

# GIANTS of the Ring

▲ Two wrestlers come together at the center of a sumo ring.  
Objective: to push the other wrestler over, or knock him out of the ring.

- 1 The two wrestlers<sup>1</sup> take some time to stare each other down. Then, suddenly, they spring forward and **impact** with great force in the middle of the ring. Slapping,<sup>2</sup> pushing, tripping, **gripping** the belt, and throwing the other wrestler are all allowed, but punching<sup>3</sup> and kicking are not. The first person to be knocked down or pushed  
5 out of the ring loses. The entire match usually lasts less than a minute.

The sport of sumo is Japan's traditional style of wrestling, and it is one of the oldest organized sports on earth. Sumo matches were taking place in the seventh century A.D. The basic elements of modern sumo began to fall into place in the 1680s, and the sport remains little changed since then.

## 10 Bigger Is Better

- Sumo wrestlers are huge men by any standard. Their average weight is 160 kilos, and there is no weight **restriction**. The Hawaiian Salevaa Atisanoc, whose sumo name is Konishiki, weighed over 280 kilos when he was  
15 a successful wrestler. To achieve such impressive **dimensions**, sumo wrestlers eat large quantities of *chankonabe*, a Japanese stew whose ingredients include vegetables, chicken, fish, tofu, or beef. In the ring, they wear, without **shame**, little more than a traditional silk belt called a *mawashi*. Their hair is styled in a fashion popular with 17th-century samurai.<sup>4</sup>



▲ To achieve their huge size, sumo wrestlers follow a regular daily pattern: Practice. Eat. Sleep.

<sup>1</sup> If you **wrestle** with someone, you fight them by forcing them into painful positions or throwing them to the ground rather than by hitting them.

<sup>2</sup> If you **slap** someone, you hit them with an open hand.

<sup>3</sup> If you **punch** someone, you hit them with your closed hand, or fist.

<sup>4</sup> In Japanese history, the **samurai** were fighting men of the upper classes.



▲ As part of sumo's ritual, wrestlers throw a handful of purified salt before they step onto the clay.



▲ The sumo contest takes place beneath a shrine roof, illustrating sumo's close association with Japan's Shinto religion.

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## Ancient Traditions

Sumo matches are rich in tradition. The wrestling ring, called the *dohyo*, is exactly 4.55 meters across. Above it hangs a beautiful shrine<sup>5</sup> roof that illustrates sumo's close association with Japan's Shinto<sup>6</sup> religion. Wrestlers throw salt onto the ring before each match, a religious tradition believed to make the ground pure. Overseeing the fight is the *gyoji*, an official dressed in wonderful traditional clothes who closely watches and sometimes encourages the wrestlers.

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## Foreigners in Sumo

As Japan becomes more internationalized, so too does the world of sumo. Wrestlers from Mongolia, Korea, Russia, the United States, Argentina, and other countries have taken their turn in the ring. It's not surprising that so many people are entering the sport, since professional sumo wrestlers enjoy many benefits. Top wrestlers are national heroes and can earn more than one million dollars annually; some have even married movie stars.

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Foreign wrestlers once found it difficult to advance in sumo. Konishiki once complained to the press, "If I were Japanese, I'd be a grand champion now." But since then, four wrestlers of foreign origin have become grand champions or *yokozuna*, the top level of sumo wrestler. Few other sports have been so successful at keeping their traditional roots while still appealing to a 21st-century audience. For this reason, the ancient and the modern will continue to meet in the sumo ring.

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<sup>5</sup> A **shrine** is a religious place, often for a special person or thing.

<sup>6</sup> **Shinto** is a religion of Japan.



◀ Top-level sumo wrestlers average 160 kilos (350 pounds); the heaviest can reach 280 kilos (600 pounds).