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Sumo wrestles with globalization

The sport embodies the soul of Japan. Yet the number of Japanese recruits dwindles, and international talent is filling the gap. Why?

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In the beginning, before there was a nation called Japan, there was sumo. As an exhibit at the sport's museum in Tokyo explains: "According to Japanese legend, the very origin of the Japanese race depended on the outcome of a sumo match." The supremacy of the Japanese people on the islands of Japan was established, as the legend goes, when the god Takemikazuchi won a sumo bout against the chief of a rival tribe.

No wonder, then, that sumo, more than any other athletic endeavor, is thought to embody the soul of the Japanese nation. For 1,500 years, religious-inspired ritual has guided every lumbering step taken by sumo wrestlers. Clad only in loincloths, their hair swept into topknots that were the peak of fashion 150 years ago, the men of sumo are supposed to serve as oversized poster boys for the ultimate Japanese virtues: dignity, honor, discipline, and strength.

But the guardians of this most Japanese of sports can no longer claim this responsibility as their birthright. For here is the blond topknot of an Estonian ex-bouncer called Baruto (real name: Kaido Höövelson) and the hairy chest of Bulgaria's Kotooshu (born Kaloyan Stefanov Mahlyanov). There is the telltale cellulite of a trio of Georgian wrestlers, whose bodies accumulate fat quite differently from the way the Japanese physique does. And everywhere, it seems, are the wide cheekbones of Mongolian athletes.

Since 2003, only two men have been promoted to the exalted status of *yokozuna*, or grand champion, the sport's highest rank to which a mere 69 wrestlers have clambered since 1789. Both are from the land of Genghis Khan: Asashoryu (né Dolgorsuren Dagvadorj) and Hakuho (formerly known as Monkhbatyn Davaajargal). Well beyond the Mongolians, in just over a decade, foreigners have so dominated sumo that more than half of all high-ranked wrestlers are now *gaijin*, the colloquial term for "foreigners." At the 2010 autumn tournament in Tokyo, only one Japanese man competed in the top two echelons, and he was a 37-year-old journeyman past his prime.

The reason for the foreign invasion is simple. The number of Japanese sumo recruits dwindles each year. What average Japanese kid today wants to grow up—and out—to become a sumo wrestler? Ask any high school or middle school sumo coach what's happened to recruitment numbers, and he'll tell you they've gone way down. The training is too rigorous, the bottoms too bared. And in a country where being rotund is no longer a sign of prosperity but a marker of overindulgence, all that fat is considered unsightly, even if it is wrapped around a lithe and limber fighting machine.

"You look at the Mongolians who come today, and they have the hungry, strong bodies of kids who grew up doing hard labor on the farms," says Michinori Yamada, longtime coach of the top-ranked Saitama Sakae high school sumo team. "Japanese families used to send their boys to sumo stables to ensure they got enough food. Now, Japanese kids eat what they want, they go to college, and they don't want to work so hard."

Here, sumo, once again, is a few thunderous steps ahead of Japanese society. Even though change was forced on the sport, the stampede of foreigners into sumo signals a rare instance in which Japan is tackling one of its biggest problems: a growing labor shortage. Indeed, sumo's *gaijin* experiment carries resonance far beyond the *dohyo*, as the sumo ring is known. After all, if this quintessentially Japanese sport can accept—and even celebrate—foreigners, perhaps the rest of the nation can do the same in other fields.

Of course, international wrestlers still face persistent discrimination, the thousand small indignities that can wear down even a 200-kilogram (441-pound) behemoth. Still, it is now virtually impossible to imagine sumo without athletes whose names are spelled in *katakana*, the Japanese alphabet reserved for foreign words. Imagine: the last time a Japanese-born wrestler won an official tournament was back in 2006. International athletes don't just dominate sumo. They *are* sumo.

Naturally, foreigners can't just turn up in a sandpit and start grappling away. They must learn passable Japanese, especially to match the local athlete's ability to mumble mind-numbingly dull postmatch platitudes. They must train their stomachs to crave not just a Japanese diet, but also a voluminous sumo diet of traditional stews and other foods. They must accept the isolation of a system in which each sumo training stable is allowed to house only one foreign-born athlete.

