin to stare each other down in a psychological battle that can be as exciting as the battle it precedes. This process can be repeated several times, each time the athletes come to the center ring, stare each other down, rise up and return to their side, toss some salt and return to center ring all while maintaining the intimidating stares and facial expressions. It has been suggested that a winner can be determined by observing this ritual closely. These rituals are timed and the various ranks are allowed different times to complete.

The Sumo Battle

Once the *gyoji* or referee calls time on the pre-bout warm up and rituals the match is ready to begin. At this point neither wrestler can return to ringside, should the wrestler step out of the *dohyo* he would forfeit the match. This begins the most intense part of the Sumo experience. The wrestlers will stare eye to eye and focus so deeply on the other that their breathing will become synchronized. The *tachiai*, or initial clash must be simultaneous; coordinated by each wrestler without talking. If the timing is wrong or one of the wrestlers is not ready (*matta*) the referee will stop the fight and they will try again. At the Juryo level and above there are fines levied against the wrestler for committing *matta*.

The rules are as follows: The loser of a match is the first wrestler who:

1. steps or is thrown from the ring
2. touches the ground with anything but the soles of his feet
3. uses an illegal technique (no choking, punching, hair pulling, poking of the eyes, ear claps, groin grabs, kicks above the knee)
4. has his *mawashi* come off completely. This is actually a rarity since the referee will usually call a time-out so that a loose belt can be adjusted without a penalty.

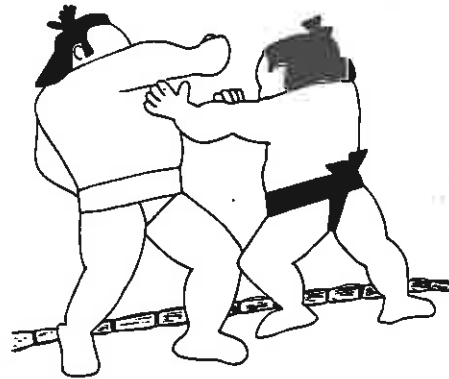
The actual wrestling usually lasts only seconds and a round that lasts over a minute are quite rare.

⁸ The Big Book of Sumo page 64, Mina Hall 1998

There are over 70 specific Sumo techniques used to accomplish a win. The following pages show examples of the techniques.



KIRIKAESHI (backward trip). A wrestler places his leg behind his opponent's leg and then pushes or twists him, forcing him to fall backward.



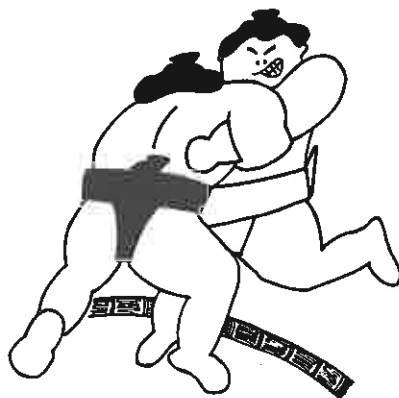
TSUKIDASHI (thrust out). Alternating arms at a very quick pace, a wrestler thrusts blows at his opponent's chest, forcing him out.



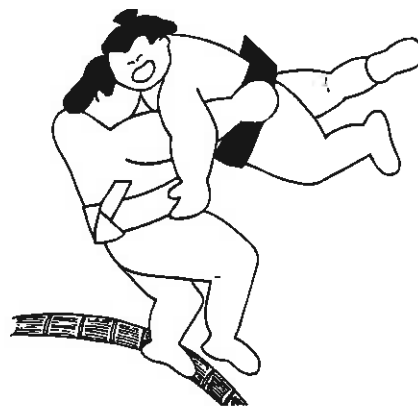
OSHIDASHI (push out and down). Using one or two arms, a wrestler forcefully pushes out his opponent.



UTTCHARI (twist out). A wrestler pushed to the edge and nearly out grabs his opponent and, in a desperate move, twists and pushes his opponent out first.

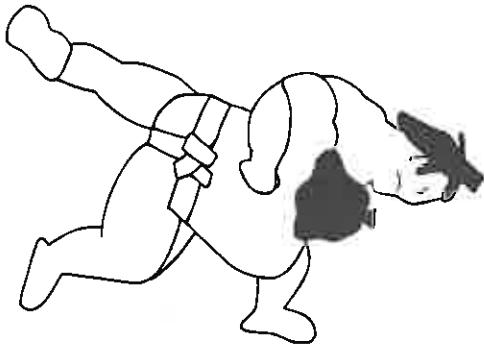


KIMEDASHI (lock and push out). A wrestler locks his arms around his opponent's and forces him out.

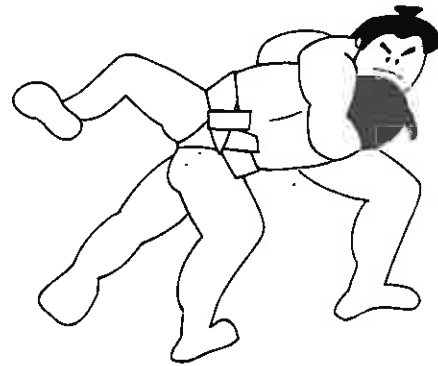


ISAMIASHI (accidental step-out). A wrestler on the verge of winning accidentally steps out first.

