

SUMO EAST AND WEST

PRODUCTION NOTES

Four years in the making, SUMO EAST AND WEST offers a rare insight into one of the most esoteric corners of Japanese culture, an institution currently in the throes of dramatic change as a result of increased contact with the West.

The world of sumo is highly secretive, bound by tradition, and closed to outsiders. As the US-born grand champion Akebono says in the film, it is a world that even ordinary Japanese people often don't understand. Producers Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards spent more than a year negotiating permission and arranging the logistics of filming professional sumo in Japan, as well as covering the growing world of amateur sumo from Tokyo to Atlantic City to LA to Hawaii.

SUMO EAST AND WEST examines the impact of American wrestlers in what may be the most singularly Japanese of institutions. The rising interest in sumo represents a new manifestation of the fascination with the exoticism of the East, one that often takes the form of objectification of "the Other." At the same time, the Americanization of sumo is a case study in how the U.S. absorbs a foreign cultural element and gives it a uniquely American spin, often leaving it transformed beyond recognition. The spreading across the globe of sumo is a testament to the influence of Japanese culture. But at what point is sumo no longer sumo?

Production History

Production on SUMO EAST AND WEST began with a shoot at the "Night of Giants" amateur sumo tournament at the Trump Taj Mahal Casino in Atlantic City, NJ in November 1998. An unlikely venue for a ritualistic 2000-year-old Japanese sport, casinos have actually been the location of choice for sumo in the West as American promoters attempt to market sumo on the model of professional boxing, or more outlandishly, professional wrestling. Their efforts have met with surprising success: "Night of the Giants" drew amateur competitors from the U.S., Japan, Russia, Germany, Norway, Canada, Mongolia, and numerous countries in Eastern Europe and was broadcast on ESPN-2 where, according to its promoters, it scored the highest ratings in the history of the channel. It was also at this event that the producers first encountered two of the wrestlers who would become main characters in the film, Wayne Vierra of Hawaii (350 lbs), a former professional sumo wrestler in Japan and now the North American amateur champion, and Emmanuel Yarborough of New Jersey (757 lbs), the 1995 world amateur champion.

Production continued with a shoot in Los Angeles at the North American Amateur Sumo Championships, held amid the blackjack tables of the Hollywood Park Casino. Like Night of the Giants, the LA event was a far cry from the solemnity and ceremony of professional sumo in Japan. The tournament was held on the actual casino floor itself, on a patchwork of judo mats instead of the meticulously crafted dirt *dohyo* (sumo ring) blessed by a Shinto priest that is a fixture of Japanese sumo. Most of the competitors wore lycra bicycle shorts under their sumo belts in deference to Western discomfort with baring the buttocks, while ESPN's cameramen ran up and down the mat and the crowd hooted and hollered at a round card girl in hot pants and a tight t-shirt emblazoned with the logo of Asahi, the Japanese beer that is a major worldwide sponsor of sumo. This sort of event represents precisely the kind of Westernized sumo that purists in Japan—chief among them the powerful and conservative Nihon Sumo Kyokai, the governing body for professional sumo—fear will be the fate of the sport should it be exported to the West.

Filming next shifted to Hawaii, where the sport first came to the U.S. and which remains the hotbed of American sumo. "Probably 85% of the guys who do sumo in North America do it in this twenty mile

stretch,” notes John Jacques, 51, a school principal on the North Shore of Oahu and the coach of the Oahu Sumo Club. A beefy, blue-eyed blond who had spent years in rugby, football, and freestyle wrestling, Jacques was invited in 1976 by the brahmins of pro sumo to spend a summer at a professional stable in Japan, the better to spread the gospel of sumo upon his return. He has since made a crusade of recruiting boys (and girls) from the hardscrabble towns of the North Shore into the sport as a way of teaching self-discipline and offering an alternative to the drugs and gangs that have infected that economically depressed area.

This twenty-mile stretch of the North Shore to which Jacques refers is also home to Wayne Vierra, the film’s main character. A high school football and wrestling star, Vierra was recruited into the feudal world of professional sumo at the age of 18. During his two years in Japan, he rose through the ranks rapidly until his career was abruptly ended by a ruptured pancreas which required emergency surgery. Returning to Hawaii, Wayne endured a lengthy bout of depression before rejoining the sport on the amateur circuit. With a gentle manner that belies his ferocious intensity in the sumo ring, Wayne describes his experience in Japan, how he learned the language, and overcame homesickness for Hawaii to the point where he was homesick for Japan when he had to leave. Melancholy but dignified, Wayne also discusses his love for sumo and dream to lead the first U.S. team in the 2008 Olympics.

