HEN TITANS CLASH:

Women's Pro Wrestling

Forbidden to smoke, drink, or even date, Japan's women pro wrestlers literally throw themselves into their work.

Text by Lucille Craft
Photographs by Ben Simmons
They go by names like Devil Masami, Lioness Asuka, and the most feared of them all, Dump Matsunou. Two hundred and forty days a year, they try to beat the gits out of each other. And to thousands of star-struck Japanese girls, they are goddesses. Welcome to joshi puro resonare, or joshi puro—women’s pro wrestling of a kind unlike anywhere else in the world.

Cross a Donny Osmond concert with a clash between Roman gladiators, and you would have the odd mixture of subfusc and pudgiers that is joshi puro. The country that inspired Madame Butterfly has now produced this scene, watched on TV sets across the nation: two women in bathing suits, as terrifying as speedie tractor-trailers, approach their quarry, a sleeker girl who is clearly the crowd favorite. In case you haven’t guessed, the bad guys are the ones with the shaved heads and the snakes painted on in place of hair. The nasties corner their victim and then smash together, sandwiching her in the middle like a piece of pastrami. They then proceed to strangle her with a chain, gouge out her eyes, karate-kick her in the gut, and, to add insult to injuries, spit on her from their water bottles.

"They train every day, and it's really grueling," says Yukon Erika, twenty-two, a Canadian who recently completed a tour with the mostly Japanese team. "They devote their life to the wrestling. It's like in the army, almost, you know, death before dishonor. They're very, very strict here."

Erika's manager back in Toronto, who happened to be of Japanese descent, used his connections to get her a stint in Japan. Erika joined several wrestlers from Mexico, part of the small foreign 'coterie maintained by the Japanese team (similar to domestic baseball teams that hire a few foreign ballplayers).

As Erika puts it, Japan is about the only place she can get taken seriously, both by her fans and the other bruisers. "The definite difference is the speed. The Japanese girls are so fast that it makes North Americans look like they're moving in slow motion, almost. They're really precise, it's just great. The fans, she exults, "go nuts. They love it. See, they're really devoted to their stars, and the stars, in turn, are devoted to the fans. So they perform very well for the fans."

"Banners bearing the impassioned slogans of each fan club festoon the walls of the arena. The black and red Chinese characters urge the wrestlers to "Win or lose, do it with heart!" "KO with quick technique!" and "Take 'em on fearlessly, like a typhoon!"

Unlike pro wrestling in North America, you don't find many leerers among the fans in Japan. The 1,000 patrons here at Tokyo's one-stop family amusement center—Kokakuen, a huge downtown venue that sponsors everything from circuses to Michael Jackson and is the home turf of the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants baseball team—are mostly
clean-cut teenage girls and their pare-
ents, binoculars and cameras at the
ready. For them, this is much like
goin’ to hear Doney or Michael, ex-
ccept that for the US$20 price of a
ticket, they have the privilege of work-
ing themselves into a wild frenzy
watching three hours of virtually non-
stop body smashing, acrobatic locks,
brain busters and guillotine drops.

More Screamin’!

Like their counterparts overseas,
members of the All Japan Women’s
Wrestling Association use karate,
judo, boxing, gymnastics, and an
occasional chain or stick. But the
similarities end there. As with the
more traditional form of sumo
wrestling, wrestlers—as young as
age thirteen—must endure a life of
discipline and training. They are for-
bidden to smoke, drink, or even date.
Days off, even for injuries, are few,
and the workouts are tough. Before a
match, they preen and
fluff over makeup, cos-
tumes, and hairstyles as
if it were prom night.
The payoff, for the most
successful, is becoming
as famous as the prime
minister and earning
more than most com-
party presidents, as
much as US$2000 a year.
But it isn’t all blood
and guts.

Pulsing rock music
wells up, rumbling off
the walls so loudly it
is almost impossible to
hear the strains of a
husky voice emanating
from a figure in the cen-
ter of the ring.

Besides being able
to best each other up, Japa-
nese female wrestlers
can also croon a love-
song. The reigning pop idol and singer of this
tune is a boishy twenty-
two-year-old named
Nagayo Chiguza. Before
she puts on her bathing
suit and high-top boots
to do battle, Chiguza
dons a sparkling cos-
tume that reflects the light as
accompanying her half-time concert.
And, on cue, well-organized and loyal
platoons of fans in the audience put
on jackets that read “CHIGUSA,” be-
fore going into a perfectly coordi-
nated chanting routine.

