Sumo Do, Sumo Don't
Summary

Shuhei (Japanese idol Masahiro Motoki), a student at Kyoritsu University, has attended hardly any lectures, and in his final year and with a job already lined up, he has only his thesis to complete. His supervisor, Professor Anayama, president of the university's Sumo Association, insists he become a member of the university's sumo club in order to graduate. Shuhei reluctantly forms a team with club veteran Aoki (who has never won a bout), the overweight Taniaka, Shuhei’s skinny brother Haruo, and the foreign student Smiley (who joins on condition he doesn't have to bare his buttocks).

At first they lose every match and are teased by the other teams. When Club Manager, Natsuko Kawamura, gets the local television station interested and they begin attracting fans, including Masako, their wrestling improves and they beat their rival team. Their opportunity to challenge for second division looks likely to be lost with Haruo injured, but Masako steps in to make up the number needed for the team and they win the tournament.

The ancient sport of sumo

Sumo’s origins are linked to the Japanese animist religion Shintoism, and its rituals are connected with Shinto ceremony. The first sumo matches were held around 1,500 years ago as a ritual to pray for good harvests. During the Nara period (8th century) sumo was introduced to the imperial court where the rules and techniques of the sport were refined.

Sumo bouts take place in a ring called a dohyo, a circle of earth with a straw boundary. Two sumo wrestlers, or rikishi, wrestle to force their opponent onto the ground or out of the dohyo. The rikishi wear only a mawashi, a silk sash loincloth and their hair is styled in a mage topknot. Rikishi are ranked in a strict hierarchy, with yokozuna at the top. To become a yokozuna, rikishi holding the second-ranked ozeki status must win two consecutive tournaments, show consistently good performances, and be deemed to have the character fitting of the title by the Sumo Kyokai, the sport's professional body. As a result, there have been only 62 yokozuna in the last 300 years. In the film, Professor Anayama is a yokozuna of the university's sumo club.
Though sumo is the national sport, baseball is the most popular sport in Japan. As baseball flourished during the American post-war occupation, interest in sumo declined. *Sumo Do, Sumo Don’t* was made in 1992 as the sport’s popularity was on the ascent, revived by the stunning success of the Hanada brothers Wakanohana and Takakohana. Named after their famous ozeki father, and yokozuna uncle, they attracted legions of female fans as they rose to similar ranks themselves. The success of foreign sumo rikishi, Konishiki and Akebono (the first non-Japanese yokozuna), also attracted international attention to the sport.

**The group and the individual**

In sumo, rikishi compete as individuals, but they train as a team in ‘stables’. Kyoritsu University’s Sumo Club becomes the refuge for those on the margins of society: Tanaka, a Christian who has never been invited to join anything before; Smiley, a foreigner; Haruo, who is tired of pro-wrestling in drag; and Masako, who is laughed at by other girls but finds acceptance in the club.

While membership of a group is an important part of Japanese society, *Sumo Do, Sumo Don’t* cautions against the dangers of an aggressive group mentality and conformism. The members of the bullying Hokuto University team all think and act the same, and the second-division team is led by right-wing fanatics, who urge them to ‘fight to the death!’ In contrast, Shuhei and team find success as individuals working together as a team. At the same time, the team relies on the cooperation of all its members – even Smiley, who eventually dons a mawashi to compete.

**Exclusivism in sumo**

Tradition has been preserved in sumo through the conservatism of the sumo establishment, but as Japan changes, it faces new challenges. One of these is the presence of foreigners in the sport. The Hawaiian rikishi, Konishiki, never achieved the rank of yokozuna, despite his eligibility. His criticism of the Sumo Association’s reluctance to bestow the rank upon a non-Japanese did not aid his cause. In *Sumo Do, Sumo Don’t* the resentment of some towards foreigners in the sport is reflected in exhortations of Haruo’s fans to ‘beat the foreigner, nasty brute’ when Haruo is wrestling with Smiley.
Women and sumo

*Sumo Do, Sumo Don’t* also challenges the role of women in society. Masako joins the team as cook and cleaner but ends up competing for the team, breaking one of sumo’s strictest rules. Sumo still does not permit women to set foot in the dohyo. In March 2000, the female Governor of Osaka, Fusae Ota, was refused permission to enter the dohyo to present a prize at the Osaka tournament. In *Sumo Do, Sumo Don’t*, Natsuko challenges the traditional deference of women towards men when she spiritedly defends the team against the criticism of the ‘old boys’. In the final scene, Natsuko enters the dohyo and goes through the motions of the dohyo entering ceremony with Shuhei.

The strong female characters in the film reflect the growing independence of Japanese women and their reluctance to accept the limitations imposed on them by society.

Power doesn’t always win

As there are no weight divisions in sumo, rikishi may find themselves pitted against opponents twice their size. Smiley is a strong ex-rugby player whose success against the rest of the team leads him to conclude that he does not need to practise as ‘power inevitably wins’. When he is flipped by one of the schoolboys the team are practising against, he finds out that ‘power doesn’t always win in sumo’. To begin with, the Kyoritsu team are beaten in every bout, even by the wimpy Honjitsu Medical University team. Professor Anayama’s clever strategies for attacking the weaknesses of their opponents enable them to defeat their arch rivals, Hokuto Gakuin, and then claim victory in second division.
Giving it your best shot

Sumo Do, Sumo Don't won the New Director's Award from the Japanese Film Directors Association. It carries the positive message that winning is not everything, that what is important is to try. Aoki has never won a bout, but his perseverance (one of the most esteemed traits in Japan) finally earns him victory. Masako loses her bout, but she has given it her best shot. Beneath the entertaining plot – a team of losers overcome obstacles to achieve success – the film provides an interesting challenge to some of the assumptions and attitudes in Japanese society.

