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Apr. 4, 2004. 09:10 AM

## Isn't it time for sumo?

Tired of overpaid athletes and thuggish sports stars, local fans fall for the Japanese art of wrestling

JANICE MAWHINNEY

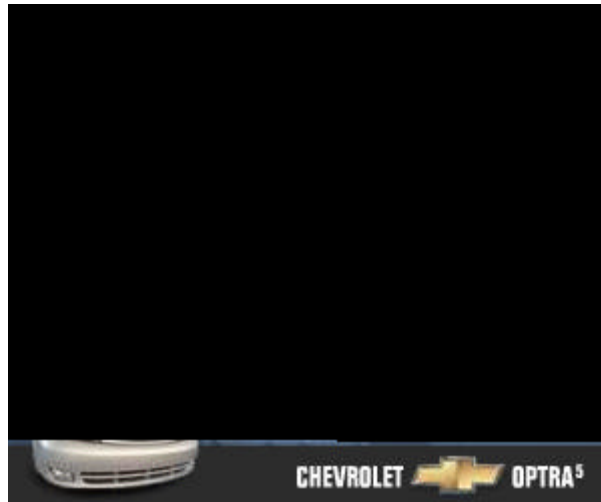
Computer consultant Geoff Senson gave his wife an unusual Christmas present last year: the handprint of Japanese sumo wrestler Takamisakari, nicknamed Robocop. "She was thrilled," he says without a glimmer of irony.

The couple persuades friends who get TV Japan via cable to tape the 15-day sumo tournaments for them so they can watch every match and keep their own win-loss records. "We're planning a sumo-based trip to Japan within the next two years," says Senson. "The passion we feel for sumo is pretty intense."

The Sensons are not alone in their fervent enthusiasm for sumo.

The Leafs, Raptors and Blue Jays indisputably have their followings in the Toronto area. But so does Asashoryu, the 140-kilogram, 23-year-old,

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KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

"The best way to learn is just to get in there and do it," says Elmer Gale, who teaches sumo wrestling at his Toronto club. His 8-year-old daughter, Pax Layla, is also a fan of the sport.

"The passion we feel for sumo is pretty intense."

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Mongolian-born sumo grand champion, who started out with a touch of a bad boy image very rare in his sport.

There are lots of impassioned sumo fans in the city and around the GTA. Toronto even has a club, the Ronin Judo/Sumo School, where men and women can learn sumo wrestling and compete in amateur matches.

Elmer Gale, who owns and runs the school, is the amateur silver medallist in North American sumo.

Sumo wrestling dates back more than 1,500 years in Japan. It is a sport like no other, steeped in ceremony and ancient ritual, pitting wrestlers who often weigh more than 136 kilograms against each other. Sumo tournaments, called *bashos*, are held six times a year.

They frequently attract television audiences of more than 30 million viewers.

Sumo's popularity in Japan wavered in recent years, but is picking up again thanks to the strong, smart and attractive young grand champion, Asashoryu, who has won the last two tournaments without losing a single match. At the same time, sumo's appeal has grown worldwide, especially in Scandinavia, Germany, England and France. French President Jacques Chirac is a keen sumo fan. But Canadian interest is not far behind.

"We used to be typical North American sports fans," says Senson. "We had season's tickets for the Argos and we went to the Blue Jays games. But I got more and more disenchanted with professional sports, the bad behaviour, the huge amounts of money handed out to players, the high ticket prices and the strikes.

"Sports stars are today's lords, and we serfs toil to pay huge sums to see them," says Senson, adding that, with athletes such as baseball player Alex Rodriguez signing \$100 million-plus contracts, "I'm really disillusioned with it all."

Sumo is a pure meritocracy, he says, and doesn't have outrageous salaries. Wrestlers bow to each other at the beginning and end of every bout, and if they misbehave, they are permanently kicked out of the sport.