Girls stand and don cheap pink satin hajirous, to chant CHI-GU-
SA, CHI-GU-SA, CHI…

While Westerners regard pro
wrestling as low class entertainment,
the Japanese version is almost as
wholesome as a Shubukane ball. “In
North America, it’s family, the com-
ments. Whether you’re good or bad,
you always get the negative aspect of it,”
complains Yukon Erica. “They’ll come
at you, and they’ll make com-
ments. It’s not as heartwarming to
go and work there as it is here. Over
here, the fans, they’re always on your
side.”

Not always. Only a few fans cheer
for the undisputed Wicked Wach of
Wrestling, Demp Matsumoto. The
twenty-six-year-old strong woman
sports a shaved head, armlets, and
other makeup that help enhance her image of evil incarnate.

“I used to get mail, letters with
razor blades inside, people called me
an idiot. But recently, I’ve started to
get more people worrying about me
and rooting for me.”

Demp is adept at skills like swing-
ing from the top rope to land on a
cowering opponent. Not that she has
to go to all that trouble. At 220
pounds, 20 pounds heavier than
Yukon Erica, she can immobilize
the competition simply by sitting on
them.

The happiest victim pinned under
Demp holders with a convincing
whine, but when her foe thunders—
in a popular ringside method of in-
imidation—“Give up, Give way!”
the opponent wriggles out for
another go.

Still, even Demp gets dumped on
once in a while. Japanese wrestlers
play their parts with so much integri-
ty that injuries are a calculated risk.
Demp is proud of the scars on her
forehead and chin, from the time she
got hit with a trash can. Picking it
may be the rule of the game in other
countries, but the Japanese say they
strive for reality. In a bit of wrestles humor,
Dump likes to fling things up once in a while by yelping her bulk neatly out of the ring to come close to pouncing on the TV cameramen or to try to bash the ringside announcer. Like a grizzly bear toying with its quarry, she never seems to connect with anyone who isn’t a wrestler, but likes to leave an intimidating trail of overturned furniture.

"When I’m wrestling, I completely forget about where I am," confesses Dump. "There’s only one thing on my mind—that my opponent is the enemy. I get so excited, there are times when I come close to killing her. And that’s when my partner has to stop me."

Dump is about as lovable as Attila the Hun, but her role is critical to the success of pro wrestling. She plays foil to the popular heroine, the songbird Chigusa. Foreign wrestlers like Yuko Eriko, incidentally, never get to become idols.

Joshu pureo owes some of its success, oddly, to sumo. Until the advent of television, sumo wrestlers would travel to humble corners of the country to stage bouts, staying at inns, mixing with the locals, and briefly injecting a bit of life into sleepy towns. But nowadays, sumo matches are limited to a few major cities, and most fans must be content with televised access to their bulky heroes. Women pro wrestlers (and their male counterparts) still dutifully pack onto company buses to reach fans in far-flung corners, offering the excitement, if not the prestigious tradition, of sumo wrestling. Their major matches, however, are broadcast nationally.

Selling tickets accounts for only a part of the profits. Japanese of all ages have always been suckers for a souvenir that to outsiders would appear utterly worthless, and women pro wrestling keenly capitalizes on this. To get in, patrons are forced to run a gauntlet of song albums, video tapes, beach towels, authentic boxer trunks, aprons, paper megaphones, placards signed by the wrestlers, their biographies, and other forgettabilia. Going home empty-handed, a recent visit confirmed, seems to require more whippower than most fans can muster.

Typical of the loyal fans who attend several matches a month is an elfin girl named Noriko Matohashi and her friend, Miki Takahashi, both sixteen. Miki, who is chubby, was one of 7,000 girls who unsuccessfully auditioned last year for ten places on the pro wrestling team. Nothing, the girls say, is as thrilling as pro wrestling.

Sponsors say the secret of Japanese women’s pro wrestling is that it provides more than mere entertainment. They say the slashing of good and evil, especially when portrayed by ordinary-looking girls, inspires young females, who are wrestling with their own adolescent problems.

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