Foreign wrestlers, like their Japanese counterparts, must also hew to a hierarchy that would make even Confucius wince. Here's a typical day in a sumo stable, where all the athletes must live and train for the duration of their careers: reveille is at 5:30 AM, then comes a full morning of hard practice. Lunch is eaten in order of rank, followed by a session with a topknot hairstylist and a couple of hours of naptime. Then the wrestlers-in-training go on to bathroom cleaning and other chores, a session at the gym, and dinner preparations.

From 7:30 PM to 10:30 PM, the athletes are given free time. After that, lights go out. Wrestlers all sleep in the same room. The rest of the day, junior stablemates must act as glorified servants to their elders. Pride is brutally checked: low-ranked wrestlers are banned from giving out autographs and don't merit a salary at all, merely a living stipend. Even *yokozuna* are paid just \$300,000 a year, a sliver of what a baseball star or top footballer earns.

Within this rigid arrangement, foreign wrestlers, no matter their athletic prowess, are held to a higher standard than their Japanese counterparts. When a pair of Russian wrestlers was caught smoking marijuana in 2008, their transgressions were taken as proof of foreigners' innate unruliness. Then there's the case of Mongolian former grand champion Asashoryu, who despite unquestionable dominance in the ring, was deemed by the local press as lacking *hin*, or dignity.

Practically everything Asashoryu did reeked of a lack of *hin*: failing to defer to a sumo elder in a bathhouse hallway, tugging on an opponent's topknot, pumping his fist before a fight. Early in 2010, the Mongolian got caught up in a drunken scuffle outside a Tokyo nightclub. Though Asashoryu flagellated himself, apologizing in a suitably abject Japanese fashion, he was forced into early retirement. "If Asashoryu had been Japanese, there would have been some criticism but it would not have been as severe," says Takanobu Nakajima, a university economist who is also vice chair of an advisory committee formed to rejuvenate the sport.

Hawaiian-born Konishiki (who started out life as Saleva'a Atisano'e) arguably received even worse treatment in the 1990s, when the 287-kilogram wrestler was denied an expected promotion to *yokozuna* by the Japan Sumo Agency (JSA), the sport's governing body, presumably because he was a little too individualistic, or perhaps a little too, ahem, American.

Nevertheless, foreign-born wrestlers can thrive in Japan and have done so. Hakuho, Asashoryu's Mongolian successor as *yokozuna*, is as bland and deferential as Asashoryu was controversial and cocky. Naturally, he is beloved by his Japanese fans. So, too, is Estonia's Baruto, who has been dubbed sumo's Leonardo DiCaprio by the local media. (OK, maybe there's a passing resemblance between the two, but, really, not all blond, blue-eyed foreigners look alike.) At one tournament, elderly ladies with powdered faces and dowdy cardigans waved Baruto-emblazoned fans while screaming "*Kawaii!*" ("Cute!"). Quite an honor for the son of former Soviet cattle farmers.

International talent has undoubtedly enhanced the action inside the *dohyo*. Nevertheless, all is not well in the house of sumo. Attendance is down, and hard-core fans are dwindling. It might be easy to blame the sport's waning popularity on the *gaijin*. But most of sumo's woes are homegrown. In 2007, the sport was rocked by the hazing death of a 17-year-old Japanese recruit at the hands of his stablemates, who were armed with bottles and a baseball bat.

More damaging has been a 2010 scandal in which 65 wrestlers admitted to participating in illegal betting rings formed through underworld contacts. Mind you, the athletes weren't punting on sumo. Instead, they were wagering on baseball, card games, and—gasp!—golf. But most betting is illegal in Japan and its presence in sumo stables highlighted the sport's longstanding relationship with another Japanese institution: the *yakuza*.

