

CULTURE · JAPAN

The History of Sumo Wrestling

From a legendary founding match and real Shinto agricultural ritual, through imperial court ceremony, samurai battlefield training, and Edo-period professionalisation, to the modern stable system, the yokozuna's own demanding standard, internationalisation, real scandal, and a genuinely unresolved present-day tension between tradition and modernity.

10 Chapters

Philip Osztromok

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: SUMO'S REAL SHINTO ORIGINS & WHY THIS COURSE LIVES IN THE CULTURE SUBJECT

The History of Sumo Wrestling

Chapter 1 · Introduction: Sumo's Real Shinto Origins & Why This Course Lives in the Culture Subject

Sumo is usually introduced as a sport. This course opens by arguing it is better understood as a religious ritual that later acquired a professional league — and by correcting one claim about sumo that almost every introduction to it repeats without checking.

Why This Course Sits Here, Not Under History

The idea for this course was first jotted down under this site's own History Subject, on a list of sports-history topics. It ended up here instead, joining the four Japanese courses already completed in the Culture Subject — *Japanese Film & Television*, *Japanese Manga & Anime*, *Japanese Music*, and *Japanese Literature*. That routing follows a real precedent already set on this site: *The History of Football* was brainstormed the same way and ended up in its own Football Subject rather than under History, because a sport's story turned out to be a cultural story more than a chronological-events one.

Sumo makes that case more strongly than most. A modern professional bout still contains a purification rite, a sacred ring, and an official dressed as a priest. Treating that as "sports history" would mean skipping the part that actually explains it.

A Real Correction: Sumo Is Not Officially Japan's National Sport

Sumo is described, constantly and almost universally, as Japan's national sport. The Japanese word used is *kokugi*, and the sport's own institutions lean on it heavily — three of the six annual professional tournaments are held in an arena literally named the **Kokugikan**, "National Sport Hall."

What the record actually shows

There is no law, statute, or formal government designation making sumo Japan's national sport. The status is genuine convention and genuine institutional recognition — sumo falls under the jurisdiction of Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology — but it has never been legally codified. The translation is also looser than it looks: the *gi* in *kokugi* sits closer to *art*, *craft*, or *practice* than to *sport*. "National sport" is a serviceable rendering of a word that does not quite say that.

That correction is not a technicality to get out of the way. It is the course's opening argument in miniature: the thing everyone calls a sport is called, in its own language, something closer to a national *practice* — and the rituals in the next section are the reason why.

Shinto You Can Still Watch, Live, Today

Sumo's origins reach back a long way — commonly traced to the Yayoi period (roughly 300 BCE to 300 CE), though claims that deep are necessarily softer than dated ones. What matters for this chapter is more concrete: before sumo professionalised in the Tokugawa period, matches were held on the grounds of shrines and temples, and the ritual apparatus of that setting never left. It is still visible in a bout televised this week.

The dohyō

The ring itself is still treated as sacred ground — a direct inheritance from the centuries when bouts were held on shrine and temple grounds rather than in arenas.

The yakata roof

The suspended roof above the ring originally represented the sky, set over a dohyō symbolising the earth — a shrine's architecture, hung above a sporting venue.

Throwing salt

Wrestlers scatter salt into the ring before a bout as an act of purification, using salt exactly as Shinto shrines long have.

Shiko stomping

The high leg-lift and heavy stomp is a purification movement, understood as driving malevolent forces out of the ground beneath the ring.

THE REFEREE IS DRESSED AS A PRIEST, AND THAT IS NOT A COINCIDENCE

The *gyōji* — the referee inside the ring — wears robes modelled on those of Shinto priests and Heian court officials, topped with a lacquered black *eboshi* hat of the kind worn by courtiers and priests. This is more than costume: for certain ceremonies, *gyōji* perform in the manner of Shinto officiants, in rites that take the form of an actual Shinto ritual rather than a sporting formality.

Nothing in that list is a revival or a heritage display staged for tourists. It is the ordinary, unremarkable procedure of a professional bout, and it is why this course treats sumo's religious dimension as the main thread rather than as background colour.

The Modern Institution, in Brief

The body governing professional sumo, the **Japan Sumo Association**, was formed on **28 December 1925**. Since **1958**, it has run **six tournaments** — *honbashi* — each year, every one of them fifteen consecutive days long, across four locations. Later chapters return to this structure in detail; it is worth fixing here simply as the shape of the institution whose long history the rest of the course traces.