Further reading


Teaching and learning activities

Before viewing

1 Have you ever been involved in a sports club? Why did you join? What did you like or dislike about being a member?

2 What are some of the barriers to joining a sports club, or playing competitive team sport? List some of the reasons people might not be involved in such activities. As you watch the film, see if anything on your list is explored.

After viewing

Short takes

1 Why does each club member become involved in sumo? Refer to the cast list to check names.

2 Why does the manager, Natsuko, arrange for television coverage of the club?

3 Why does Professor Anayama say he does not wish to train the boys?

4 What makes him change his mind?

5 What is the significance of the holes in the punching bags?

Longer shots

1 Why do you think people might laugh at sumo? (Note: Sumo has again become popular and respected in Japan since this film was made.)

2 Which was the more appropriate response to the club’s failure at their first competition: the professor’s or that of the ‘old boys’?

3 Why does Smiley take off his pants? Suggest what you think was going on in his mind as the competition progressed.

4 Which character in the film did you identify with most? Explain your choice.

5 Return to your ‘Before viewing’ discussion about being involved in clubs. Were any of your comments relevant to the film?

Angles

SUMO

1 Conduct some library or Web research on sumo to learn more about the sport and its rituals.

2 What are the national values that sumo enshrines? Some of these are mentioned in the film, for example, perseverance and fortitude. Check your dictionary if you are unsure of the meanings of these words.
3 Does Australia have a national sport? Discuss this with your class and identify the values associated with such a sport. Examining the sports pages of the newspaper will assist you in this activity.

4 Develop your thoughts into a reflective piece of writing titled ‘Our National Sport’. Ensure your focus is on how the sport relates to and reflects society. As further preparation for this activity, you might like to write some notes on the following:
   - heroes of the sport and the qualities/achievements for which they are admired
   - rules of the games • codes of ethics • gender roles • audience.

OUTSIDERS

1 In what ways are each of the following outsiders? Write a sentence for each character:
   - Aoki • Tanaka • Smiley • Masako • Natsuko.

   Are there any other characters you consider to be outsiders? Add to this list if possible, continuing to write an explanatory sentence for each name.

2 Why do you think the stories of outsiders are popular in novels and films for and about adolescents? Discuss this question with your class, then develop your own narrative about an outsider who eventually becomes accepted. Make sure you focus on how this acceptance happens. Some suggested topics include:
   - the arrival of an adopted or billeted child in an established family
   - a new student at school
   - a new member joining a friendship group or club
   - a new person in a sports team
   - a group of unpopular students who become a valued part of the school community.
3 How does the director depict non-Japanese people and their understanding of Japanese culture? Consider Smiley’s repeated comment: ‘You Japanese never delve to the essence of the matter.’ What does this statement mean? Is it a fair comment? Does Smiley really want to experience Japanese culture? Is Smiley a stereotype? Discuss these questions with the class, then write a paragraph in which you assess whether the portrayal of Smiley is positive or negative.

GENDER ROLES

1 Early in the film we hear a wrestler warned: ‘Don’t bluff like a girl!’ Shuhei is told to ‘be a man and help out’. What does the film present as the masculine and feminine ideals in Japanese society?

2 Do you think the film is upholding or questioning these ideals? Refer to specific scenes in your answer.

3 Should anyone be prevented from playing a sport on the basis of gender? For example, should women be allowed to play Australian Rules football? Discuss this with your class then prepare a persuasive piece of writing in which you explain your point of view.

Focus on film

FILMING SPORTS

1 What do you think some of the challenges would be in making a film about a sport?

2 What did the director do to ensure that the fight scenes in Sumo Do, Sumo Don’t did not become repetitive or boring? Make sure you consider:
   • acting
   • music
   • editing
   • composition of shots
   • camera distance and angles
   • juxtaposition and variety of shots.

3 Prepare a script and storyboard for your own short film about a competition. It would be easiest to concentrate on something simple, such as an arm wrestle. Think carefully about how you will portray the following characters:
   • competitors
   • coach
   • judge
   • spectators.

4 If you have access to the necessary facilities, make your film. Alternatively, create a picture essay using a series of photographs with speech bubbles.
JOURNEYS

1 While Shuhei is achieving his final victory, the film’s script and voice-over cleverly returns to the observations made by Cocteau, which accompany the footage of the empty hall at the beginning of the film. What is the purpose of this? Watch these sections of the film again to assist you in answering.

2 Each of the characters learns or achieves something over the course of the film. Identify what this is for each character and sketch, from memory, a shot that communicates this particularly effectively to the audience. Collect and sort your sketches, pin them up in a group for each character, then take turns to explain why each shot was chosen. (Your sketches do not have to be works of art, but should roughly indicate the composition of the shot.)

Extension activities

1 Sumo do and sumo don’t. Would you sumo? Film a series of vox pop interviews with students. Ask them if they will join your school’s new sumo club. Carry a drawing on card of a sumo wrestler wearing a mawashi, so you can show them the uniform they would be required to wear. Edit your interviews and show the most entertaining to your class.

2 What are the criteria for classifying an activity as a sport? Develop a list of criteria, then assess which of the following fit:
   • wrestling
   • chess
   • sumo
   • baseball.
   Present your criteria to your classmates and assess any other potential sports they suggest.

3 Try to get some media coverage of a club within your school. If there is no club, form one! You will need to find an interesting angle that might interest the school newspaper and local media, then speak to your teacher about how to write a press release.

Related texts

A League of their Own (film) 1992, Penny Marshall (director).
Lean on Me (film) 1989, John Avildsen (director).
Stand and Deliver (film) 1988, Ramon Menendez (director).
The Breakfast Club (film) 1985, John Hughes (director).