The SUMO

Sumo is an ancient sport dating back some 1500 years.
Depiction of the Battle between Nomi-no Sukune and Taima-no Kehaya. The origins of sumo are given in the myths of physical contests and the tale of the epic battle of Sukune and Kehaya told in the Nihon Shoki (year 720).

Depiction of the Imperial Ceremony of Sumo Wrestling in the Heian Court. Sumo matches were held annually as ritual ceremonies to divine the year’s harvest. Later, the ceremonies became an event in the imperial court and continued for 500 years.

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, Takemikazuchi, 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.

Origin of Sumo

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) saw sumo being 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.
Rules of Sumo

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 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 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.
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 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:


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.

Listed below these on the banzuke, in progressively smaller characters, appear the names of the juryo and makushita, and below these the san-dan-ma, 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 juryo 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.

**Gyoji**

The referee’s role is to signal the start of the match and watch over the progress of the bout. The referee also is in charge of writing the detailed letters, in a style called Negishi lettering, on the tables listing wrestler rankings.

At 15-day grand sumo tournaments, aggressive and powerful contests are held in this ring.

Wrestlers' names are read off with most on the right and west on the left. The long format from top to bottom originated in order to depict the east-west pairings, and has continued to this day since the late 18th century (middle Edo period).
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 ju-ryo perform a similar ceremony before their matches.

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 makinshita rikishi climbs into the dohyo, is handed a bow by the gyoji with which he performs the yuita-bow or 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.

**Sumo Ceremonies**

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 Gyoji and The Judges

NOT the least colorful of the figures attendant on sumo are the gyoji or referees. They are attired in kimonos 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, vermillion for those corresponding to sanyaku, red and white for makuchin, 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.

Tate-gyoji
The colors of the tassels, either all purple or purple and white, indicate rank. The referees wear straw sandals with white tabi. Only the standing referees have short swords and an iron pill box attached to their garment.

Sam yaku-gyoji
The color of their tassel is vermillion. They wear straw sandals over white tabi socks and are allowed to have an iron pill box worn at the waist.

Maku-uchi-gyoji
The colors of their tassel are red and white. They wear white tabi socks.

Juryo-gyoji
The colors of their tassel are blue and white. They wear white tabi socks.
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 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.
Wrestling: Who are the stars of Sumo wrestling?

Grand Sumo Tournament

A more detailed schedule is here:

Kokugikan
5-3-38 Kokan, Tokyo