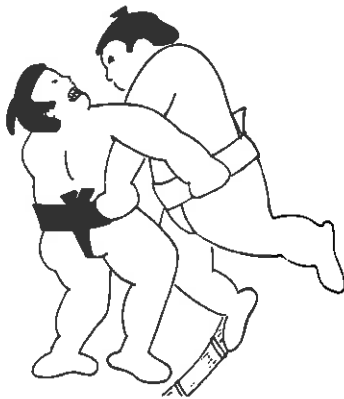
All photos courtesy of The Big Book of Sumo, Mina Hall 1998



SUKUINAGE (beltless arm throw). A wrestler forces his arm under his opponent's armpit and then, without gripping the belt, throws him down.



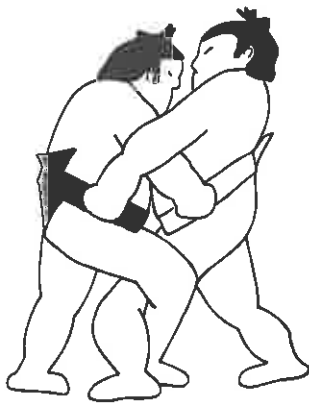
KUBINAGE (headlock throw). A wrestler wraps his arm around his opponent's neck, as in a headlock, and throws his opponent down.



TSURIDASHI (carry out). A wrestler, using two hands, grabs his opponent by the belt and carries him out.



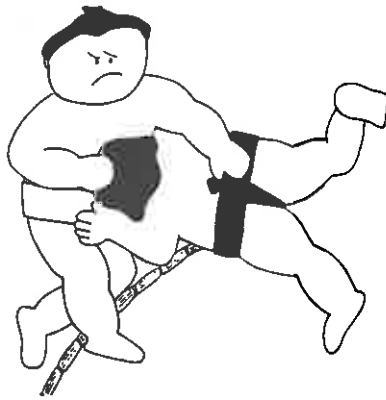
TSURITAOSHI (carry down). A wrestler, using two hands, grabs his opponent by the belt and then drops him to the ground.



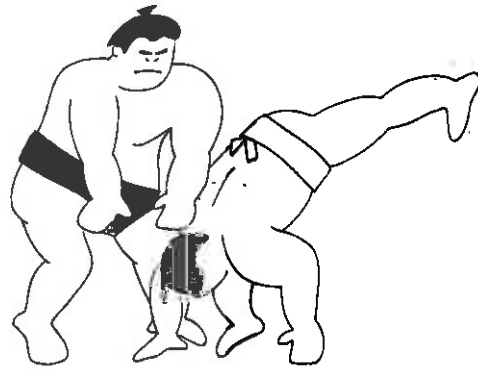
SOTOGAKE (outside leg trip). A wrestler wraps his leg around the outside of his opponent's and trips him or immobilizes the leg so that the opponent loses balance.



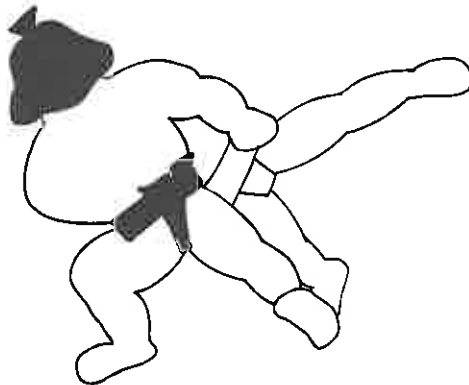
UCHIGAKE (inside leg trip). Similar to *sotogake*, except a wrestler wraps his leg around the inside of his opponent's leg and trips him.



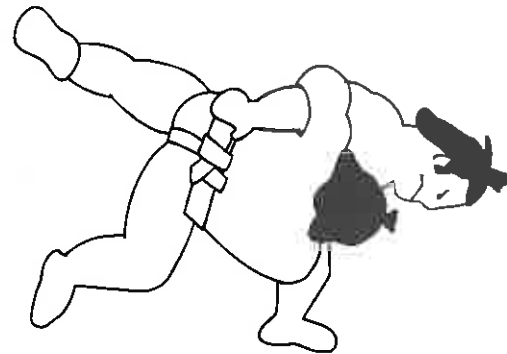
YORITAOSHI (force out and down). Similar to *yorikiri*, except as the wrestler drives out his opponent he topples on him due to either momentum or force.



