Blonds Enter the Sumo Ring
Fleshy Foreigners Crack Japan's Sacred Sport

By Anthony Faiola
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TOKYO -- Flesh struck flesh with a thunderous smack, and rolls of fat and muscle rippled down the alabaster-skinned frame of the blond sumo Baruto, a rising star in Japan's national sport. Clad only in a traditional loincloth, the sweaty Estonian towered over his stouter Japanese opponents during a morning practice, knocking them to the dirt floor one after the other, like so many oversized bowling pins.

"I came to Japan to be a sumo champion," said Baruto, 20, the professional name of Kaido Hoovelson. After only 19 months in Japan, the 6-foot-6, 360-pound Baruto -- which means Baltic in Japanese -- is soaring in the rankings. "I still feel like a foreigner, and I don't understand many of the customs of sumo. But I don't care. I plan on making it to the top anyway."

Baruto's ruddy complexion and hungry, outsider's spirit make up the new face of sumo wrestling in Japan, where foreigners are now dominating what once was among the purest and most sacred cultural bastions. The change has become a metaphor, many here say, for a reluctantly globalizing Japan. Foreigners are making unprecedented inroads in this nation long considered to be highly xenophobic, breaking into the top levels of fields as diverse as sports, finance and the arts.

Obstacles on the road to success in the nation with the world's second-largest economy persist, as fiercely tough immigration laws and unspoken codes that create glass ceilings for non-Japanese remain strong. But there has been movement. In June, for example, former CBS executive Howard Stringer officially became the first foreign head of Sony Corp. His path was carved by Brazilian-born Carlos Ghosn, who took control of Nissan Motor Co. in 1999 and turned the once-ailing company into one of the world's most profitable automakers by fusing his nurturing but no-nonsense foreign management style with Japanese efficiency.

"Sumo, like Japan itself, is becoming globalized," said Yutaka Matsumura, chairman of the Japan Sumo Federation. "Not everyone is happy about it, but I would say it is inevitable. I think in the end it will make us more competitive and raise the bar for greatness."

The culture clash is evident in the rarified world of sumo, where the last Japanese grand champion of the 2,000-year-old sport retired in January 2003. Since then, foreign-born wrestlers have reigned supreme while young amateurs from many countries have steadily climbed the professional rankings.

Rules regulating foreign wrestlers were relaxed in 1998 -- in part because of a steep decline in the sport's popularity among young Japanese athletes. The percentage of foreign professionals has grown from 2.5 percent in 1995 to more than 8 percent. More important, foreign-born sumos now make up 28 percent of the makuuchi, the upper professional ranks.
A Hawaiian and a Mongolian have won the grandmaster's title in the sport of giants during the past two years.

Fueled in part by a multimillion-dollar Japanese campaign that sumo be added to the Olympics, the sport has gone global. The number of nations with important amateur circuits has more than doubled in the past decade, from 40 to 86 countries. In the United States, Las Vegas played host last month to America's first professional sumo tournament in 20 years, and two weeks ago, an exhibition was held at Madison Square Garden in New York called "World Sumo Challenge: Battle of the Giants."

Sumo fever has swept the former Soviet republic of Georgia, which has put two wrestlers into the Japanese pro ranks. Georgian sports officials went so far as to build a round earthen sumo-wrestling ring three years ago at their National Sports Arena, where would-be pros now train three times a week. In Brazil, local sumo tournaments are luring tens of thousands of spectators a year, with regional winners from 18 states going on to an annual national championship.

Pacific Islanders and Mongolians, who have long practiced their own tradition of sumo-like wrestling, were the first to break down barriers here more than four decades ago. But the arrival of East Europeans over the past five years has captured attention. Bulgaria's Kaloyan Mahalyanov, 22 -- known here as Kotooshu, or the European Harp -- has jumped into the high ranks of sumo, standing out from the chubby champs because of his brooding good looks and tall, muscular frame. Now a sex symbol in Japan -- posters and pins of him outsell other wrestlers at sumo stadiums -- he has also become a hero in Bulgaria, where all of his bouts are broadcast nationally.

Set to film a new instant soup commercial and negotiating for his own TV show, Mahalyanov, a farmer's son, is also now fabulously wealthy. The lure of fame and fortune through sumo has become as strong a draw for some young athletes in the developing world as the dream of winning a professional soccer contract in Europe or playing basketball in the NBA.

"There are many young wrestlers like me in Georgia whose only wish is to become a professional sumo wrestler," said Levan Gorgadze. Gorgadze, 6 feet 5 and 276 pounds, arrived in Japan last month to turn pro after two years on the international amateur circuit. He became interested in sumo when one of his countrymen shot to fame in Japan in 2001. Gorgadze, a dashing young man with blue eyes and sandy hair, is now living with a group of Japanese college sumo hopefuls who are also waiting to be drafted by a professional stable, an official house of sumo wrestlers. Once drafted, Gorgadze will be forced to scrub toilets and lay out futons for older pros for at least his first year of training.

He speaks no Japanese or English and eats in silence as he watches the Japanese wrestlers cheerfully chat amongst themselves. He has been told he needs to gain at least 40 pounds to have a shot at the top, and that he also needs to learn the polite form of Japanese speech and master the art of emotional restraint in public. For now, his only lifeline is the cell phone he uses to call his family back home, plus an oversized dream. "I am filled with the desire to win," he said through a Georgian interpreter.

"I know that in Japan, I can become rich and famous as a sumo wrestler," Gorgadze said. "That is not an option for me back home in Georgia."
But in a nation where outsiders are still regarded with unease, the stream of foreigners invading the most Japanese of sports -- and one whose rituals are strongly tied to the domestic Shinto religion -- has generated both controversy and backlash. Critics contend that the new European stars have longer arms and legs and allege that this gives them an unfair advantage. The huge growth in foreign-born pros led officials in 2002 to impose a limit of only one foreign wrestler per sumo stable. Some stables, all of which are permitted to be owned and operated only by Japanese citizens, maintain private policies barring foreigners.

That, however, has turned out to be the stable owners' loss. Like boxing managers, they get a percentage of their wrestlers' purses, and those stables that court foreigners have done extremely well financially. Many others now are actively scouting international talent -- including Baruto, who was spotted by a visiting Japanese stable owner while wrestling at a local sumo club in Estonia.

Baruto's meteoric rise to the upper echelons of sumo has caused a stir. He is poised this year to become the first blond to pass into the higher ranks, meaning he must wear a traditional hairstyle binding his straw-colored locks in a topknot shaped like a ginkgo tree leaf. Some sumo officials have demanded that he now dye his hair black in deference to the essentially Japanese nature of the sport.

That is one fight, at least, that Baruto might be willing to concede.

"I am in Japan and I know things are done differently here," he said, lifting hands the size of hams in a shrug. "I don't care what the color of my hair is. I just care about winning."

*Special correspondent Taeko Kawamura contributed to this report.*