Although organized crime bosses' patronage of sumo wrestlers has been an open secret for decades—a well-worn career trajectory for retired sumo wrestlers has been as Mafioso-style bodyguards or even enforcers—the betting scandal forced fans to face up to the extent of *yakuza* involvement in a sport whose athletes are expected to act as moral paragons of society. More than a dozen wrestlers were suspended from the sport for their illegal

wagering. But the scandal has radiated out from sumo. In November 2010, through a crackdown kick-started by the sumo investigation, police arrested a person thought to be the No. 2 man in the *Yamaguchi-gumi*, the nation's biggest crime syndicate.

Disgust with the *yakuza* connection ran so high that some of sumo's top corporate sponsors pulled out of the 2010 summer highlight, the Nagoya *basho*, or "tournament." (At the Nagoya stadium itself, signs outside warned: "Gangsters keep out.") NHK, the country's national broadcaster, which has for decades devoted weeks of airtime to sumo's six annual *basho*, halted live coverage of the 15-day competition. It was the first time since 1953 that a live sumo feed had been cut, a shocker akin to a TV blackout of soccer's World Cup.

Presumably, NHK was also still smarting from an incident in 2009 in which, Japanese police contend, gangster bosses bought front-row seats at a sumo tournament so their jailed blood brothers could see them on TV and feel a surge of *yakuza* pride. "This is the kind of crisis you may only see once in 100 years," said NHK's president Shigeo Fukuchi, explaining the network's sumo embargo. The subtext was even more alarming. Would sumo, that klieg-lit display, beloved as much as a cultural touchstone as a display of physical prowess, actually exist in a century's time?

The answer, at the start of 2011, was not heartening. Far from reforming itself, the house of sumo imploded further, as if acting out a slow, ritualized form of suicide. For years, the specter of match-fixing has dogged the sport. But confirmation appeared to come when more than a dozen wrestlers and coaches were implicated in fixing matches and using cell phones to coordinate the collusion. The evidence, police say, was collected from mobile phone messages as a by-product of investigations into the 2010 gambling scandal. So grave were the allegations that the JSA canceled the 2011 spring *basho* in Tokyo. It was the first time a tournament had been canceled since the end of World War II, when a bombed-out stadium prevented matches from being held.

To some critics, the match-fixing scandal has delivered precisely the kind of killer blow they hope will finally knock some sense into sumo's elder statesmen. Following the allegations, everyone from Japan's prime minister to ordinary housewives had an opinion on what the sport needed to do to reform itself. Many urged the JSA to inject fresh blood by appointing outsiders to the notoriously closed body. Others argued that sumo should lose its cushy, tax-exempt status and be forced to compete in a leaner, meaner environment. Whatever the solution, one thing is clear: Japanese society is demanding big changes from its sport of giants.

At the same time, it's worth noting that not a single foreign wrestler was banned from the ring because of the match-fixing and gambling imbroglios. Indeed, in the end, what may save sumo is the unlikely combination of foreign wrestlers and national traditions that

verge on the sacred. For decades after the war, Japan maintained a sort of embarrassed silence over its national faith, which combines elements of both Shinto and Buddhism in nature worship and a pantheon of indigenous deities.

Nevertheless, sumo is still deeply rooted in Japanese religious traditions. Suspended over the *dohyo* is a Shinto shrine roof. Before matches, wrestlers sip holy water and purify the ring by sprinkling salt. Once in the sacred space, they clap their hands together to summon the gods. Even the referees wear peaked black hats similar to those of Shinto priests.

Do most wrestlers, even those who are Japanese, truly understand the significance of all this religious regalia? Probably not. Ask the young recruits at Saitama Sakae High School, which boasts one of the nation's best sumo teams, about the sport's hallowed nature, and they will stare blankly. What they like is a good "wrassle"—in extraordinary surroundings.

For more than a divine spirit, what Shinto confers upon sumo is a sense of high theater. An average sumo match lasts but a few seconds. The surrounding pageantry—the *yokozuna's* ritualized *dohyo* dance, the priestly keen of the referee, the spray of white salt against brown sand—is what separates sumo from the slapstick hype of the World Wrestling Federation. It is the same indefinable quality that makes one intuitively understand when a product or design is "Made in Japan." Does it really matter if the victor in a sumo bout is a Georgian who moonlights selling yogurt on Japanese TV?