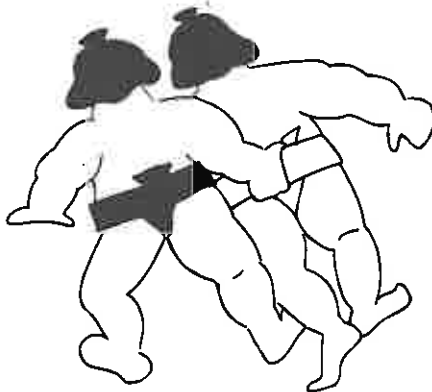
HATAKIKOMI (pull down). A wrestler grabs his opponent's hands, arms, shoulders, or neck and pulls him down.



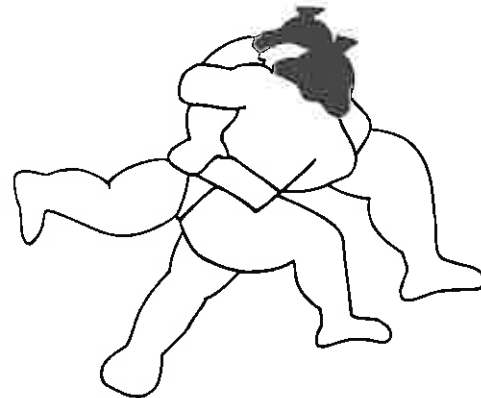
UWATENAGE (overarm throw). The most common throw technique. A wrestler, using an outside grip on the belt, throws his opponent down.



SHITATENAGE (underarm throw). Similar to *uwatenage*, except the wrestler uses an inside grip on the belt to throw his opponent down.



UWATEDASHINAGE (overarm throw-out). A variation of *uwatenage*, except the wrestler throws his opponent out, usually by an outside grip on the back of the belt.



SHITATEDASHINAGE (underarm throw-out). A variation of *shitatenage*, except the wrestler throws his opponent out, usually by an inside grip on the back of the belt.

The Closing Ritual

Compared to the opening rituals the closing sequence is much simpler. The wrestlers return to their respective sides and bow. There is no emotion shown by either wrestler. It does not matter whether you have won or lost, dignity and honor take precedence. The loser leaves the ring and the referee brings the winner his encouragement money *kenshokin*. Prior to taking the money the wrestler chops three times over the envelopes with his right hand in a gesture of thanks. If there are no encouragement money envelopes then the wrestler will swing his right hand through the air swiftly to thank the Gods. The wrestler then exits the dohyo ring, returns to his corner and waits to give *chikara mizu*, power water, to the next fighter from his side. This will continue until all matches have been fought, judged and decided.

The Connection between Sumo and Karate

There is so much more to Sumo wrestling than could be described in 17 pages. There are additional post tournament rituals and pageantry that further add to the events unbelievable fan support. There is far more detail with regards to the wrestlers preparation for a match. From this research I was able to link certain customs from Sumo to the style of Karate we practice today. We know of several instances where Grandmaster Nagamine mentions Sumo in both of his books on karate. First, we see reference that both Arakaki and Kyan had trained in Okinawan Sumo. It was rumored that Arakaki actually killed a Sumo wrestler who pushed him down a flight of stairs.⁹ Okinawan Sumo arose from a grappling tradition known as *tegumi*. Grand Master Nagamine makes direct reference to Sumo as follows:

“Because Okinawan sumo had never been promoted in the same spectacular way as its Japanese counterpart on Japan’s mainland, islanders never bothered building permanent sumo rings or venues to host such local events or championships. To the Okinawans of yesteryear, sumo wrestling had been an exciting cultural recreation for everyone to enjoy. It was not a commodity to be exploited in such grandeur. That is simply not the Okinawan way. In the old days, any open space, field or mountainside where people could freely gather and watch in their own comfort was sufficient. During that time there were no special rules or regulations about the size or configuration of the ring. The only condition was that the grappling surface had to be free of small stones or anything else that might be of danger to the grapplers. Usually, such bouts took place on a lawn, or surface covered by sand or sawdust to ensure safety for the athletes.”¹⁰

The kanji lettering for karate or *tote* meant China (for the Chinese art) and Hand for (tegumi)¹¹

⁹ The Essence of Okinawan Karate-Do, Shoshin Nagamine 1976, pages 36,38 & 39

¹⁰ Tales of Okinawa’s Great Master, Shoshin Nagamine

¹¹ <http://seinenkai.com/art-sumo.html> - Charles C. Goodin

This begins to solidify the link Sumo wrestling has to Karate and specifically our style of Karate. The traditions in Sumo that began almost 1,500 year ago can be seen in dojos around the world. This includes:

- Opening rituals at the beginning and end of class
- Deep respect for teachers and higher ranked students
- Courtesy, Honor, & Character
- An understanding that excellence comes from diligence and hard work

These tenets have deep roots in the Sumo tradition. As Okinawan and Japanese Karate were coming together as an art form the masters of old surely looked to Sumo for ideas and inspiration.

Sumo's popularity can no longer be contained to the island of Japan. The popularity of Sumo is spreading throughout Europe and Asia. Japanese Sumo has seen a substantial increase in non-Japanese athletes joining stables and hitting the "*rikishi road*." Who knows... we may one day take our grandchildren to a Sumo tournament here in the United States.