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Past the pain and language barriers

Estonian not thrown by new language, life and sport

By **TONY MCNICOL**

Even for a sumo wrestler, Kaido Hoovelson looks big. The 20-year-old Estonian, who goes by the ring name of "Baruto," stands 197-cm tall, making him one of sumo's tallest wrestlers.

Last time he checked, he weighed a solid 162 kg -- "166 after dinner."

Behind the table of a pokey Ryogoku bar, he takes sips from an oddly small looking glass of beer and recounts the first bruising year of his sumo career.

Baruto's Judo coach in Estonia encouraged him to come to Japan. "He told me it's not very difficult . . . a lot of sleeping, a lot of eating, a little bit training. I said 'why not?' "

A little later Baruto entered his present sumo stable.

Unfortunately, it seems his coach's description wasn't totally accurate.



Sumo wrestler Baruto, aka 20-year-old Kaido Hoovelson, was encouraged to come to Japan by his judo coach, who described the life of a wrestler as "a lot of sleeping, a lot of eating, a little bit of training. But for the past three years, Baruto's life has been characterized by "a lot of cleaning, a lot of training, a little bit of sleeping."

"At first it was a big shock," says Baruto. In between training sessions, he was busy with chores like washing the older wrestlers' clothes and sweeping out the dojo.

It was, he says, "a lot of cleaning, a lot of training, a little bit sleeping."

At least his coach was right about the eating.

Nevertheless, Baruto has moved up the sumo ranks quickly. In the coming March tournament he will be ranked "makushita," the third of six divisions.

Not bad for someone who only started sumo three years ago.

But he has had to learn much more than grips and throws.



Even by sumo standards, Baruto, pictured with an Estonian admirer, is extremely tall.

Becoming a novice sumo wrestler is signing up to a crash course in Japanese language.

He arrived with only an Estonian Japanese dictionary and two words of Japanese: "geisha" and "sayonara" -- and no one in his stable knew more than a handful of English words.

But a year later his Japanese is fluent enough to follow training instructions and hang out with his stablemates.

Becoming a sumo wrestler is an exceptional form of total immersion language learning, says Satoshi Miyazaki, linguist and author of "Why do foreign sumo wrestlers speak fluent Japanese?"

Not only do foreign sumo wrestlers have to learn Japanese, they have to learn how "to become Japanese," says Miyazaki.

That means picking up body language, etiquette and the minutiae of sumo culture too.

For instance, wrestlers will learn "keigo" -- polite Japanese -- very early on because they need it to talk to the senior stablemates and stable master.

Instead of poring over textbooks, Japanese is quite literally bashed into wrestlers; "The first Japanese language sumo wrestlers have to learn is 'itai' (ouch!)" Miyazaki explains. Once they know that, at least they can say if they get injured."

Many foreign sumo wrestlers become very fluent, very quickly. There is plenty of language practice meeting sumo officials and guests to their stable, or even being interviewed in Japanese.

Baruto had only been in Japan for a few months when he was interviewed after his first tournament; "I just said 'hai, hai' and smiled."

Still, foreign wrestlers often have a surprise when they first try out their Japanese outside the sumo stable.

"They gradually notice that their Japanese is sometimes very difficult for others to understand," Miyazaki says.

Special sumo dialect like "gochan desu" for thank you could be a dead giveaway if wrestlers try to go out incognito.

Another potential linguistic pitfall is "chanko" -- a word which wrestlers use for all kinds of food. (Chanko-nabe is the calorie-packed meat stew wrestlers use to bulk up).

On the whole, foreign wrestlers seem to have been pretty successful fitting in. Out of 708 wrestlers in Sumo's six divisions, 59 were born outside of Japan. There have now been three foreign Yokozuna grand champions.

Hawaiian Akebono was the first in 1993, then his compatriot Musashimaru and now Mongolian Asashoryu.

The current crop of foreign wrestlers comes from across the globe, including Tonga, Brazil, Bulgaria, Russia, Mongolia -- and Estonia.

Their number is unlikely to increase much more, however.

Perhaps fearing a gradual foreign takeover of Japan's ancient sport, in 2002 the Japan Sumo Association limited the 55 stables to one foreign sumo wrestler each (a few stables already had more than one foreign wrestler when the rule was introduced).

For the moment the Mongolians are cleaning up. Yokozuna Asashoryu heads a gang of seven countrymen in the top division. From the other end of the continent, European wrestlers like Russian Roho, Bulgarian Kokkai and Kotooshu from Georgia are also starting to push their weight around.

The old presumption that foreigners could only ever succeed by brute force has already proved wrong, says Mark Schreiber, veteran sumo watcher.

"All the Hawaiians had going for them was their bulk. When I look at the new crop, I see a slightly different style," he says.

"Now you get people who are big, and who have technique. You certainly see that with the Mongolians."

Wrestlers from overseas have also shown that they can put up with the rigors of training.

"Foreign wrestlers have the perseverance they need now," says Schreiber. "To get good at sumo you have to endure the training, and hazing by your seniors. That's why the Japanese thought foreigners could never succeed."

On the contrary, he suggests, some foreign wrestlers, particularly the Mongolians, seem a little harder and hungrier than those raised in prosperous Japan.

Ex-nightclub bouncer Baruto is only expecting things to get tougher from here on.

A fellow Estonian wrestler who arrived in Japan with him has already gone home.

Baruto's target for this March's tournament in Osaka is simply to win more bouts than he loses.

He has gotten used to the sumo life a little, although he misses the parties in Estonia.

At least it is easy to save money. New sumo wrestlers don't have many luxuries but they don't have many outlays either. "No food, no rent, no clothes," says Baruto with unshakable cheerfulness.

Then what's so good about being a sumo wrestler?

"I don't know," he shrugs and grins. "I just like sumo, it's my life."

Send comments to: community@japantimes.co.jp

Due to space restrictions, last week's Zeit Gist article, "Resisting the Tide," based on a discussion of the concept of "Nihonjinron" by Dr Chris Burgess of Tsuda University, failed to carry an online resource pointer. Those interested in reading more on this subject can find a more detailed disussion of multiculturalism and identity in Japan by Dr Burgess at