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Program companion website, visit www.pbs.org/sumoeastandwest

INDEPENDENT LENS's "SUMO EAST AND WEST" OFFERS RARE LOOK INSIDE SECRETIVE WORLD OF ANCIENT JAPANESE SPORT AS IT WRESTLES WITH INFLUENCE OF AMERICANS

A Film by Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards
Premieres Nationally on "Independent Lens"
ITVS's Acclaimed Series on PBS
Tuesday, June 8 at 10 P.M.
(check local listings)

" [SUMO EAST AND WEST] is an engrossing exploration on the meaning of tradition and the inevitability of change. Behind the camera, Pearlstein managed to look past the grotesque and the spectacle to capture the elegance at the heart of the game. Under her direction, every belly-slap, diaper-hitch, and thousand-pound tumble becomes a moment of beauty and grace." —The Austin Chronicle

(San Francisco, CA) — **SUMO EAST AND WEST**, produced by husband-and-wife team Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards, will have its television premiere on *Independent Lens* on Tuesday, June 8 at 10 P.M. (check local listings). Beautifully shot on Super 16mm by director Pearlstein (winner of the 2004 Sundance Film Festival Award for Best Cinematography for *Imelda*), the film is an examination of the cultural collision occurring in Japan as more and more foreigners enter the ancient Japanese sport of sumo.

In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry's fleet of steamships rolled into Yokohama Harbor and announced that the U.S. was going to open up Japan for trade, whether the Japanese liked it or not. In much the same way, cultural change is being brought to the ancient sport of sumo, as Americans once again go head to head with the Japanese to open up a closed society. Four years in the making, **SUMO EAST AND WEST** offers a rare opportunity to go inside the cloistered and highly secretive world of sumo, where the historical clash between East and West plays out in the story of the Western outsiders who have entered this quintessentially Japanese institution.

Sumo is not only Japan's national sport but a centuries-old cultural treasure that is literally part of the Shinto religion. Since the 1970s, however, the success of American sumo wrestlers from Hawaii has marked a controversial change in the sport, culminating in the 1993 ascension of Akebono (Chad Rowan of Oahu) as the first non-Japanese *yokozuna* (grand champion) in history.

(over)

At the same time, foreign promoters have started to market sumo in the West—in decidedly non-traditional form—in glitzy locales such as casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City as part of a broader movement to gain Olympic status for the sport. Yet the push to gain Olympic status has also required various concessions, such as the use of a non-dirt sumo ring, the acceptance of bicycle-style lycra shorts under the sumo belt, and most radically, the introduction of competition for women. In Japan such developments are the source of heated debate between purists like the powerful Nihon Sumo Kyokai (the governing body for professional sumo, which has consciously shrouded the sport in the trappings of ancient Japan), and more global-minded elements in the sumo community that are eager to spread the sport worldwide.

Now sumo faces the question of how much or how little it needs to open up to the world in order to continue to thrive. Is it possible for even the most dedicated Westerners to truly understand, let alone practice, what is in many ways a living embodiment of Japan itself? What happens when they try? And what does this effort reveal about both Japanese and American cultures and the relationship between them?

SUMO EAST AND WEST records the rituals of sumo in Japan: the lives of the wrestlers, their training and the age-old culture that surrounds them. It visits the tournaments and the wall-to-wall TV coverage, captures the fanaticism of the fans and reveals how deeply sumo is woven into the very history and culture of Japan.

Similarly, the film enters the world of amateur sumo in the U.S., following the diverse cast of American sumo wrestlers as they strive for respectability and observing the effect that the internationalization of the sport is having on Japan. **SUMO EAST AND WEST** is told through a tapestry of Super 16mm observational footage, interviews, and archival material, including early films of sumo by Thomas Edison, wartime newsreels, images of sumo in the World War II relocation camps and rare home movies.

SUMO EAST AND WEST was produced with major funding from the Independent Television Service (ITVS), Pacific Islanders in Communications, the National Asian American Telecommunications Association, the Japan-US Friendship Commission and the Japan Foundation.

Additional information and/or downloadable photographs from **SUMO EAST AND WEST** are available at www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos.

The program's interactive companion website www.pbs.org/sumoeastandwest features detailed information about the film, including an interview with the filmmakers, cast and crew bios, as well as links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter. The site also features a "talkback" section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film and more.

