

## The Exciting World of Sumo

Watching Day 14 of the New Year Grand Sumo Tournament in Ryogoku Kokugikan in Tokyo this January was an eye-opening experience for me. Not only having the honour of attending the tournament on the same day as the Emperor and Empress of Japan, but also seeing the harmonic co-existence of *rikishi* (wrestlers) of different nationalities has deeply impressed me. Reading the Ryogoku Kokugikan Handbook for 2006, I got to know more about the Bulgarian *rikishi* Kotooshu. Last November, the Japan Sumo Association approved the promotion of Kotooshu to *ozeki*, the second highest rank in sumo, after he picked up two wins over the current Grand Champion Asashoryu, the Mongolian *rikishi*, at a record pace of only 19 tournaments. His native Bulgaria is also ecstatic over his promotion as the first-ever European *ozeki*.



Sumo, Japan's national sport for almost two millennia, has long been under the exclusive control of the local Japanese *rikishi*. Although 4 of the 68 *yokozuna* (grand champion) to date have been reported as having Korean backgrounds, it was not until the late 80s and early 90s that sumo started to feel less domestically dominated and more internationally interesting.



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Besides the Mongolian Asashoryu, the 68th *yokozuna*, who has dominated the sport for the past 3 years, there are *rikishi* from 13 different nationalities, such as Tonga, Kazakhstan, Brazil and China, currently competing professionally in sumo.

**Mr. Robert Crew, the Travel Editor of the Toronto Star, wrote an amazing article, 'Sumo showdown', on February 18, 2006. He described the sumo tournament as "Filled with ritual and excitement, Japan's sumo tournaments are a colourful day out for the whole family".**

If you are interested in including a sumo tournament in your next itinerary plan, please visit the official homepage of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai [www.sumo.or.jp/eng](http://www.sumo.or.jp/eng). It offers tips for viewing sumo and fun things to do in the arena. Just a few examples in Ryogoku Kokugikan Arena in Tokyo:

*Sumo wrestler's favourite "Chanko"*: You can enjoy a bowl of 'chanko', a popular soup-based dish at the Sumo wrestler stables, at 200 yen (about C\$2) only in the Kokugikan sumo training school area from 12:00 noon to 2:00pm.

*English Commentary on loaned radios*: English commentary is available through a special radio program running from 4:00pm to 6:00pm. The radios can be borrowed with a refundable deposit of 2,000 yen (about C\$20).

*Sumo Museum*: Located to the right of the Kokugikan main entrance. Admission is complimentary.

The typical schedule is six tournaments held over the course of a year with each one running for 15 days starting from the Sunday closest to the 10th. Three are held in Tokyo (January, May and September), one in Osaka (March), and one in Nagoya (July) and one in Fukuoka (November). The 2006 Grand Tournament Schedule can be accessed at <http://www.sumo.or.jp/eng/>

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## SAKURA POWER

**A**fter reading the Flower Power article in the March 18, 2006 Globe and Mail by Canadian novelist Mr. Will Aitken, I could not help but write about sakura, cherry blossoms, in this newsletter.

The cherry blossom season is relatively short. Mankai, full bloom, is reached within one week after the first blossom. When the blooming peak is over the next week, the blossoms are already beginning to fall off the trees. Strong wind and rain can cut the blooming season even shorter. **“Going back to the 7th century, cherry blossom viewing does have more sober roots. The buds have been associated with everything from samurai, whose readiness to die for their warlords made their lives beautiful but brief, to kamikaze pilots, who had cherry blossoms painted on the sides of their flying bombs”** is how Mr. Aitken described the romantic notions associated with cherry blossoms.

*Hanami*, the term that commonly refers to cherry blossom viewing, is the most enjoyable flower viewing event. It is said the trees appear as beautiful clouds from a distance while the intensity of the beautiful blossoms can be enjoyed from a close distance by looking at a single tree or a group of trees.



*Hanami* sometimes becomes a boisterous and noisy outdoor party as Mr. Aitken notes; **“But if you imagine the ritual of hanami as a parade of gentle young lovelies in kimonos, thinking evanescent thoughts among pink petals**



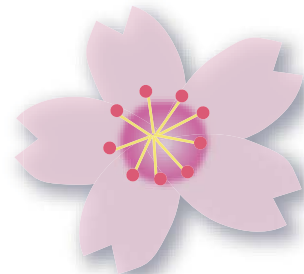
**perhaps pausing to pen a bittersweet haiku you are in for a jolt.”**

In order to capture the right timing for cherry blossoms, the Meteorological Agency and the media closely watch what is called the “cherry blossom front” as it moves slowly from south to north. The most important factor that determines the blooming time of cherry blossoms is the geographical location: the milder the climate, the earlier the bloom begins. On the southern subtropical islands of Okinawa, cherry blossoms appear as early as January, while on the northern island of Hokkaido, blooming may start as late as May.

