

## Sumo Contents

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Kokugikan,

## 1. Origin of Sumo

ACCORDING to Japanese legend the very origin of the Japanese race depended on the outcome of a sumo match. The supremacy of the Japanese people on the islands of Japan was supposedly established when the god, Take-mikazuchi, won a sumo bout with the leader of a rival tribe. Apart from legend, however, sumo is an ancient sport dating back some 1500 years.



*Sechie-zumo*: In the Nara Period, the Imperial Court gathered wrestlers from all over the country to hold grand sumo tournament, called the *sechie-zumo*. It was a ceremonial banquet to celebrate peace on earth and bountiful harvests.



住吉神社の相撲会

A Sumo bout in the Muromachi Period.

Its origins were religious. The first sumo matches were a form of ritual dedicated to the gods with prayers for a bountiful harvest and were performed together with sacred dancing and dramas within the precincts of the shrines. The Nara Period (The 8th century) sumo was introduced into the ceremonies of the Imperial Court. A wrestling festival was held annually which included music and dancing in which the victorious wrestlers participated. Early sumo was a rough-and-tumble affair combining elements of boxing and wrestling with few or no holds barred. But under the continued patronage of the Imperial Court rules were formulated and techniques developed so that it came more nearly to resemble the sumo of today.

A military dictatorship was established in Kamakura in 1192 and a long period of intense warfare ensued. Sumo, quite naturally, was regarded chiefly for its military usefulness and as a means of increasing the efficiency of the fighting men. Later in the hands of the samurai, jujitsu was developed as an offshoot of sumo. Peace was finally restored when the different warring factions were united under the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1603. A period of prosperity followed, marked by the rise to power of the new mercantile classes. Professional sumo groups were organized to entertain the rapidly expanding plebian class and sumo came into its own as the national sport of Japan. The present Japan Sumo Association has its origins in these groups first formed in the Edo Period.



A colorful *dohyo-iri* of Makuuchi rikishi color-printed by Kunisada around 1840.



A scene of Sumo bout color-printed by Shunei in the Kansei Period about 1790.

## 2. Rules of Sumo

THE sumo ring is called the *dohyo* and takes its name from the straw rice bag which mark out its different parts. The greater portion of each bale is firmly buried in the earth. The *dohyo* is 18 feet square and 2 feet high and is constructed of a special kind of clay. The hard surface is covered with a thin layer of sand. The bout is confined to an inner circle a little over 15 feet in diameter. Over the *dohyo* suspended from the ceiling by cables is a roof resembling a Shinto shrine with four giant tassels hanging from each corner to signify the seasons of the year.

A bout is won by forcing the opponent out of the inner circle or throwing him in the *dohyo*. To lose the match it is not necessary to fall in the circle or to be pushed completely out. The *rikishi* who touches the ground with any part of his body, his knee or even the tip of his finger or his top-knot, loses the match. Or he need only put one toe or his heel over the straw bales marking the circle. Striking with fists, hair pulling, eye gouging, choking and kicking in the stomach or chest are prohibited. It is also against the rules to seize the part of the band covering the vital organs. As there are no weight limits as in boxing or western wrestling it is possible for a *rikishi* to find himself pitted against an opponent twice his own weight.

There are six Grand Tournaments a year, three are held



The general view of the *dohyo*.





The Emperor's Cup is awarded to *Hakuho* the winner of the tournament

in Tokyo, one in Osaka, Nagoya and Kyushu. A tournament lasts for fifteen days, each *rikishi* fighting once every day with a different opponent. The winner of the tournament, in other words the *rikishi* with the best record of wins over losses, is awarded the Emperor's Cup on the final day after the last match. There are three additional prizes, the *shukun-sho* awarded to the *rikishi* who upset the most *yokozuna* (grand champions) and *ozeki* (champions), the *kanto-sho* for fighting spirit and the *gino-sho* for technique. To be eligible for any of these prizes, the *rikishi* must also have won at least eight of his fifteen matches.

### 3. Banzuke (Sumo Rankings)

THERE are at present about 800 *rikishi* in professional sumo from the lowly trainee to the *yokozuna* at the top. After each Grand Tournament the *banzuke* are revised *rikishi* being either promoted or demoted depending on their performance during the fifteen days. A new official ranking list called the *banzuke* is issued by the *Nihon Sumo Kyokai* printed in an ancient, stylized calligraphy. The *rikishi* are first arbitrarily divided into east and west teams although they do not compete as teams nor is a *rikishi* from one team necessarily matched against one of the other. Heading the *banzuke* in large, bold characters are the names of the upper division *rikishi*, the *maku-uchi*. The *maku-uchi* group includes the five top ranks:

1. Yokozuna
2. Ozeki
3. Sekiwake
4. Komusubi
5. Maegashira

The number of the *maku-uchi* are within 42. The remainder of the upper division *rikishi* or approximately a quarter of their total number are distributed among the top four grades.

