



Mongolian *sumo* wrestler Asashoryu humbles a Japanese opponent, as he usually does. He is middle-sized in the heavyweight *sumo* world, but he is strong, quick and tough, and nobody can beat him with any consistency. He is a *baaad* 24-year-old boy. Even his tiniest deviations from tradition annoy Japanese *sumo* fans. For instance, he tosses purifying salt into the ring with his left hand instead of his right.



Photos by YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Blue Dragon of the Morning

Television plays as big a role in Japanese life as it does in America. But there is not much English-language broadcasting, and there is virtually no English when one gets outside the big cities, as Yoshi and I always do. So in the mountains and on the seashores I am reduced to sports, cooking and nature programs while I wait for Yoshi to wake up or get ready. Those types of TV shows are interesting in any language, or even no language at all if I turn down the volume as Yoshi lies sleeping. I am not a cook but I eat, and I have no difficulty following the preparation of various Japanese dishes. I especially like it when *konyaku* or *wasabi*, say, are among the ingredients and the cooking show takes me to the fields where these vegetables are grown. Baseball, of course, is a major sport in Japan, but the season was over as we moved around the countryside in November 2004. What was left was *sumo* wrestling, Japan's national sport even though it is not quite as popular as baseball nowadays. But it's not bad, not bad at all. The world's largest athletes clash in the middle of a dirt ring and the winner is the one

who pushes his opponent out of the ring or throws him down within it. Nowadays there is only one *yokozuna*, or master *sumo* wrestler, although *sumo* rules allow as many as four. The trouble is, this particular *yokozuna* keeps beating everybody, and nobody else can win enough points to rise to his heady level. To make matters worse, he is not even Japanese. He is a Mongolian, born as Dolgorsuren Dagvadori and wrestling under the Japanese name of Asashoryu, which means “Blue Dragon of the Morning.” To make matters even worse, he is not very big as *sumo* wrestlers go, only 308 pounds, but when he squares off against a Japanese mountain of flesh and muscle, Yoshi always says, “Asashoryu will win,” and he almost always does. To make matters still worse, he can’t seem to keep his mouth shut. “Japanese wrestlers are no good,” he says bluntly, impolitely in this country where manners are paramount and humility is admired. My father used to say that he didn’t mind braggarts, only braggarts who could back it up. Japanese feel much the same way. They are waiting for the “Great Japanese Hope” to come along and teach the foreign Blue Dragon a lesson. They fancied they might have one in the 15-day autumn 2004 tournament that I watched on TV while I was in Japan. *Sumo* fans were all atwitter. Kaio (“Great King”), a big guy from Kyushu, was the hometown favorite in the Kyushu Grand Sumo Tournament, and he even met and defeated Asashoryu in the final bout. Seat cushions flew with joy in the tournament hall. But Kaio’s victory over the Mongolian was anticlimactic. Asashoryu didn’t seem to try very hard, perhaps, uncharacteristically, to let Kaio have a good day before a hometown crowd. It didn’t cost Asashoryu anything. He had already won enough bouts in the previous two weeks, and could not be dethroned by Kaio or anybody else. So the Blue Dragon of the Morning walked off with still another championship, just as he would two months later when he went undefeated, 15-0, in the first grand tournament of 2005. Sad to say, more Mongolian horrors await Japanese *sumo* fans. There are three dozen other Mongolians enrolled in Japanese *sumo* stables, all eager to step in when Asashoryu steps down, all tough and hungry. Good friend Ken Asano, a Japanese-American businessman who subscribes to a satellite Japan TV service so he can watch real-time *sumo*, voices the frustrations of Japanese. “I doubt if I will see a new native *yokozuna* before I die,” he says. “What is the world coming to?”

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