In the major cities on the main island, such as Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, it usually takes place around the end of March and beginning of April. Again, the blooming time differs from year to year depending on weather and can vary by an average two weeks early or late.

For the current update of sakura blooming forecast, please visit

<http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/JN/sakura2006/index.html>



However, the chart will also give you an idea for planning your *hanami* trip next year:



## Sakura Blooming General Forecast

City	Average	Year 2005	Year 2004
SAPPORO	May 5	May 10	May 5
HAKODATE	May 3	May 1	April 26
SENDAI	April 12	April 14	April 7
TOKYO	March 28	March 31	March 18
YOKOHAMA	March 28	April 2	March 18
NAGOYA	March 28	March 31	March 23
TAKAYAMA	April 16	April 17	April 10
KANAZAWA	April 6	April 7	March 28
KYOTO	March 31	April 2	March 24
OSAKA	March 30	April 3	March 23
NARA	April 1	April 3	March 25
KOBE	March 30	April 3	March 26
HIROSHIMA	March 29	April 3	March 19
TAKAMATSU	March 30	April 1	March 24
MATSUYAMA	March 28	April 1	March 19
FUKUOKA	March 26	March 29	March 17
KUMAMOTO	March 24	April 1	March 24
KAGOSHIMA	March 26	April 3	March 29
NAHA	January 19	January 19	January 17

The data is quoted from the Japan Meteorological Agency. There are over 100 varieties of cherry trees in Japan. The dates above refer Somei Yoshino cherry trees, the most numerous type in Japan (cultivated during the Edo period), except for Ezoyamazakura in Sapporo and Hikanzakura in Naha.

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### What is the basic rule of Sumo?

The rikishi who first touches the floor with something other than his sole or leaves the ring before his opponent loses the match.

### How many winning techniques are there in Sumo?

In the old days, before a ring was even used, there were supposedly 48 winning techniques. In 1955, the Japan Sumo Association released its first official list of 68 techniques, which was increased to 70 in 1960 and 82 in 2001. If you are interested in finding out more, an index of illustrations and explanations of all techniques can be found at <http://sumo.goo.ne.jp/eng/kimarite/index.html>.

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS AND FESTIVALS

Only some selected samples are mentioned at below. For more events and festivals, please visit: [www.jnto.go.jp/eng/TD/festivals.html](http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/TD/festivals.html)

### June

1st & 2nd

**Takigi Noh Performance, Heian Shrine, KYOTO**

The famous Takigi Noh, participated in by various Noh schools, is presented after dark under the light of blazing torches on an open-air stage set up in the shrine's compound.

10th - 16th

**Sanno Festival of Hie Shrine, TOKYO**

Originating in the Edo Period (1603-1867), the festival is featured by a procession of mikoshi (portable shrines) through the hub area of Toyo.

14th

**Otaue-shinju, Rice Planting Festival of Sumiyoshi Shrine, OSAKA**

Young girls dressed in traditional farmer costumes ceremonially transplant rice seedlings in the shrine's paddies in prayer for a good harvest.

### July

1st - 15th

**Hakata Gion Yamagasa Festival, FUKUOKA**

The festival reaches its climax on the 15th with a fleet of giant floats topped by elaborate decorations that are paraded through the streets.

7th

**Tanabata, Star Festival**

Tanabata, Star Festival, is celebrated nationwide. Legend has it that the stars Vega and Altair, the separated lovers, can meet each other across the Milky Way once a year on this day.



### August

1st - 7th

**Nebuta Matsuri Festival, HIROSAKI**

2nd - 7th

**Nebuta Matsuri Festival, AOMORI**

Spectacular summer festivals televised nationwide. Enormous, illuminated papier-mâché dummies set on floats parade the streets in the evening.

3rd - 6th

**Kanto Matsuri Festival, AKITA**

Features a parade of men vying in their skills at balancing *kanto* (long bamboo poles), hung with many lighted lanterns, on their shoulders.

6th - 8th

**Sanja Matsuri, The Three Shrines Festival, ASAKUSA, TOKYO**

The main streets are decorated with colorful paper streamers and banners in a festival that is the largest and brightest of its kind.

12th - 15th

**Awa Odori Folk Dance Festival, TOKUSHIMA**

The entire city resounds with singing and dancing, day and night, and visitors are encouraged to join this joyful dancing parade.

16th

**Daimonji Bonfire on Mt. Nyoigatake, KYOTO**

A spectacular bonfire in the shape of the Chinese ideograph can be viewed from downtown Kyoto.