What This Course Covers

CHAPTER	WHAT IT COVERS
2	Ancient origins — sumo as Shinto ritual, agricultural fertility rites, and the legendary Nomi no Sukune story
3	Sumo in the imperial court: the Nara and Heian periods
4	The warrior era — sumo and the samurai
5	The Edo period: professional sumo is born, and the banzuke ranking system with it
6	The real structure of modern sumo — rikishi, stables, and the ranking system
7	The yokozuna, and a promotion standard that formally requires dignity as well as strength

CHAPTER	WHAT IT COVERS
8	Sumo goes international: foreign-born wrestlers reaching the top ranks, and the real controversy that followed
9	Real scandals and genuine challenges to sumo's traditional image
10	Capstone: sumo today — tradition and modernity in tension

A Note on Sources

Every specific date, figure, and claim in this course is checked against real sources at the time of writing, matching the discipline already established across this site's history and culture courses — including its four Culture siblings. Where a claim is traditional, legendary, or genuinely disputed rather than documented — and sumo has more of those than most subjects — this course says so plainly rather than smoothing it over. Chapter 1 has already used that licence twice: on sumo's Yayoi-period origins, and on the national-sport designation that turns out not to exist.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Sumo's "national sport" status is universally repeated and legally nonexistent. Does a designation everybody honours but nobody legislated carry less weight than a formal one — or, in practice, more?

REFLECTION 2

A modern bout still includes purification with salt, a sacred ring, and a priest-robed official. At what point, if any, does a ritual performed inside a commercial sporting event stop counting as a real religious act?

REFLECTION 3

This course was moved out of History and into Culture on the grounds that sumo's story is more cultural than chronological. Before reading on — do you expect that framing to hold up across all ten chapters, or to strain somewhere?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 1

- Sumo has **no formal legal designation** as Japan's national sport; *kokugi* is convention, and *gi* means closer to art/craft/practice than sport
- Sumo is nonetheless institutionally recognised — governed under Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology
- Origins are commonly traced to the Yayoi period (c. 300 BCE – c. 300 CE), a claim necessarily softer than a dated one
- Before professionalising in the Tokugawa period, bouts were held on shrine and temple grounds — the ritual apparatus never left
- Still visible today: the sacred dohyō, the sky-representing yakata roof, salt purification, and shiko stomping to drive out malevolent forces
- The *gyōji*'s robes are modelled on Shinto priests and Heian court officials; for some ceremonies they officiate in the manner of Shinto priests
- The Japan Sumo Association was formed **28 December 1925**; since **1958** it has run six 15-day tournaments a year across four locations

Next chapter: **Ancient Origins — Sumo as Shinto Ritual** — the agricultural fertility rites behind the sport, and the legendary Nomi no Sukune origin story that sumo still traces itself back to.

CHAPTER 2: ANCIENT ORIGINS: SUMO AS SHINTO RITUAL

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Chapter 2 · Ancient Origins: Sumo as Shinto Ritual

Chapter 1 showed a modern bout still carrying its own purification rite in miniature — salt, a sacred ring, a priest-robed official. This chapter goes back to where that connection actually started: sumo as a rite performed for the gods, not a sport merely blessed by them, and the single legendary match every later history of sumo traces itself back to.

A Rite Bound to the Harvest

Before sumo was anything resembling a sport, it was performed as an offering to Shinto deities — entertainment staged to please the gods and, in return, secure a good harvest and divine protection. Wrestling of this kind sat inside a much broader Japanese tradition of tying physical performance directly to the agricultural calendar: rice-planting festivals, harvest rites, and New Year divination ceremonies that still survive at shrines across Japan today.

A REAL, STILL-PRACTISED EXAMPLE

At Suwa Taisha in Nagano Prefecture, a divination rite called *tsutsugayu shinji* — the "cylinder-gruel rite" — is still held every 15 January. Hollow reeds or bamboo tubes, one for each coming month, are boiled together in rice gruel; the following morning, the tubes are cut open, and the amount of rice stuck inside each one is read as a forecast of that month's own harvest. This is not sumo itself, but it is exactly the kind of ritual world sumo grew up inside — physical performance and ceremony used to divine, and to influence, the year's crop.

Read against that backdrop, sumo's own earliest form was not a contest of two individuals so much as a performance directed outward — toward the gods, and toward the harvest their favour was believed to determine.