Other shoots in Hawaii found the filmmakers following Japanese tourists at the Pearl Harbor memorial; filming in Honolulu’s famous Bishop Museum; and conducting interviews with Jan Rowan, mother of Akebono; and Larry Aweau, the 80-year-old *eminence grise* of island sumo, and the man responsible for recruiting almost all the Hawaiian wrestlers in the pro ranks. Sumo first gained a foothold in the U.S. through the immigration of Japanese laborers to Hawaii in the late 19th century, a tale told in the film by Katsugo Miho, the son of a Japanese language school principal on the island of Maui. Before World War II sumo clubs were numerous in Hawaii and on the West Coast, with an estimated 6,000 wrestlers active in the U.S. and its territories. But the attack on Pearl Harbor brought a sudden and cataclysmic change. As newsreels whipped up public bloodlust against Japan—and as Japanese-Americans were herded into “relocation” camps—sumo enthusiasts buried their sumo belts, trophies, and home movies in their backyards for fear of being branded as disloyal or un-American. Later, as a member of the all-nisei 442d Regimental Combat Team, Miho was among the liberators of Dachau at a time when his father was in a POW camp in the U.S. and his two sisters had returned to their ancestral home city of Hiroshima. (Today Miho is an attorney who negotiates the contracts for all the Hawaii-born sumotori who go to Japan.)

Concluding a year-long process of bilingual, cross-cultural, trans-Pacific negotiation, the crew next spent six weeks in Japan filming in Tokyo, Aomori, Fukuoka, and Nagasaki during the spring of 2000. Pearlstein and Edwards shared a single, closet-sized Japanese hotel room for the duration of the shoot, and shockingly, still decided to get engaged the following winter.

All filming of sumo in Japan was coordinated through the Nihon Sumo Kyokai (Japan Sumo Association), the famously conservative organization with control over all aspects of pro sumo. Technically, the filmmakers could not even film a random sumo wrestler glimpsed on the streets of Tokyo without the specific permission of the Kyokai. While some in Japan are eager to have amateur sumo broadened to become a worldwide sport and eventually included in the Olympics, the Sumo Kyokai has consciously shrouded sumo in the trappings of ancient Japan in an effort to make it even more traditional and closed to outsiders. The Kyokai is a billion dollar business run entirely by retired sumo wrestlers, most of whom have no formal education beyond junior high. Its desire to preserve sumo’s traditions against the tide of those who would turn it into some sort of Asiatic World Wrestling Federation is both understandable and admirable. Yet the Kyokai is also seen by many as an exclusionary old boys’ club fighting a losing battle with modernity, multiculturalism, and the changing face of life in Japan.

The Kyokai officially distances itself from amateur sumo and its Olympic ambitions, taking the position that concessions like a non-dirt sumo ring, the creation of weight classes (which do not exist in pro sumo), and most radically, competition for women render amateur sumo an entirely different sport. Fearing foreign encroachment on its national sport, the Kyokai has lately imposed restrictions on the number of foreigners who may be in any one professional stable, as well as requiring de facto knowledge of Japanese, effectively disallowing the majority of recruits from Hawaii and anywhere else. With the demographic of its fans aging and with the West encroaching, these self-appointed guardians of the purity of sumo are ever vigilant to further erosion, even as more global-minded elements and the pressure of Western interests militate for more, not less, internationalism.

Among the key interviews and observational material filmed in Japan were the stories of three most important men in the history of Americans in sumo:

- Jesse Kuhaulua of Maui, aka Takamiyama, the Hawaiian who in 1972 paved the way for all the Americans who followed by becoming the first foreigner to win a professional sumo tournament in Japan. After retiring, the man still best known simply as Jesse became the first foreigner to open his own sumo stable, where he continues to coach, and was responsible for bringing into sumo both Konishiki and Akebono.
- Konishiki: nee Salevaa Atisanoe of Oahu, the 600-lb. Hawaii-born wrestler who in the late 1980s became the first true Western superstar in sumo. Konishiki's rapid ascent through the ranks provoked a storm of controversy in Japan, prompting dire allusions to Commodore Perry's "black ships," a common reference when Japan feels threatened by the outside, but one which carried specific racial overtones because of Konishiki's Samoan heritage and dark coloring. Counter-charges of discrimination followed 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. Now retired, the quick-witted and engaging American remains the single most popular celebrity in all of Japan through his ubiquitous presence on TV shows, commercials, and in merchandising. (Music from Konishiki's latest venture, a hip-hop CD called "Konishiki Master of Sumo," is featured extensively in SUMO EAST AND WEST).
- Akebono: nee Chad Rowan of Oahu, who in 1993 became the first non-Japanese yokozuna (grand champion) in the history of sumo. Akebono and Wayne Vierra began their careers together as teenaged novices in Jesse's stable, staving off homesickness as they adjusted to the culture shock of life in Japan and the brutal world of pro sumo before Wayne's sudden injury sent their lives on divergent paths. Akebono relates the story of his discovery (as a teenaged pallbearer at a family funeral, where the natural grace of the 6'8" youngster impressed a sumo recruiter who was in attendance), his struggle to disprove his doubters, and his ultimate triumph as yokozuna. Following a three-year slump prompted by a knee injury, the 31-year-old 500-lb. Akebono won two tournament championships in 2000, and soon after announced his retirement from the sport.
- Sentoryu: nee Henry Miller of St. Louis, MO. The son of an African-American father and a Japanese-American mother, Sentoryu has been a professional sumo wrestler for the past 12 years. In the film he relates the culture shock facing a *gaijin* (foreigner) in the thoroughly Japanese world of sumo, an experience made even more challenging by the barely veiled racism in ethnically homogenous Japanese society.