Senson and his wife stay connected with worldwide sumo aficionados through the Internet and also keep in regular touch with a number of other sumo fans in the Toronto area. "The Toronto group met and had a sushi dinner together," he says. "Joe Kuroda is the leading light of that group."

Computer programmer Kuroda was born in Japan and came to Canada at age 15. He's a respected sumo authority among international sumo fans. "I did a little sumo recreationally as a kid, and I got interested in it again about 15 years ago," he says. "My wife's mother still lives in Japan and we time our visits to coincide with sumo tournaments. She sends me sumo magazines, too."

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Kuroda watches every match and memorizes amazing amounts of detail about wrestlers and their sumo association, Nihon Sumo Kyokai. He thinks the tradition and ceremony that permeate sumo, as well as the high ethical codes wrestlers must adhere to, are what make the sport interesting.

"A lot of people like the characters of the individual wrestlers," he says. "Sumo is not tarnished. It is the same sport it used to be. They maintain the customs and traditions."

Some of those customs have led the association into deep waters over the past few years. Women have always been forbidden on the *dohyo* (sumo ring) and the governor of Osaka, a woman, wants to hand out trophies for Osaka tournaments as the male governors of the other tournament cities do.

"She has complained about having to send a male assistant to do that for four years now," says Kuroda. "She has recently been re-elected. Sumo officials are still studying the matter. Sometimes you have to move with the times."

If women are not welcome in the ring, however, plenty are found in the audience. Marisa Zubans, a Toronto stay-at-home mother, was introduced to sumo through her women's group when she lived in Tokyo for three years while her husband completed a work assignment there. She toured one of the 50 sumo *heya* (stables) — where the wrestlers live and train — with her group, and attended Tokyo tournaments friends.

"When we figured out how to turn on the English translation on our television, and got English commentary for the sumo, we got more interested," she says. "My husband enjoyed it, but he had a lot of other things on his mind. I was the one who became a real fan."

She collected sumo memorabilia, including photographs of herself with a couple of high-ranking wrestlers, and has a special table in her Toronto home where she keeps them.

Toronto musician Steve Raiman is popular in Japan, and regularly travels there. Sumo matches are shown on large screens in public baths in Tokyo, where he first saw the sport. "It's very exciting," says Raiman. "There's a fascinating psychological element as well as all that strength. Sometimes one of the little guys can topple one of the big guys in an upset victory."

He appreciates the lack of trash talk in sumo, and the way the wrestlers respect each other and the sport. He built a trip to Japan around the sumo tournament in Osaka that ended last Sunday, and got a ticket to the semi-final day of the *basho*. Good seats for the final day had been sold out for weeks.

Once someone watches enough sumo to know some of the wrestlers and develop a sense of what's going on, it's easy to get hooked, Raiman says. "We really love our sumo."

Ronin Gale, owner of the Ronin Ryu Dojo on Dupont St. at Lansdowne Ave., has taught sumo to local men, women and children for 20 years. He holds classes in Dufferin Grove Park when the weather is pleasant enough. Gale has trained in judo for 30 years himself, and says sumo was always a part of his own training.

He says his 8-year-old daughter PaxLayla is also enthusiastic about sumo and is showing signs of promise. He introduced her to sumo before she could walk, by using a hand puppet, Gale says.

The emphasis in sumo, unlike North American sports, is less on who's Number 1, he says. "The beauty of sumo is the spirit of the fight ... once a person gets away from the media concept of sumo, everyone loves it. It's like the child's game King of the Hill. The best way to learn is just to get in there and do it."

John Racine, an East York native who has lived in Japan for the past eight years, puts sumo in Canadian terms. "Can you imagine a hockey game on ice that is consecrated by a priest and purified before each period?" he asks. "Can you imagine the referees wearing silk robes designed in the 1200s, and each carrying a dagger to symbolically take his own life if he blows a call?"

"Now imagine Gretzky in a topknot. It was those exotic, traditional elements of sumo that drew me in ."

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