Perhaps an individual spectator pining for the days of two of the last great Japanese wrestlers, brothers Takanohana and Wakanohana, may become irritated. But traditions in Japan are so deep that they can subsume even seemingly unyielding concepts like ethnicity. Yes, Japan is a largely homogenous and sometimes xenophobic island nation. Even in the face of a mounting labor shortfall, many Japanese people are unwilling to accept the need for, say, Indonesian nurses or Chinese convenience-store clerks.

Still, Japan's ability to elide matters of race is not limited to the sumo ring.

Sadaharu Oh, the Japanese baseball hero, was born to a Chinese father and faced schoolyard discrimination because of his ancestry. Yet his long-standing home-run record is still hailed as the ultimate display of Japanese fortitude. Masayoshi Son, the founder of SoftBank, is ethnically Korean; yet his business success is praised as one of the last great examples of Japan Inc.'s bravura.

Maybe Japan is uniquely Japanese and national comparisons cannot be drawn. But it's still worth thinking of how other sports have adapted and flourished because of an infusion of foreign talent. The apotheosis of America's national pastime, Major League Baseball, is

no less American because of the stream of foreign players from places like the Dominican Republic and, yes, Japan. The same can be said for the National Basketball Association, whose popularity in the United States hasn't waned at all even as the league's rosters have become more international.

Can sumo, as the physical repository of all things Japanese, survive and thrive in the same way? In fact, reforms have already begun. The JSA is a tradition-obsessed bulge of bureaucracy lacking the flexibility of its charges. But the governing body, if only through sheer necessity, has accepted foreigners into the sport, albeit with reluctance and continuing constraints, including the rule introduced in 2010 to limit each of the 50-plus sumo stables in Tokyo to just one foreign-born wrestler. The new rule is a parochial—even protectionist—policy the sport hardly deserves. But so far the restriction has failed to stop the rise of talented foreign wrestlers.

At the same time, the JSA has moved to tackle its gangster problem with more than the usual quick bow of contrition followed by years of inaction. Committees have been formed, the JSA's management shaken up, and wrestlers put on notice that the wink-and-nod attitude toward the *yakuza* will no longer be tolerated. (Given Japanese baseball's success with striking out *yakuza* influence, sumo should be able to succeed with a similar purge.)

The biggest challenge, though, will be to change the salaryman attitude that pervades sumo, an exchange of individual freedoms for lifetime employment that in this day and age no longer feels like such a good—or even realistic—deal. Stablemasters may argue that it's only through the severity of sumo life—the hazing, the curfews, and the constant toilet-scrubbing—that discipline is instilled and loyalty is retained. But if the monastic rigor of sumo stables deters so many potential wrestlers, surely the rules can be relaxed. In the 21st century, does it really make sense for the JSA to demand, for instance, that its athletes abstain from driving cars during tournament weeks?

And as sumo changes, Japan must do the same. The salaryman culture, with all its inefficiencies and inequalities, should not hold sway in the 21st century. Young Japanese have already abandoned its peculiar ethic. In today's competitive economic environment, the country's companies can no longer just expect to lead the world, or live in isolation from it. Sumo proves that foreign blood can invigorate without destroying the ineffable Japanese-ness of the sport. In the same way, unless the Japanese start suddenly procreating more or drastically shortening their life span, immigration will be the best solution for energizing a shrinking, aging society. Says economist Nakajima: "We live in a global economy now—Japan must change, and sumo must change."

In the meantime, sumo's sacred heart will carry the sport through to the next century. "When we visit retirement homes, old people like to touch us and sometimes are brought to tears," says retired wrestler Yoshinori Tashiro. "There's something spiritual about sumo."

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Certainly, when the sport’s *colossi* parade into the ring to open and close each tournament, even the stale stadium air feels consecrated. Slick with perspiration, trembling with determination, the wrestlers circle the ring, bring their hands together, and bow their heads to the gods. It is an act of divination that is quintessentially Japanese. No blond head or Mongolian cheekbone can change this singular moment of worship. [○](#)

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