The Legendary Founding Match: Nomi no Sukune vs. Taima no Kehaya

Sumo's own foundational story is recorded in the *Nihon Shoki*, Japan's second-oldest chronicle, compiled by a committee of court scholars in 720 CE. According to the account, in 23 BCE — during the traditional reign of Emperor Suinin — a man named Taima no Kehaya boasted that no one in the land could match his strength. The emperor summoned a renowned strongman from Izumo province, Nomi no Sukune, to answer the challenge.

The match

Nomi no Sukune kicked Taima no Kehaya in the ribs, breaking them, then stamped on his lower back — killing him on the spot.

The verdict

The *Nihon Shoki* itself treats this as the founding contest of what would become sumo — the earliest written record of the practice in Japan.

The aftermath

Nomi no Sukune went on to be remembered as sumo's own ancestral figure, and as the founder of the Haji clan, a lineage later associated with funerary and ceremonial roles at court.

It is worth noticing what this founding story actually depicts: not a formalised bout with rules and a winner declared by points, but a real fight to the death, staged at an emperor's own command to settle a boast. Whatever sumo eventually became, its own foundational story is a story about lethal violence, not sport.

How reliable is this account, really?

The *Nihon Shoki* was compiled in 720 CE, and its companion text the *Kojiki* in 712 CE — both roughly seven centuries after the events they describe reaching this far back. Historians treat the chronicles' own earliest layers with real caution: the texts make no sharp distinction between myth and history, and their own central purpose was establishing an unbroken imperial line back to the sun goddess Amaterasu, not producing an objective historical record. The *Nihon Shoki* is generally

considered more reliable the closer it gets to the scholars' own present day — which means a dated 23 BCE wrestling match, recorded seven hundred years later inside a text built to serve dynastic legitimacy, is a legend with a real cultural function, not a verified historical event.

Why the Legend Still Matters

None of that historical caution erases the legend's own real weight. Sumo institutions today still treat Nomi no Sukune as the sport's own ancestral founder, and shrines dedicated to him remain sites of real reverence within the sumo world. The story functions the way founding myths generally do — not as a claim a modern historian should accept at face value, but as the origin story a living tradition has chosen to tell about itself, and continues to tell.

A Direct Line to Chapter 1

Chapter 1 noted that sumo's ring, roof, and referee's robes all descend from a time when bouts were held on shrine and temple grounds. This chapter's own two threads — the harvest-rite tradition and the Nomi no Sukune legend — are the reason that setting existed in the first place. Sumo did not move onto sacred ground later; by its own telling, it began there.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 3 follows sumo out of legend and into the real, documented record of the Nara and Heian imperial courts, where it became a formal annual court ceremony — the point at which sumo's own history starts resting on firmer ground than a single founding myth.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Sumo's own foundational story is a fight to the death, not a sporting contest. What does it suggest about a tradition's own self-understanding that its origin myth is so much more violent than its modern practice?

REFLECTION 2

The *Nihon Shoki* was compiled specifically to legitimise an imperial line, seven centuries after the events its earliest chapters describe. Does knowing a text's own political purpose change how you'd read a legend it records, even one as specific and dated as this?

REFLECTION 3

Sumo began as a rite performed for the gods, tied to the harvest. Chapter 1 already showed that framing never fully disappeared. At what point, across the chapters ahead, do you expect sumo to have stopped being primarily a religious act and started being primarily a sport?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 2

- Early sumo was performed as an offering to Shinto deities, tied directly to the agricultural calendar and the hope of a good harvest
- A real, still-practised parallel: Suwa Taisha's *tsutsugayu shinji* rice-gruel divination rite, held every 15 January
- Sumo's founding legend: Nomi no Sukune vs. Taima no Kehaya, recorded in the *Nihon Shoki* (compiled 720 CE) as occurring in 23 BCE under Emperor Suinin — a fight to the death, not a bout
- Nomi no Sukune is remembered as sumo's ancestral founder and as founder of the Haji clan
- A real, sourced caution: the *Nihon Shoki* and *Kojiki* were compiled roughly 700 years after this event, blend myth and history freely in their earliest layers, and were built primarily to legitimise the imperial line — the match is a founding legend, not a verified historical record

Next chapter: **Sumo in the Imperial Court: The Nara & Heian Periods** — where sumo leaves legend behind and becomes a documented, formal annual court ceremony.