The image shows a historical Japanese Banzuke, a sumo ranking chart. It is a large rectangular chart divided into several horizontal sections. The top section lists the names of the highest-ranking sumo wrestlers (yokozuna and ozeki) in large characters. Below this are sections for the juro (junior) and makushita (lower) ranks, with names listed in smaller characters. The chart is organized into columns, likely representing different divisions or tournaments. The bottom section contains administrative information, including the date and the official responsible for the chart.

Banzuke

Listed below these on the *banzuke*, in progressively smaller characters, appear the names of the *juro* and *makushita*, and below these the *san-dan-me*, *jo-ni-dan* and lastly the *jo-no-kuchi*. Below the *makushita* do not get to wrestle on each day of a tournament. The matches start in the morning with those of the lowest ranking *rikishi*, followed by those of progressively higher and higher rank, building up to a climax towards the end of the day with the bouts featuring the *yokozuna*.

The position of the *yokozuna* is unique. In the past three hundred years since the title was created only Sixty-nine *rikishi* have been so honored. The *yokozuna*, alone of all the ranks can never be demoted even if he makes a poor showing during a tournament. Instead should he continue with a bad record, he is expected to retire. Before a *rikishi* can even be considered for promotion to *yokozuna*, he must have won two consecutive tournaments while holding the rank of *ozeki*. He must have proven himself capable of turning in consistent performances and in the critical eyes of the *Sumo Kyokai* be a man of character worthy to hold such an exalted position.

The rank of a *rikishi* determines the style in which his long hair is dressed. The style worn by *juro* and *maku-uchi* is the more elaborate and is called the *o-icho-mage* after the ginkgo leaf which the top-knot is supposed to resemble. The lower ranks wear the *chon-mage*, a plainer style tied with paper strings. The hair styles are adopted from those fashionable in the Edo Period and have been preserved not merely because of tradition but also because they serve as a head protection in the event of falls.



## 4. Sumo Ceremonies

SUMO has managed to survive with its formalized ritual and traditional etiquette intact making it unique among sports. On each day of the tournament immediately before the *maku-uchi* matches are scheduled, the colorful *dohyo-iri* or “entering the ring” ceremony takes place. Down one aisle in reverse order of their rank comes one team of *maku-uchi rikishi* wearing *kesho-mawashi* or ceremonial aprons. These aprons, beautifully made of silk, richly embroidered with different designs and hemmed with gold fringe cost anywhere from 400,000 to 500,000 yen. The *rikishi* climb into the *dohyo* and go through a short ritual ancient in sumo tradition after which they depart to be followed by the other team entering from the opposite aisle to repeat the ritual. Earlier in the day the *juryo* perform a similar ceremony before their matches.

The leading roles in the *dohyo-iri* are reserved for the *yokozuna* who have not taken any part in the ceremony up to now. A *yokozuna* comes down the aisle attended by a senior *gyoji* and two *maku-uchi rikishi* in *kesho-mawashi* one bearing a sword. Over his *kesho-mawashi* the *yokozuna* wears a massive braided hemp rope weighing from 25 to 35 pounds tied in a bow at the back and ornamented in the front with strips of paper hanging in zigzag patterns. This is a familiar religious symbol in Japan. It can be found hanging in Shinto shrines and in the home over the “shelf” of the gods where offerings are made at New Year.



The colorful *dohyo-iri* by *maku-uchi rikishi*.



*Yokozuna Hakuho* goes through the traditional *dohyo-iri* ceremony with his *tachimochi* or sword-bearer and *tsuyuharai* or attendant. *Gyoji* is seen at extreme right.



Performs the *yumitori-shiki*

While the *gyoji* and two attendants crouch in the *dohyo*, the *yokozuna* performs the *dohyo-iri* ceremony with the greatest dignity. After first clapping his hands together to attract the attention of the gods, he extends his arms to the sides and turns the palms upward to show he is concealing no weapons. Then at the climax he lifts first one leg to the side high in the air, then the other, bringing each down with a resounding stamp on the ground symbolically driving evil from the *dohyo*. After he has withdrawn with his attendants the other *yokozuna* enter, in turn, and repeat the ceremony.