Featured Appearances

Wayne Vierra

Wayne Vierra, 28, of Hawaii, is a two-time North American amateur sumo champion in both heavyweight and open weight divisions, and formerly a professional sumo wrestler in Japan. A star high school football player and wrestler from the small, hardscrabble town of Hau'ula on the North Shore of Oahu, Wayne was recruited into professional sumo at the age of 18 by Larry Aweau, the 80-year old *eminence grise* of Hawaiian sumo and the man responsible for sending to Japan almost all the Americans in the pro ranks. Like almost all of his predecessors, Wayne went to Japan without any knowledge of Japanese language or culture and joined Azumazeki-beya, the sumo stable owned by Jesse Kuhaulua, the trailblazing American sumo wrestler who in the 1970s was the first foreigner to win a professional sumo tournament. There, Wayne was befriended by another teenaged Hawaiian recruit, Chad Rowan, who under the name Akebono would go on to become the first non-Japanese grand champion in the two-thousand year history of the sport. The two became fast friends, and together staved off homesickness, culture shock and the notoriously brutal hazing of the sumo world as they pursued their dreams of fame and fortune. During his two years in the feudal world of pro sumo, Wayne rose rapidly through the ranks until—on the cusp of entering the top divisions of the sport—his career was abruptly ended by a ruptured pancreas, which required emergency surgery. Returning to Hawaii, he endured an understandable bout of depression before eventually rejoining the sport on the amateur circuit. He has since established himself as one of the dominant amateurs in the world, aiming someday to lead the first U.S. sumo team to the Olympics.

Akebono

Born Chad Rowan in Waimanalo, Hawaii, Akebono is the first non-Japanese yokozuna (grand champion) in the two-thousand year history of sumo. An honor student in high school in Hawaii, Chad was first spotted as a teenager by sumo recruiter Larry Aweau, who was impressed by the natural grace of the 6'8" future yokozuna while he was serving as a pallbearer at a family funeral. Shipped off to Japan, Chad became the protégé of Jesse Kuhaulua—the first Hawaiian sumo champion in Japan, who had subsequently retired from the sport and opened his own sumo stable—and was given the name Akebono, which means dawn, or rising sun. In a sport where a low center of gravity is considered crucial, sumo cognoscenti scoffed at the prospects for so tall a wrestler. (Chad had been a basketball player as well as a wrestler in high school.) But Akebono quickly proved his doubters wrong, and in 1993 donned the ceremonial white cloth belt of the grand champion, seen being woven by novice sumo wrestlers in the film. Hampered over the past few years by a chronic knee injury, Akebono rebounded in stirring style in late 2000, winning two out of three straight tournaments before announcing his retirement in January of 2001 at the age of 31. More recently, he has stepped out of retirement to enter the popular new combat sport of K-1.

Jesse Kuhaulua

Jesse Kuhaulua of Maui—aka Takamiyama, aka Azumazeki Oyakata—was the first American during the postwar period to become a professional sumo wrestler in Japan. In 1972, ten years after his arrival, Jesse became the first non-Japanese wrestler to win a professional tournament. When he was awarded the Emperor's Cup, a telegram from then-President Nixon was read in the sumo arena, the

first time English had ever been officially spoken there. A ferocious and hugely popular wrestler, Jesse enjoyed an unusually long 21-year career in the ring. Following his retirement, he made the difficult decision to become a Japanese citizen in order to open his own sumo beya (stable)—the first American ever to do so. As a coach Jesse began actively recruiting young wrestlers from Hawaii, among them Wayne Vierra and the future grand champion Akebono. At the height of the foreign invasion in the early '90s, there were more than a dozen Americans from Hawaii in the pro ranks. The success of these Hawaiians eventually led the Nihon Sumo Kyokai to impose a limit of three foreign sumo wrestlers in any given stable.