CHAPTER 3: SUMO IN THE IMPERIAL COURT: THE NARA & HEIAN PERIODS

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Chapter 3 · Sumo in the Imperial Court: The Nara & Heian Periods

Chapter 2 ended with a legend seven centuries removed from the event it describes. This chapter reaches genuinely documented ground: a real annual court ceremony, with a real recruitment bureaucracy behind it, a real structure, and a real, traceable decline.

The Sumai no Sechie: A Real Annual Court Ceremony

From the Nara period into the Heian period, sumo became one of Japan's *sando sechi* — the three annual formal ceremonies of the imperial court — under the name **Sumai no Sechie**, the "Wrestling Banquet." The oldest surviving record of the event places it in **726 CE**, under Emperor Shōmu, when wrestlers from his own court-controlled domains were presented as a form of tribute. The ceremony's own purpose stayed close to the world Chapter 2 described: it remained, at its core, a ritual tied to praying for a good harvest and reading the fortunes of the provinces, now performed inside the machinery of the imperial court rather than at a village shrine.

A Real Bureaucracy Built to Stage It

Staging the Sumai no Sechie required real administrative infrastructure. Officials — described in the sources as sumo emissaries — were dispatched out to the provinces specifically to recruit strong men and encourage their contribution to the court event. A temporary office, the **Sumai no tsukasa**, was established during the Heian period to organise the ceremony, with imperial princes given the honorary role of *Betto*, chief of the office. Wrestlers themselves were, in effect, apprenticed as imperial and military guards — the same soldier-adjacent status that would echo, centuries later, in the professional stables Chapter 6 covers.

Recruitment

Administration

Emissaries sent to the provinces to identify and bring back strong men for the ceremony, most wrestlers arriving as contributions from the provinces themselves.

The Sumai no tsukasa, a temporary court office run by imperial princes holding the title of Betto, organised the event each year.

Status

Wrestlers were effectively apprenticed as imperial and military guards, tying the role directly into the court's own military establishment.

The Left, the Right, and the Music Between Them

On the day itself, wrestlers were split into two sides, left and right, and paired off across as many as twenty bouts, fought before the emperor and the assembled court nobility. The matches were accompanied by *bugaku*, the imperial court's own dance performed to real Japanese court music — the tradition this site's own Music Subject already covers as *gagaku*. The left/right division was not incidental decoration: by the ninth century, court music itself was formally organised the same way, into *tōgaku*, the "music of the left" (drawing on Tang-dynasty Chinese and Indian material), and *komagaku*, the "music of the right" (drawing on Korean and other traditions). The wrestling ceremony and the music accompanying it shared a single structural logic.

A REAL STRUCTURAL ECHO

A single ceremony organising both its combatants and its music around the same left/right division is a genuine, documented structural choice, not a coincidence of two unrelated traditions happening to overlap. It reflects how thoroughly sumo, by the Heian period, had been absorbed into the court's own formal aesthetic and ceremonial order — not a rough contest tolerated at the margins of court life, but a ceremony built with the same organising principles as the music and dance performed around it.

A Real, Traceable Decline

The Sumai no Sechie did not end all at once. Its first real disruption came with the death of the retired emperor Heizei on **9 August 824 CE**, after which the ceremony's own dates were shifted — moved to 16 July — and its prominence began to fade. Emperor Kōkō later made a real effort to revive interest in the event, but from the middle of the Heian period onward, the grand court ceremony gave way to smaller, lower-key *meshiawase* — invitational matches organised directly by the imperial guards rather than staged as a full annual state ceremony. The Sumai no Sechie itself was held only sporadically after that, with recorded performances in **1158** and **1174**, before finally being abolished.

An Honest Gap in the Record

Sources describing the Sumai no Sechie's own final abolition are specific about its last recorded performances — 1158 and 1174 — but do not give a single precise date or decree marking its formal end. What can be said with confidence is the real shape of the decline: a gradual fading from grand annual state ceremony to sporadic, occasional event, tracking the imperial court's own broader loss of real political and cultural centrality as Japan moved toward the warrior-dominated era covered in Chapter 4.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 4 follows sumo out of a declining imperial court and into the hands of a rising class with an entirely different relationship to physical combat: the samurai, for whom sumo became training as much as ceremony.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Sumo wrestlers and court music were both organised by the same left/right division. What does sharing a structural principle with the arts around it suggest about how fully sumo had been absorbed into formal court culture, rather than merely tolerated by it?

