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SUMO WRESTLING

*Sumo* wrestling is very popular in Japan. Besides simply being a form of entertainment, the art of sumo wrestling reflects the Shinto religion; Japanese stress the importance of the athlete’s virtues over his brute force. Furthermore, there are many symbolic movements performed during each bout.

**Starting Points**

1. Look at the pictures of sumo wrestlers (*see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 1*). Have you seen this type of competition before? What do you think of it?

2. Look at the significance of sports in your culture. What is your favorite sport? Why do you enjoy watching it? What elements of culture are tied to sports? Consider what people’s attitudes toward a particular sport tell about their culture.

3. Sports are not just expressions of physical ability but are often used to express values. As you study the Japanese sport of sumo wrestling, think about why such an activity would be chosen to express many values of the Shinto religion.

**Information**

**The History of Sumo**

Sumo has deeply embedded roots in the Shinto religion. It is difficult, however, to pinpoint when sumo actually began. For many years, the word sumo was used to describe many forms of unarmed athletic exercises including judo, running, and weight lifting. Historical accounts suggest that wrestling was used as a means of settling arguments as early as 23 B.C.E. However, these matches were to the death and did not resemble today’s sumo.

By 642 C.E., the modern sport of sumo wrestling was well established and becoming extremely popular to watch, especially among Japanese royalty. Rules to prevent fatalities were established, and judges were appointed to ensure that the rules were obeyed. Slowly, the sport of wrestling began to merge with the Shinto religion, stressing the wrestlers’ virtues in addition to their physical strength and ability. In the seventeenth century, tournaments were held to benefit Shinto shrines where most of the wrestlers, or *sumotori* [sue-MOH-toh-ree], lived. The sport has survived because of Japan’s leaders, who have recognized the importance of preserving traditional activities.

**The Sumotori**

Unlike Western wrestling, there are no weight classes in sumo wrestling. Therefore, a two hundred-pound wrestler could easily find himself wrestling an opponent who is three hundred pounds. Such massive weight is fostered by a
weight gaining program that is even more demanding than rigorous exercise periods. In addition to *chanko-nabe*, a stew with fish, chicken, meat, eggs, and vegetables, it is not unusual for a wrestler to eat seven pounds of cooked rice in a single sitting. On average, wrestlers consume between five and six thousand calories per day. However, wrestlers are beginning to recognize the ill effects of being overweight, and many are focusing on achieving greater strength, rather than weight, as a means of winning in the ring. Because they consume so much food, sumotori become very good cooks and often open restaurants or become sushi chefs after retiring from the ring.

Wrestlers think it is important to have strength, skill, and a strong fighting spirit. When a wrestler begins professional training he joins a “sumo stable,” where he lives and trains with other wrestlers. The amateur wrestlers wait on their more experienced colleagues by cooking their food, scrubbing their backs in the bath, and arranging their hair in an old-fashioned topknot.

Top wrestlers receive the same notoriety and fame as do top football or basketball players in the United States. Fans avidly support both the sport itself and the wrestlers whose progress they carefully chart. When a wrestler does well, his patrons (often members of special sumo fan clubs) may reward him with expensive gifts or elaborate meals. In addition, young sumotori are often supported in part by their hometown, with their friends and relatives covering the wrestlers’ expenses. Furthermore, as wrestlers climb to the top ranks, it is not unusual to see them on television programs or in commercials. Despite being fierce competitors in the ring, they are often quite gentle outside the ring, which increases their popularity in the hearts of the Japanese. Today, despite stiff competition from baseball, sumo is still generally accepted as Japan’s top spectator sport. Tickets may cost as much as several hundred dollars for a ringside seat, which is up to one hundred feet away from the wrestlers.

**The Sumo Bout**

A sumo tournament is colorful and impressive. During each day of the national tournament, which is held six times yearly, three times in Tokyo and alternately in Nagoya, Osaka, and Fukuoka, the wrestlers ranked in the Upper Division parade into the ring wearing ornate, heavily embroidered, ankle-length aprons in addition to the thick silk belt they always wear. Bouts last between two seconds and two minutes. These may seem short and uninteresting to people unfamiliar with the symbolism of the rituals, but bouts are very exciting for those acquainted with the sport.

The match is held in a ring that is fifteen feet in diameter (see *Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 2*). Small straw bales mark the boundaries. Only two wrestlers are allowed into the ring for the bout, one from the east team and the other from the west team. Before the wrestlers fight, each enters his side of the circle to begin his preparation. Facing the audience, he first claps his hands together. This shows he will fight fairly, and the sound attracts the attention of the Shinto gods. Next, he raises his right foot high off the ground and stamps it down; then he does the same with his left foot. This stamping demonstrates to his opponent the wrestler’s strength and shows his desire to win the bout. After performing these rituals once, the sumotori return to their “corners” outside the ring, perform foot stamp-
ing again, rinse their mouths out with water, and wipe their underarms with a small piece of tissue paper, which is considered a source of additional strength.