Konishiki

Born Salevaa Atisanoe and raised in the small Oahu town of Nanakuli, Konishiki was the first true American superstar in professional sumo. Discovered while bodysurfing in Waikiki, Konishiki joined pro sumo in the early 1980s shortly after graduating from high school, where he was an accomplished football player and powerlifter. Within two years he had rocketed to the top ranks of the sport, challenging the top sumotori for the Emperor's Cup and provoking a storm of controversy in Japan with both his rapid ascent and his blunt and outspoken manner—a product of the high value placed on honesty by his Samoan upbringing, but decidedly at odds with the Japanese values of decorum and restraint. Konishiki's sheer size (he fought at more than 600 pounds) prompted charges that he and other Hawaii-born sumotori were damaging the sport by emphasizing size over technique. Critics invoked Commodore Perry's "black ships," a common reference when Japan feels threatened by the outside (and especially the U.S.), but one that carried specific racial overtones because of Konishiki's Polynesian heritage and dark coloring. Years later, counter-charges of discrimination were leveled when Konishiki was denied promotion to yokozuna under the somewhat ad hoc rules governing such matters, an act viewed by many as a transparently xenophobic attempt to keep an outsider from attaining this exalted status. (He was forced to settle for ozeki, the second highest rank in sumo.) Ironically, it was near the end of his career, when he was dropping down the ranks and had become an underdog for perhaps the first time, that Konishiki truly won over the Japanese public. Now retired, the quick-witted and engaging American remains perhaps the single most popular celebrity in all of Japan, a ubiquitous presence through his many television appearances, rap records, and commercial endorsements. Music from Konishiki's debut hip-hop CD, "Konishiki Master of Sumo," is featured extensively in **SUMO EAST AND WEST**.

Sentoryu

Henry Miller—aka Sentoryu—is a native of St. Louis, Missouri and the only American currently in pro sumo who is not from Hawaii. As Henry explains in the film, the name Sentoryu is said to rhyme with St. Louis, at least to Japanese ears. The son of a Japanese mother and an African-American father, Henry has spent the last 12 years in professional sumo, achieving promotion to the top division of the sport during our filming in Japan in May of 2000, making him one of only two such high-ranking wrestlers in his stable. Strikingly easygoing and good-natured, Henry relates for us the culture shock facing a *gaijin* (foreigner) in the thoroughly Japanese world of sumo, an experience made even more challenging by his dark complexion, which drew out the thinly veiled racism in Japanese culture.

Emmanuel “Manny” Yarbrough

Manny Yarbrough is without a doubt the most famous amateur sumo wrestler in the world. A 6'8" 757-pound former college football player, Emmanuel, who goes by “Manny,” is a seven-time member of the U.S. national sumo team and the 1995 amateur world champion in the open weight division. Manny was recruited into sumo by his judo instructor, Yoshiada Yonezuka, the Japanese-born coach of the 1988 and 1992 US Olympic judo teams, who now runs a martial arts studio in Cranford, New Jersey where Manny continues to train. Articulate and witty, Manny has appeared in numerous television programs and print periodicals including *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Dennis Miller Show*, *The View* and *Sports Illustrated*, as well as on MTV and music videos for artists such as Ice-T, and numerous commercials in the U.S. and Japan.

SUMO EAST AND WEST Credits

Director:	Ferne Pearlstein
Produced and Edited by:	Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards
Written by:	Robert Edwards
Director of Photography:	Ferne Pearlstein
Co-Producers:	Yoshi Muto and Nan Bress
Post-Production Supervisor:	Steve Bennett
Archival Researcher:	Edward Engel
Translator:	Noriko Sakamoto and Yoshi Muto
Music:	Akihito Narumi with Shirakami, Doug Edwards and Bobby Lurie

Awards

First Prize at the Director’s View Film Festival in Connecticut.

About the Filmmakers

Ferne Pearlstein (Producer/Director/Cinematographer/Editor) is a filmmaker based in New York City. A graduate of Stanford University’s Master’s Program in Documentary Film, the International Center of Photography and the University of Michigan, Pearlstein began her career as a photojournalist in the New York bureau of the Japanese newspapers Tokyo/Chunichi Shimbun and Chugoku Shimbun. Since turning to motion pictures, she has been producer, director, cinematographer and/or editor on more than 25 films, which have won numerous awards and have been screened and broadcast around the world. Her works include *Raising Nicholas* (her first film, shown at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival), *To Meet the Elephant*, and *Dita and the Family Business*. In addition to **SUMO EAST AND WEST**, Pearlstein photographed *Imelda*, an ITVS-funded feature documentary about Imelda Marcos for which she lived and traveled with the former First Lady of the Philippines during her campaign for the presidency, and for which she won the Documentary Cinematography Prize at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival; *Ruthie and Connie: Every Room in the House* for HBO (2002 Berlinale); and *Big Enough*, Jan Krawitz’ sequel to her award-winning PBS film *Little People*;

The Minors; and *Secret People*, both for PBS. Pearlstein is currently cinematographer on *The Vote*, a documentary about the 2004 Presidential election by Linda Bryant (director of the award-winning ITVS film *Flag Wars*), and *Dreaming of Kawthoolei*, a feature-length documentary about Karen refugees shot in the refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border and in the rebel camps of the Karen Liberation Army in Burma.