REFLECTION 2

The Sumai no Sechie's decline tracked the imperial court's own declining real power, rather than any loss of interest in wrestling itself. What does that suggest about how much a ritual's own survival can depend on the institution staging it, separate from the ritual's own popularity?

REFLECTION 3

Wrestlers in this period were effectively apprenticed as court guards. Chapter 4 covers sumo's real adoption by the samurai. Before reading on, what do you expect changes and what stays the same once sumo moves from a ceremonial court role to genuine military training?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 3

- The **Sumai no Sechie** ("Wrestling Banquet") was one of the imperial court's three annual formal ceremonies, the *sando sechi*; the oldest surviving record dates to **726 CE**, under Emperor Shōmu
- Real recruitment infrastructure: emissaries dispatched to the provinces, and a temporary office, the **Sumai no tsukasa**, run by imperial princes as *Betto*
- Wrestlers were effectively apprenticed as imperial and military guards
- Bouts split competitors into **left and right** sides across up to **20 bouts**, performed for the emperor and court nobility, accompanied by real *bugaku* court dance and music — itself formally organised into left (*tōgaku*) and right (*komagaku*) categories
- The ceremony declined after the retired emperor Heizei's death on **9 August 824 CE**; Emperor Kōkō later revived interest, but grand ceremonies gave way to smaller *meshiawase* events
- Recorded performances continued sporadically to **1158** and **1174**, before the ceremony was finally abolished — no single precise end date survives

Next chapter: **The Warrior Era: Sumo & the Samurai** — how sumo moved from a declining court ceremony into real martial training for Japan's rising warrior class.

CHAPTER 4: THE WARRIOR ERA: SUMO & THE SAMURAI

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Chapter 4 · The Warrior Era: Sumo & the Samurai

Chapter 3 left the Sumai no Sechie fading alongside the imperial court that staged it. Sumo did not fade with it — it changed hands, and changed purpose, moving from ceremony into a rising warrior class's own real combat training.

A New Ruling Class, a New Use for an Old Practice

As real political power shifted from the imperial court to a warrior aristocracy — the Kamakura shogunate's own founding is itself genuinely disputed among historians, with 1185 (when Minamoto no Yoritomo secured real judicial and policing authority over the eastern provinces) now generally favoured over the older, more traditional 1192 date (his formal imperial appointment as *Sei Taishōgun*) — sumo followed Japan's own shifting centre of power. The samurai who now genuinely ran the country had far less use for a court ceremony tied to harvest divination than for a real system of unarmed and semi-armed combat training.

Kumiuchi: Sumo as Battlefield Grappling

That training took shape as **kumiuchi** — literally "grappling combat" — real armored close-quarters wrestling, drawing directly on sumo technique. Warfare in this period followed a genuine, documented sequence: bow and arrow first, then swordwork, and finally, once combatants closed the distance completely, kumiuchi grappling. On a real medieval battlefield, an enemy general pinned to the ground in kumiuchi was typically finished off with a blade — the grappling itself was the step that decided who got to use the sword next.

The sequence of combat

Bow, then sword, then kumiuchi grappling once fighters closed — a real, documented

What kumiuchi was for

Winning the grapple against an armored opponent decided who controlled the

progression through the stages of a medieval Japanese engagement.

finishing blow — grappling skill had real, lethal stakes on the battlefield.

Sumo's own role

Sumo technique served as the practical foundation kumiuchi was built on, training the unarmed core skill underneath a form of combat carried out in full armor.

This is a genuine repurposing, not merely a rebranding. The ceremony Chapter 3 described was staged for the emperor's own court; kumiuchi was drilled for a battlefield where losing the grapple could mean losing your life. The techniques share real ancestry, but the stakes, and the audience, had changed completely.

Oda Nobunaga's Real, Documented Tournament

By the late sixteenth century, sumo had also become something the era's most powerful warlords used deliberately, in public, for their own political ends. **Oda Nobunaga** — the warlord whose own campaigns did more than any other single figure's to end Japan's long civil-war period — was a genuine, documented enthusiast of the sport, holding real sumo tournaments at Jōraku-ji in Azuchi repeatedly between 1570 and 1581, the year before his death.

A REAL, MASSIVE, DATED EVENT

Nobunaga's largest tournament was held in **February 1578** at Azuchi Castle, with a documented **1,500 wrestlers** taking part. Because so many bouts needed to run at once, circular arenas were marked out across the castle grounds specifically to speed the proceedings along and keep spectators safely clear of the action. The tournament drew genuine, verified strategic value beyond simple entertainment: it let Nobunaga scout young men of real physical strength and martial promise, while the scale of the spectacle itself was a real, deliberate display of his own authority.