The wrestler then picks up a handful of salt from his side of the ring and tosses it into the air. In the Shinto religion, salt is used for purification and by throwing it in the air, the wrestler purifies the area of the match.

In the middle of the ring, there are two markers two feet apart. The sumotori walk to these small lines and face one other. They squat down and clap their hands in greeting, trying to intimidate their opponent. This increases the audience’s excitement. The wrestlers then extend their arms straight out to their sides with their palms upward to show they have no weapons. The referee gives a command to get ready. The wrestlers clench their fists and place them on the lines. They then lean forward so they are almost touching heads and wait for the signal.

The referee stands inside the ring during these preliminaries, but at this point he moves closer to stand almost directly between the two wrestlers. He stands with his feet apart so he can quickly move out of the wrestlers’ way if necessary. He holds a fan upright in his right hand so that it almost touches his chest (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 3). When he lowers it to a horizontal position in front of him (waist level), the bout begins.

After the signal is given, the two wrestlers lunge toward each other. Punching with a closed fist or kicking is not allowed. If this occurs, the bout is forfeited. Pushing is allowed if the hand is open. Officially, slapping is also allowed. The winner is the first to force his opponent to leave the ring or touch any part of his body, besides the soles of his feet, to the ground. After his defeat, the loser bows to the winner, while the winner squats down, skimming his right hand across his right knee to signify his knowledge of victory. If the referee awards him a prize for his victory, the wrestler accepts it by performing another ritual. Staying in squatting position with his left hand on his left knee, he makes three downward chopping movements with his right hand. He then takes the envelope containing his cash prize, which is presented to him on the referee’s fan.

In reality, there are no losers in sumo because the athletes are merely contending for different level positions. In sumo tournaments, the winner is the wrestler with the most wins in fifteen matches. The winner is ranked maku-uchi [mah-koo-oo-chee], or upper division, while the wrestler who wins the fewest matches will be ranked maku-shita [mah-koo-sh-TAH], or lower division. In another tournament, the wrestlers can change places in the rankings if the outcome is different.
Activities

1. Have a sumo bout. Draw a fifteen foot diameter circle with string or tape markers either on wrestling/gymnastic mats or on a carpeted floor. In the center, draw two lines that are two feet apart and eighteen inches long. Divide the class into three groups: east wrestlers, west wrestlers, and referees (the referees are nearly as popular to the Japanese as the wrestlers themselves). Remember that although the bout itself is simple, the warm-up movements are full of tradition and symbolic meaning.

2. Talk to a local high school wrestler or coach about the American styles of wrestling. Write an essay or make a list contrasting the differences between American styles of wrestling and sumo wrestling. Identify symbolism in both versions of the sport.

3. Research Shintoism. Write a report explaining in more depth the religious symbolism apparent in sumo wrestling.

3. Make a referee’s fan (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 3). Cut an oval eight inches by twelve inches, or the shape shown in the picture, from poster paper. Staple or tape it to an eighteen inch long, three-quarter inch dowel or flat stick. Cords and tassels can be made from yarn (purple, red, blue, or white are the most authentic colors).

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think symbolic movements are important in sumo wrestling?

2. What qualities are important for wrestlers to have? How does this attitude towards athletes differ from the attitudes towards athletes in the United States? Do you agree or disagree with the Japanese expectations of their athletes?

3. Do you think the cultural values expressed in sumo wrestling are also present in other Japanese sports? Are they present in other aspects of life?

4. What are the differences between American-style wrestling and sumo wrestling? Why do these differences exist?
Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 1: Sumotori (Wrestlers)
Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 2: Sumo Wrestling Ring
Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 3: Referee’s Fan
FLAG OF JAPAN

The flag is white with a large red disk in the center representing the sun. The flag is symbolic of Japan as the “Land of the Rising Sun.”
Map of Japan

- Occupied by the Soviet Union in 1945 administered by Russia
- Claimed by Japan

Key:
- HOKKAIDO
- Sapporo
- Akita
- Sendai
- HONSHU
- Tokyo
- Kobe
- Nagoya
- Osaka
- SHIKOKU
- Kitakyushu
- KYUSHU
- Fukuoka
- Okinawa

Regional Borders:
- North Pacific Ocean
- East China Sea
- Philippine Sea
- Korea Strait
- Sea of Japan

Countries:
- Russia
- China
- North Korea
- South Korea