Among the many diverse locations and events filmed were professional sumo at the Ryogoku Kokugikan (Tokyo's main sumo arena); inside two different professional sumo stables; an invitational amateur sumo tournament in northern Japan, featuring the top national teams from the U.S., Georgia, Russia, Poland, Mongolia, Egypt, and Estonia); schoolboy sumo clubs; the controversial Yasukuni War Memorial Shrine; sumo exhibitions by grade school boys and girls; the sumo fan club at Tokyo Women's University; NHK Television Studios English language simulcast of sumo; sumo jinku singers; karaoke bars; the Hawaiian restaurant in Tokyo run by owner/chef George Kalima, a retired pro sumo wrestler; the competitive hula class taught by Kalima's Japanese wife; a festival in the seaside town of Shimoda celebrating the 1853 arrival of Commodore Perry and his black ships; and dozens of interviews. Naturally, not all of this diverse material made it into the finished film.

Integral to the Japan shoot was Co-Producer Muto Yoshiharu, a Japanese novelist, journalist, and literary critic who had been a colleague of Pearlstein's since their days with the Tokyo/Chunichi Shimbun. Muto remained crucial to the success of the project as post-production began in New York City in August 2000, finessing translation and cross-cultural issues in the film.

Style

SUMO EAST AND WEST employs a deliberately classical documentary style appropriate to the traditional nature of the subject, yet deceptively challenging and complex. Because sumo is a world alien to most Americans, one of the film's main aesthetic objectives was to use the characters' own voices to convey the historical and cultural background essential to the rest of the story without narration. The film also employs startling juxtapositions of image and sound to convey the cross-cultural message, ranging from traditional Japanese music, to excerpts from "The Mikado" (an early work of Eastern objectification by the West), to the sumo hip-hop of Konishiki, to the global sound of Japanese pop bands like Shonen Knife.

SUMO EAST AND WEST was shot on Super 16mm film, the picture quality and wide aspect ratio of which is ideal for capturing the visceral nature and visual majesty of the subject, as well as providing maximum resolution for future HDTV broadcast. Appropriate for the Japanese subject matter of the film and impressed with cinematographer Ferne Pearlstein's previous work, Fuji Films graciously provided film stock at a discount.

Editing SUMO EAST AND WEST took over eighteen months, given the complexity of the film and the difficulty of working in both English and Japanese.

SUMO EAST AND WEST is also used in the curricula of colleges and universities including Yale, Vassar, and Sarah Lawrence, as well as by the U.S. State Department as part of its training program for diplomats and other personnel assigned to Japan.

SUMO EAST AND WEST will have its national US broadcast premiere on PBS's Independent Lens series on June 8, 2004. Check local listings.

Funding

Funders of this film include the Independent Television Service (ITVS), an arm of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Pacific Islanders in Communications; the National Asian American Telecommunications Association; the Japan-US Friendship Commission, and the Japan Foundation. The project's non-profit fiscal sponsor is Catticus Corporation of Berkeley, CA, founded by legendary documentary filmmaker Bill Jersey, for whom Producer/Editor Robert Edwards has edited several films. SUMO EAST AND WEST also received generous in-kind support from Japan Airlines, Hawaiian Airlines, Hilton and Outrigger Hotels, Fuji Films, and Colorlab film laboratory. Despite such support, the costs of producing a feature film on Super 16 shot in

Japan, Hawaii, and both coasts of the US were significant. A true labor of love, Pearlstein and Edwards wrote, produced, directed, shot, and edited the film without pay, as well as donating their camera and editing equipment free of charge, and investing money they didn't have through the miracle of credit cards.

Distribution

Domestic US television rights for SUMO EAST AND WEST are held by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The film's international television distributor is CS Associates (contact Lisa Carey at 617-923-0077). For home video and educational sales go to <http://www.sumoeastandwest.com/buy.html> Theatrical rights are still available.

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