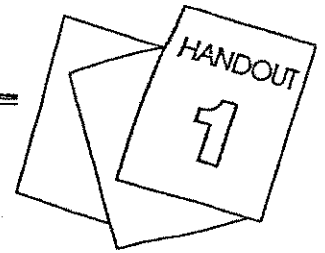


SUMO: JAPAN'S NATIONAL SPORT



Sumo: Its Cultural Roots

Introduction

Almost every aspect of sumo wrestling is centuries old and deeply rooted in Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion. Shinto stresses purity, brightness, and goodness as inherent qualities of humanity and the natural world. The religion is devoted entirely to life experiences in this world, emphasizing the search for purity, a sensitivity to beauty, and a special intimacy with nature.

Shinto is a vital part of Japanese society today. Japanese people feel a sense of renewal when visiting Shinto shrines, the sacred buildings erected for the *kami* (gods). There are over 100,000 Shinto shrines in Japan today. Families celebrate important stages of life—such as births, weddings, and the attainment of certain ages—with Shinto rituals. The greatest family event of all, the New Year, is celebrated with Shinto rituals to ensure good fortune and health in the coming year.

Sumo's origins in Shinto go back to prehistorical myths about the creation of Japan. These legends say that a sumo match decided which group of gods would rule Japan. During rice planting and harvesting seasons, sumo ceremonies were practiced in Shinto shrines to appease the gods. They were also held to predict the outcome of the harvest. During Japan's Edo period (1603-1867), sumo gained popularity, developing into a spectator sport conducted during important festivals. The rituals and traditions that accompany sumo were developed during this period and, with modern adaptations, have been passed down to the present time.

The Setting

Sumo matches take place in a circular ring 15 feet in diameter on an 18 x 18 foot square mound of hard clay, the *dohyo*. The *dohyo* is considered sacred, having been consecrated during *oharai*, a purification rite performed before a sumo tournament begins. Buried in the center of the *dohyo* are offerings of rice and seaweed, symbols of fertile harvest. Once the ring has been purified, no one but the wrestlers and the referee may stand upon it. The referees wear the robe and headdress of Shinto priests, dating back several centuries. Fans and wrestlers never question the referee's judgments. A canopy above the *dohyo*, designed like the roof of a Shinto shrine, creates the image of a sacred place.

The Tournament

Sumo tournaments are held in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, and Fukuoka. Over 10,000 spectators attend the formal 15-day tournaments, held six times each year, and millions more watch on television. Because sumo tournaments traditionally coincided with summer and autumn shrine festivals, many older attendees display their respect by wearing kimono, the formal attire appropriate to wear in the presence of the *kami*. Between tournaments, wrestlers participate in promotional tours throughout the country, contributing to the immense popularity of sumo among every segment of Japanese society.

Opening Ceremonies

In a formal ceremony held before each tournament, the *dohyo* is purified by scattering salt, a Shinto symbol of purification, to insure the wrestlers' safety and a good harvest. Drummers parade around the *dohyo* and into the town to announce that the tournament will begin the following day.

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In a ceremony that opens each day of each tournament, the crowd views all the wrestlers in a given rank. The sumo wrestlers enter the arena in full formal attire, including a belt called a *keshomawashi*, which is a heavy and brightly colored silk lower-body wrapping with an ornamental apron front. *Yokozunas*, grand champions, wear a heavy white rope called a *tsuna*. The *tsuna* represents the sacred ropes that hang under the *torii*, the sacred gateways at the entrances to Shinto shrines. The front of the *tsuna* is adorned with *gohei*, the symbolic paper offerings to the *kami* that hang from those ropes. For the tournament, the top ranked wrestlers' long hair is styled by a hairdresser in a traditional style called *oichomage*, a topknot bound tightly in the shape of a *ginkgo* leaf and lacquered. When let down, the wrestlers' hair is shoulder length. At the end of the opening ceremony the wrestlers pray for a good harvest and dedicate themselves to the day's matches.

The Match

Before his bout, a sumo wrestler receives water from the preceding wrestler on his team if he was victorious or from the wrestler on his team waiting to fight if the previous wrestler lost his match. The water—called *chikaramizu*, or “power water”—is believed to give strength; thus wrestlers want to receive it from a victorious wrestler, but not from one who has just lost. Water is also believed to purify the wrestler. The wrestler then wipes his mouth and body with a *chikaragami*, “strength paper,” (paper is also used in Shinto rituals). All sumo wrestlers clap their hands prior to a match to attract the attention of the gods—in the same way that Japanese people clap three times in front of Shinto shrines to call upon the gods.

The wrestlers rub their hands together in front of their bodies to symbolize the purification with grass that samurai performed before going into battle. They then display open hands with palms upward in a symbolic gesture to demonstrate that they have no weapons, thus insuring an honest contest. Finally, they stomp their feet to drive away demons and evil spirits from the sumo ring.

Before the wrestlers actually begin the bout, they walk back and forth from their corners to the middle of the ring. Each time they do so they toss a handful of salt in the air to purify themselves and the ring.

Once the wrestlers begin the bout, the match often lasts less than a minute. However, intense concentration is required of the sumo wrestlers. Sumo is based on pushing power, belt holds, pulling, and other techniques. Over 70 possible holds and positions exist. The goal of the sumo wrestler is to cause his opponent to touch the dohyo with any part of his body other than his feet or to force his opponent out of the ring. After the match, the loser stands at the edge of the ring, bows, and exits humbly.

There are no weight categories in sumo. Wrestlers usually weigh between 250 and 375 pounds. The average sumo wrestler weighs twice the weight of the average Japanese person. Since sumo is regarded as an art, superior techniques are necessary for success. There are six divisions (and many ranks in each division) in sumo wrestling. Promotion depends on the number of wins and losses during a tournament. To maintain their rank, wrestlers must continue to post winning records in the tournaments. The highest sumo rank is *yokozuna*, grand champion; the second rank is *ozeki*. Rituals accompany each promotion in rank. If the Sumo Association elects to promote an *ozeki* to *yokozuna*, he performs a ceremony at the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. Thereafter he will perform this same ritual prior to the start of tournament matches in the top division.

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