

Sumo

Background Notes for Teachers

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The information in this document provides context and more detail about sumo – a traditional form of wrestling from Japan that has existed for over a thousand years. You may find these notes useful to refer to when teaching about sumo to be able to better understand the sport.

Introduction to Sumo

Sumo 相撲 is a Japanese form of full-contact wrestling, in which two **rikishi 力士** (wrestlers) must push, grapple, or throw their opponent outside of the **dohyo 土俵** (ring), or by forcing them to the ground, in order to win. The word sumo originates from the old Japanese word **sumahi**, which means to fight or to battle. It is so culturally significant that it has even been declared the country's national sport, despite the popularity of other sports in Japan such as football and baseball.

Wrestlers / Rikishi 力士

In Japan, there are hundreds of professional rikishi, but within the highest division of professional sumo (known as **makuuchi 幕内**), there are a fixed number of 42.

In professional sumo, there are no weight classes, meaning there are cases where wrestlers might be matched against someone who could be double or even triple their size. Gaining weight is a crucial part of a wrestler's training regime, in order to help them gain muscle and become stronger.

When competing, all wrestlers must wear a loincloth known as **mawashi 廻し** and nothing else. By wearing as little clothing as possible, the wrestler can show that they are not cheating, exhibiting their own pure strength to help lead them to victory.

Sumo wrestlers also wear their hair in a distinctive topknot, known as **mage 髷**. This particular hairstyle was also commonly worn by men and samurai in the Edo period (1603-1868). Sumo wrestlers have their hair styled in this way by a professional specialist hairdresser, known as **tokoyama 床山**.

Rikishi also have **wrestler names (shikona 四股名)** that they are referred to when competing, which are different from their birth names. This tradition can also be traced back to the Edo period, where wrestlers were given shikona as a way to hide their identities.

History and Traditions

Sumo has existed for over 1,500 years, in which it initially began as a Shinto ritual offering; a sport for only the gods to spectate. For example, sumo bouts were performed as a way to ask the gods for a successful and bountiful harvest of rice. Overtime, it evolved into a spectator sport for the public to enjoy.

Naturally, sumo has evolved and changed a lot during the past thousand or so years, however, the version of sumo we see now was developed during the Edo period, a time of relative peace within Japanese history. Due to sumo's deep-rooted connection with religion, many of the rituals and ceremonies in the sport have been influenced by Shinto traditions and beliefs.

Dohyo 土俵

The dohyo where sumo bouts take place is considered to be sacred. The circle is around 4.55m in diameter, and in official tournaments, is mounted on a square platform made of clay. Above the dohyo, you will notice a roof that looks similar to one you might see at a Shinto shrine, symbolising the sacred nature of the sport.

At a sumo tournament, you will witness special ring-entering ceremonies known as **dohyo-iri 土俵入り**. During these ceremonies, wrestlers will typically enter the ring and perform a series of moves, such as clapping their hands to attract the attention of the gods and stomping their feet or throwing salt to help purify the ring and drive away evil spirits. During dohyo-iri, wrestlers will also raise their arms in the air to show that they are unarmed and are not carrying any weapons.

Women in Sumo

Currently, women are only able to participate in amateur tournaments, as they are prohibited from professional sumo because of traditional religious beliefs that women cannot enter the dohyo. However, many passionate female wrestlers and sumo fans across the world are fighting for change; they want to see female wrestlers to be able participate at a professional level, and not just in amateur tournaments.

Amateur Sumo

Amateur sumo allows both men and women to compete, and divides wrestlers by weight class. Amateur tournaments also take place across the world, helping to make the sport more accessible for all. Additionally, some of the traditions and rituals that take place in professional tournaments are not always so strictly enforced within amateur sumo.

Tournaments and Rankings

A professional sumo wrestler's ranking is determined through competing in the six professional tournaments (known as **basho 場所**) that take place every year. Each tournament lasts around 15 days and will draw crowds from not just across Japan but from overseas, too. Official basho tournaments rarely ever leave Japan; the October 2025 Grand Sumo Tournament at the Royal Albert Hall is the second time in history that professional sumo has ever left the country.

The highest division in professional sumo is called **makuuchi 幕内**. The lowest division is called **jonokuchi 序ノ口**, which is where most sumo wrestlers start their professional career from (unless they have had particularly successful amateur careers). The grand champions of sumo are referred to as **yokozuna 横綱**, and it is the highest possible rank a wrestler can achieve.

Day in the Life of a Sumo Wrestler

Sumo wrestlers live and train in special accommodations called stables (**heya 部屋**), that are managed and ran by a stablemaster (**oyakata 親方**). The stablemasters are usually retired sumo wrestlers who have had successful professional careers.

Below is an example schedule of what a typical day in the life of a professional sumo wrestler might be like:

- **5am** – Wake up and head straight to the dohyo.
- **5:10am** – Sweep and prepare the dohyo for a busy morning of training.
- **5:30am** – Warm-up, stretch, practice training moves.
- **7:30am** – Practice bouts.
 - The stablemaster watches the sumo wrestlers train and practice, offering advice and guidance.

- **11:00am** – Finish training for the day.
 - **12:30pm** – Lunch time – the first meal of the day!
 - **Chankonabe** ちゃんこ鍋 is a popular meal that wrestlers like to eat: a stew containing meat and vegetables such as chicken, seafood, tofu, bok choy, and mushrooms.
 - **1:30pm** – Free time.
 - Some wrestlers (usually lower-ranked ones) may have additional duties around the stables, such as cleaning or doing laundry.
 - Higher-ranked wrestlers usually have more free-time.
 - Many wrestlers like to take naps after lunch, to help them gain weight.
 - **7:00pm** – Light meal and bath.
 - **9:00pm** – Bedtime.
 - Wrestlers need to get plenty of sleep and rest before another morning of intense training.
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