Robert Edwards (Producer/Writer/Editor) Based in New York City, Edwards is a graduate of Stanford University's Master's Program in Documentary Film and a former infantry and intelligence officer in the U.S. Army in Europe, the U.S. and the Middle East, including service with a parachute infantry regiment in Iraq in the Persian Gulf War. His award-winning film *Paranoia*—inspired by a skydiving accident in which he broke his back—has been screened and broadcast on television and at film festivals in more than a dozen countries. Among his credits as an editor are Barry Levinson's feature-length documentary *Yesterday's Tomorrows* for Showtime, currently part of a traveling exhibition of the Smithsonian Institution; *Abandoned: The Betrayal of America's Immigrants*, for PBS, which won a DuPont-Columbia Journalism Award; *Stopwatch*, an hour-long PBS documentary by Bill Jersey and Michael Schwarz; and *In Search of Law and Order: Catching Them Early*, the final episode in the landmark three-part series on juvenile justice directed by Ray Telles and produced by Michael Schwarz and Roger Graef for PBS and Channel Four. Edwards recently won the Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his screenplay *Land of the Blind*. His documentary short *The Voice of the Prophet*—an interview with Rick Rescorla, a veteran of three wars and head of security for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, who was killed in the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center—screened at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

Yoshi Muto (Co-Producer) is a Japanese writer and novelist with a unique background in cross-cultural Japanese-American issues. His books include the novels *Stavlos wa Somaranai* (1983) and *Passward wa Fukushu* (1985); the essay collection *Kisha no Me* (1984); two works of literary criticism, *Dzai Osamu* (1998) and *Shimao Toshio* (1999); and translations of the novels *The Front-Runner* (1990), *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1993) and *Harlan's Race* (1996). As a journalist, Muto served as a key reporter for the newspapers *Mainichi Shimbun* and *Tokyo/Chunichi Shimbun* for more than 10 years in the 1980s and early '90s. In 1992 he came to the United States to become the *Tokyo/Chunichi Shimbun's* New York bureau chief, a position he held for the next four years. Since 1996 Muto has worked in New York as a columnist, and currently is an overseas correspondent for several news and literary newspapers and magazines in Japan. His topics range from U.S. news and human rights to business, pop culture and food. Fluent in both Japanese and English, Muto has recently finished working on a dictionary of American slang for the largest maker of dictionaries in Japan, to whom he was responsible for creating new words to express Western ideas and objects not known in Japan. For *Stone Carved Man*, Muto was the crucial player during our shoot in Japan. In addition to organizing the majority of the logistics and acting as translator and guide, he also conducted the Japanese language interviews, employing skills honed during his years as a newspaper reporter. During post-production Muto continues to be invaluable in finessing complex issues of translation and analysis.

Nan Bress (Co-Producer) has worked as an associate producer and in post-production on a number of PBS documentaries including *Regret to Inform* (nominated for an Academy Award® as Best Feature Documentary in 1999) and *Forgotten Fires* (directed by Academy Award® nominee Michael Chandler and produced by Peabody Award winner Vivian Kleiman). She holds a B.A.

from Swarthmore College, an M.A. from the Stanford University Documentary Film and Video Program, and an M.A. from the University of Chicago. She has also directed and produced a number of short documentaries, which have appeared in film festivals around the country. Previously, Bress was the director of the International Speakers Bureau and the interim director of development for the Minnesota Humanities Commission, the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is a weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community or moment in history, which prompted Nancy Franklin in *The New Yorker* to write “Watching *Independent Lens*...is like going into an independent bookstore—you don’t always find what you were looking for but you often find something you didn’t even know you wanted.” Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion websites, and national publicity and community outreach campaigns. Further information about the series is available at www.pbs.org/independentlens. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

About ITVS

Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the weekly series *Independent Lens* on Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. ITVS is a miracle of public policy created by media activists, citizens and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

About PBS

PBS, headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, is a private, nonprofit media enterprise owned and operated by the nation’s 349 public television stations. Serving nearly 90 million people each week, PBS enriches the lives of all Americans through quality programs and education services on noncommercial television, the Internet and other media. More information about PBS is available at www.pbs.org, the leading dot-org Web site on the Internet.

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