

# SUMO EAST AND WEST

## PRINCIPAL CAST

**WAYNE VIERRA.** Wayne Vierra 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 in 1990 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. There he 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. As a novice sumotori, 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. After 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 to lead the first US sumo team in the 2008 Olympics, should the sport achieve Olympic status. In one of the most important sequences in “Sumo East and West,” Wayne explains the stoicism that is integral to sumo—the maintenance of dignity both in victory and defeat—and not coincidentally the aspect of the sport that is most difficult for Americans to master. Diametrically opposed to the bravado that is cultivated in American athletes, this self-discipline is reflected in Wayne’s sumo name Kamakiiwa—stone carved man—harkening to the self-control that, ironically, helped him cope with his disappointment over the end of his pro career.

**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 serving as a pallbearer at a family funeral when he was spotted by a sumo recruiter who was impressed by the natural grace of the 6'8" future Yokozuna.

Shipped off to Japan while still a teenager, Chad was given the name Akebono (which means dawn, or rising sun) and became the protégé of the legendary Jesse Kuhaulua of Maui, who in 1972 was the first non-Japanese to win a professional Japanese sumo tournament, and subsequently retired from the sport and became the owner of his own sumo stable. In a sport where a low center of gravity is considered crucial, sumo cognoscenti scoffed at the prospects for so tall a wrestler as Akebono (who 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.

**JESSE KUHAULUA.** Jesse Kuhaulua of Maui—aka Takamiyama, aka Azumazeki Oyakata—was the first American in the postwar period to become a professional sumo wrestler in Japan. In 1972, ten years after his arrival in Japan, 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 Hawaiian 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 Japan Sumo Association to impose a limit of three foreign sumo wrestlers in any given stable. (With Akebono's retirement in late 2001, only three Americans remained in professional sumo, including the Grand Champion Musashimaru, who retired in 2003, and Henry Miller, aka Sentoryu, who appears in the film.)

**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, basketball player, and power-lifter.

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 US), but one which 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. (He was forced to settle for Ozeki, the second highest rank in sumo.) This denial was viewed by some observers as a transparently xenophobic attempt to keep an outsider from attaining the exalted Grand Champion status. 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."

**EMMANUEL "MANNY" YARBROUGH.** Emmanuel Yarbrough is without a doubt the most famous amateur sumo wrestler in the world. A 6'8" 757-pound former college football player, Manny is a seven-time member of the US national sumo team and the 1995 amateur world champion in the open weight division.

Manny was recruited into sumo by his judo instructor, Yoshisada 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 on 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,” “Late Night with Conan O’Brien,” “The Dennis Miller Show,” “The View,” MTV, and Sports Illustrated, as well as music videos for artists such as Ice-T and numerous commercials in the US and Japan.

**THE OAHU SUMO CLUB.** The undisputed dean of amateur sumo in Hawaii is John Jacques, a white American fluent in Japanese and a school vice principal by trade. Every Saturday, dozens of wrestlers both male and female gather at the backyard dohyo of Jacques’ house on the North Shore of Oahu for practices that reflect the strong sense of community in Hawaiian sumo.

Not surprisingly, sumo in Hawaii is that much closer to its Japanese origins than sumo on the Mainland, and Jacques—a former rugby and football player who came to the islands some 30 years ago from his native New York—is fiercely protective of the reputation of the sport. “This area is the real hotbed of sumo. A lot of our kids are very at-risk, and sumo has given them another avenue. We’ve sent four boys on to pro sumo, three boys into collegiate sumo, and although we haven’t had any Ozekis or Yokozunas, 95% of the guys that do amateur sumo in Hawaii and probably 80% of the guys in America do it in this twenty-mile stretch.” Among Jacques’ longtime club members are the Heffernan family: father Roger and sons Kena and Jacob. Roger took up sumo while a student of John’s at Kahuku High School. Later, as a single father, he brought his two sons to sumo practice from the time they were little boys. As a result, Kena and Jake—now grown men, who went on to become football and wrestling stars in both high school and college—are today among two of the best amateur sumotori in the world, as is Roger. Oahu Sumo Club practices and amateur sumo tournaments often feature two generations of the Heffernans doing battle on the dohyo: brother versus brother and father versus son.

**JUDGE KATSUGO MIHO.** A retired attorney, judge, and Hawaii state legislator, Kats Miho was born and raised on the island of Maui, the son of Japanese immigrants. On December 7, 1941, Miho was a college freshman and ROTC cadet at the University of Hawaii on Oahu when Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor. Miho and several nisei classmates (second generation Americans of Japanese descent) immediately went down to the Army recruiting station to enlist in the Hawaii Territorial Guard, even as Miho’s father—a Japanese national—was arrested and placed in a POW camp as an enemy alien.

Just a few months later Miho and his comrades were dismissed from the service en masse after an Army officer from the mainland on an inspection tour of Hawaii was shocked to find Japanese-Americans guarding US facilities. Two years later, after the internment of Japanese-Americans on the mainland (but not in Hawaii), the War Department reversed itself and put out a call for volunteers for an all-nisei Army regiment. Miho and his brother immediately signed up and quickly found themselves part of the soon-to-be-legendary 442d Regimental Combat Team, which went on to become the most decorated US regiment in the war, fighting its way from North Africa to Italy to France to Germany. (The nisei soldiers of the 442d, anxious to prove their loyalty to the United States, had wanted to fight in the Pacific, but were sent to Europe instead due to lingering concerns about their loyalty. Such concerns were quickly dispelled by the 442d’s peerless record in combat.) In April 1945 Miho’s artillery battalion was among the liberators of Dachau at a time when many of their own families were being held in internment camps in the United States. After the war, it was the 442d Veterans Club that sponsored the first postwar goodwill tours to Hawaii by professional Japanese sumotori. These tours resulted in the recruitment of Jesse Kuhaulua, who in 1962 became the first Hawaii-born wrestler to go

to Japan and break into the pro ranks. A lifelong sumo fan and connoisseur of the sport, Judge Miho was a driving force in the 442d's efforts, and negotiated Jesse's contract with the Sumo Kyokai, as well as those for Konishiki, Akebono, Wayne Vierra, Musashimaru, and the other Hawaii-bred wrestlers who followed.