The concluding rite of the day is the "bow dance. After the final match a specially picked *makushita rikishi* climbs into the *dohyo*, is handed a bow by the *gyoji* with which he performs the *yumitori-shiki*, a brilliant routine with a twirling bow. The ceremony was introduced sometime during the Edo Period when a winning *rikishi* was awarded a prize of a bow and to express his satisfaction performed the "bow dance". This may be considered an expression of satisfaction on behalf of the victorious *rikishi* of the day.

## 5. The *Gyoji* And The Judges

NOT the least colorful of the figures attendant on sumo are the *gyoji* or referees. They are attired in kimono patterned after the style worn by the samurai of the Kamakura Period, sumo 800 years ago. Their black court hats of gauze resemble the traditional Shinto priest's hat. Like the *rikishi* the referees are graded and only a *tate-gyoji* or top ranking referee can officiate at a bout involving a *yokozuna*. The rank of a *gyoji* can be determined by the color of the tassel on his fan, purple or purple and white for the *tate-gyoji*, red for those corresponding to *san yaku*, red and white for *maku-uchi*, blue and white for *juryo* and blue or black for the ranks below. The higher ranking referees wear *tabi*, Japanese split-toe socks and *zori*, straw sandals, in contrast to the lower ranks who are barefooted.

The *gyoji* enters the *dohyo* with the combatants and calls out the names of each in a specially trained, high-pitched voice. It is the custom for each *rikishi* to choose a poetic sumo name for himself. Some adopt a name derived from the name of their sumo master or their place of birth. Most frequently chosen are names ending in *-yama*(mountain), *-gawa*(river) or *-umi* (sea). When it is time for the combatants to begin, the *gyoji* gives the signal with his fan, and in the course of the match keep an ever watchful eye on their movements, the while shouting words of encouragement.

Sitting around the four sides of the *dohyo* are the judges in black formal kimono. They have been chosen from the *toshiyori*. Should there be any doubt about the referee's decision, the judges climb into the ring and settle the matter among themselves. They may over-rule the referee's decision or they may order a rematch. The number of judges don't vary with the different ranks. There are five judges for all matches.



The *tate-gyoji* or referee-in-chief.

## 6. The *Shikiri*

FOR the match the *rikishi* are naked except for a silken loincloth called the *mawashi*. Made of heavy silk approximately 10 yards long by 2 feet wide, it is folded in six and then wrapped around the waist from four to seven times depending on the girth of the *rikishi*. The *mawashi* is a fundamental part of the *rikishi*'s equipment. It may be said to have determined the whole form of sumo. There are seventy winning tricks most of which are achieved by maneuvering the opponent with a grip on the *mawashi*. The strings hanging from the front are of silk stiffened with glue and as they are purely ornamental can be discarded when they become detached as they frequently do in the course of a match.

After entering the *dohyo* each *rikishi* goes through a series of symbolic movements. To cleanse his mind and body, he symbolically rinses his mouth with water, the source of purity, and wipes his body with a paper towel. Certain motions are repeated from the *yokozuna's dohyo-iri*, the raising of the arms to the side as well as the stamping of feet. Each *rikishi* also scatters a handful of salt to purify the ring. This is further supposed to insure him against injuries. The salt-throwing is, however, the privilege only of *maku-uchi*, *juryo* and *maku-shita rikishi*.

The *rikishi* then squat and face each other in the center of the ring, crouch forward in a "get set" position supporting





*Shiomaki*



*Chiri-o-kiru*, Sumo respects fair-play.



*Sonkyo* or posture of toeing the mark



*Shikiri*



*Tachi-ai* or the initial clash:



*Torikumi*

themselves with their fists on the ground and proceed to glare fiercely at each other. This portion of the ritual is called the *shikiri*. They do not begin the match at once, however, but engage in a kind of "cold warfare". They go back to their corners for more salt, scatter it and return to glare. They repeat the process again and again, usually for the full four minutes allowed by the rules. (*juryo rikishi* have only three minutes and the lowest ranks must begin at once). Theoretically they wait for the psychological moment when they both feel ready. At any rate it gives the *rikishi* time to work themselves and the spectators up to the proper pitch of excitement. For those who find the matches slow in getting underway, it may be of interest to note that it was not until recently that a time limit was fixed. In early sumo the start of a match could be delayed indefinitely. A ten minute limit was first introduced in 1928, later reduced to seven, then to five down to the present four minutes. The bout, itself, is usually over in a matter of minutes, in less time than it took for warming up, but for the sumo *aficionado* those brief moments are packed with thrills.

## Sumo

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Web Site URL: <http://www.sumo.or.jp/eng>

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· Five minutes walk from Ryogoku station A4 exit, Toei Ōedo Line

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