

From: Robert Edwards <rsed@concentric.net>
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Sumo East and West
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(Docu□-□.S.-Japan) An ITVS presentation. Produced by Ferne Pearlstein, Robert Edwards. Co-producers, Yoshiharu Muto, Steve Bennett, Nan Bress. Directed by Ferne Pearlstein. Written by Robert Edwards.

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With: Wayne Vierra, Akebono, Konishiki, John Jacques, Jesse Kuhaulua, Maxine Vierra, Doris Lemmons, Wakamatsu Oyukada, Henry "Sentoryu" Miller, Kena Heffernan, Jacob Heffernan, Katsugo Miho, Larry Aweau, Jan Rowan, Emmanuel Yarbrough.
(English, Japanese dialogue.)

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By [ROBERT KOEHLER](#)

A study in athletic sacrifice and cultural differences, "Sumo East and West" enters the insular world of the 2000-year-old Japanese sport of sumo and fluidly tells how it is being slowly opened up by a determined group of Americans. Filmmakers Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards display considerable sensitivity to the sport's near-holy status in Nippon culture, and are ideally positioned as Yank cineastes to connect with those outsiders who are transforming the sport by their very presence. Sure to please fest crowds, docu is already set for PBS airings but also has enough weight to throw around in the theatrical arena.

Opening graphics declare "the arrival of the Hawaiians" in the pro sumo ranks over the past few decades has shaken up Japan's national sport. Dominant point of view is of Americans looking in, led by such stars as Hawaiian-born Akebono (the first non-Japanese sumo champ) and hard-scrabble vets like Wayne Vierra, whose roller-coaster career provides Pearlstein and Edwards with their central human story.

To the film's fault, the Japanese view of an invasion by foreigners isn't addressed until late into the story, perhaps justifying the national concern of ancient cultural traditions being eroded in the globalized post-war period.

To American Vierra, the culture shock of living and competing in Japan is tough enough, but the grueling standards and training for sumo are beyond comprehension for most spectators. Most notable is the weight factor; wrestlers can reach 750 pounds. Pearlstein's camera, granted unprecedented access in Japan, records the brutal rituals endured by rookies designed to test their physical and mental mettle for the intense competitions.

While Vierra was forced to retire after a pancreas rupture curtailed his fast rise through the ranks, Akebono remains in the thick of things in Japan. Another retired American champ, Konishiki, has parlayed his fame into a kind of commodity, including rap singles and videos. Oddly little time is spent with the only African American wrestler in the bunch, Henry "Sentoryu" Miller, who is briefly heard making references to sumo training's code of self-sufficiency and how his status in the sport tends to defuse racism.

Docu's latter half profiles Vierra's and fellow Oahu-based coach John Jacques' ongoing training of American sumos, how it has diverted some kids from crime and drugs, and Vierra's efforts to bring teams to amateur competitions. A surprising aspect in Pearlstein's and Edwards' telling is how sumo is no longer embraced by Japanese youth, who seem to far prefer American baseball.

America's own acceptance of sumo is an open question, exemplified in the finale -- an amateur match set in, of all places, the Hollywood Park casino near Los Angeles, where the contrast to the rigorous traditions of the Japanese matches seen earlier is almost comic.

Pic was lensed in a widescreen frame on 16mm, then scanned to the high-definition video format screened at the L.A. fest. Production package brings the sport and personalities vividly alive.

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Camera (color, 16mm widescreen), Pearlstein; editors, Pearlstein, Edwards; music, Doug Edwards, Bobby Lurie, Shirakami, Akihito Narumi; sound, Andy Reuland, Richard Fleming, John Eddy; supervising sound editor, Lew Goldstein. Reviewed at IFP Los Angeles Film Festival (Documentary), June 13, 2003. Running time: 87 MIN.

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