

# Sumo



If you ask someone in the western world about sumo, the response frequently is: "Pushing and shoving of two fat men in a sandpit". That is somehow true, because sumo wrestlers are fat and the surface on which they fight is sandy. But there is much more to sumo.

In order to assess the importance of this sport in Japan, it is necessary to know that according to legend the roots of the Japanese people go back to a sumo fight. The God Nehmmikazuchi fought a sumo fight with a leader of a resident people for the dominance over the Japanese islands.

The first sumo fights were formal rituals including prayers to placate the Gods and to obtain a heavy crop. Approximately in the 8th century, in the Nara Period, these ceremonies were introduced at the emperor's court. Under his auspices rules were developed bit by bit differing only slightly from the ones valid today.

Nowadays it is a tradition in Japan to hold six major tournaments a year. Three competitions take place in Tokyo, one each in Kyushu, Nagoya and Osaka. Every competition takes 15 days, during which every wrestler fights once against every contestant. The ratio of victories and defeats determines the winner of the tournament.

## Sumo inside

The sumo wrestlers are not categorised by weight, but they are divided into six groups of rank. There are currently about 800 wrestlers ("rikishi" meaning a gentleman of power) in the official ranking list called "banzuke". This list comprises all wrestlers from beginners to grand masters (yokozuna). After every tournament the rank of the rikishi is checked and published in a new banzuke written in an ancient stylised calligraphy. Here the yokozuna has a special status: he is the only one who cannot be downgraded. He is, however, expected to step down voluntarily after a poor performance.

Up to now only 68 wrestlers have been awarded this title that was introduced in the 17th century. For a long time it was exclusively Japanese wrestlers who have won it. In 1993 the Hawaiian Akebono took the highest rank as the first non-Japanese.

The sumo ring is called dohyo according to the rice straw mattresses dug into the ground that mark the different areas of the ring. Above the dohyo there is a kind of ceiling, a Shinto shrine replica, with four huge tassels dangling from every edge. They symbolise the four seasons. The solid surface of the ring is made of a special kind of clay and is covered with a thin sand layer. The actual wrestling surface is reduced to the inner ring with a diameter of 4.55 metres. The fight is won when the opponent was forced out of the inner ring or when he was thrown down in the dohyo. The rikishi who touches the ground with any part of his body, with his knee, his fingertip or even with his hair is the loser. He also loses when one of his toes or his heel steps over the marked circle. The repertoire comprises about 70 different techniques.

It is not allowed to hit the opponent with the fist, to pull his hair, nor to punch or kick into his stomach or chest. As there is no weight classification, it is possible that a wrestler is confronted with an opponent who is more than twice as heavy as he himself. This is why Konishiki, one of sumo's legends and the heaviest wrestler of all times weighing an impressive 288 kilograms, has fought against a lightweight wrestler of 114 kilograms. However, he was not always the winner.

# SEIKO