An Honest Distinction: These Weren't Yet *the* Dohyō

It is tempting to read Nobunaga's 1578 circular arenas as the direct origin of sumo's own iconic circular ring — but the real record doesn't support that link cleanly. The formally codified, sacred circular dohyō — straw bales packed with earth, a fixed 13-*shaku* (roughly 3.94-metre) diameter — is documented instead from the **Enho era, 1673 to 1681**, nearly a century later, and is associated with *kanjin-zumo*, the fundraising matches covered in Chapter 5. Nobunaga's own circular arenas were a practical, event-specific solution to running many simultaneous bouts safely — a real precedent in shape, but not, on the current evidence, the direct ancestor of the single sacred ring later chapters describe.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 5 covers the Edo period, where sumo genuinely professionalises for the first time — kanjin-zumo fundraising matches, the real, formally codified circular dohyō this chapter deliberately deferred, and the banzuke ranking system that still structures the sport today.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Kumiuchi kept sumo's own core technique but changed its purpose from ceremony to lethal battlefield skill. What does it take for a practice to be repurposed that completely while still being recognisably the same thing?

REFLECTION 2

Nobunaga's tournament served both real entertainment and real strategic scouting at once. What does combining those two purposes in one event suggest about how a powerful ruler might use a popular sport for ends that have nothing to do with the sport itself?

REFLECTION 3

This chapter deliberately resisted linking Nobunaga's circular arenas to the later, formally codified dohyō. Why might it matter to keep two similar-looking historical details separate, even when connecting them would make for a neater story?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 4

- The Kamakura shogunate's real founding date is genuinely disputed — 1185 (Yoritomo's real judicial/policing authority) is now generally favoured over the traditional 1192 (his formal imperial appointment)
- **Kumiuchi** — real armored grappling combat — drew directly on sumo technique as part of the documented bow-then-sword-then-grapple sequence of medieval battlefield combat
- Oda Nobunaga held real sumo tournaments at Jōraku-ji in Azuchi from **1570 to 1581**, his largest in **February 1578** with **1,500 wrestlers**
- Temporary circular arenas at that tournament sped up simultaneous bouts and protected spectators — a real, practical, event-specific solution
- An honest distinction: the formally codified, sacred circular dohyō is documented separately, from the **Enho era (1673–1681)**, and is not directly traceable to Nobunaga's own 1578 arenas

Next chapter: **The Edo Period: Professional Sumo Is Born** — kanjin-zumo fundraising matches, the real circular dohyō, and the birth of the banzuke ranking system.

CHAPTER 5: THE EDO PERIOD: PROFESSIONAL SUMO IS BORN

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Chapter 5 · The Edo Period: Professional Sumo Is Born

Chapter 4 deliberately left the sacred circular dohyō for this chapter, rather than crediting it to Nobunaga's own earlier practical arenas. Here is where it actually belongs — inside a real, documented story of a sport banned, then rehabilitated, then professionalised for good.

Kanjin-zumo: Wrestling to Pay for a Roof

A new form of public sumo, **kanjin-zumo** — "encouraging [donations] sumo" — emerged during the Sengoku period and carried into the early Tokugawa shogunate. The purpose was practical and specific: shrines and temples in real, documented need of repair or reconstruction held sumo tournaments as fundraisers, charging spectators to watch and putting the proceeds toward the building itself. The practice spread nationwide, concentrated especially in Kyōto, Ōsaka, and Edo.

A Real Ban, Then a Real Reversal

Kanjin-zumo's own path to legitimacy was not smooth. In the mid-seventeenth century, the shogunate banned public sumo performances outright — even the fundraising kind — on the grounds that they disturbed public morals. The ban held for decades before the government reversed course.

THE REAL TURNING POINT: 1684

In **1684**, the Edo shogunate granted **Tomioka Hachimangu Shrine** in Fukagawa formal permission to hold sumo tournaments — the decisive reversal that let kanjin-zumo return to public life. Around the same period, sumo depictions from roughly 1673 to 1683 confirm a genuinely new element had appeared alongside the reversal: a real,

defined ring. This is the circular dohyō Chapter 4 deliberately declined to trace back to Nobunaga's own temporary 1578 arenas — its real, documented appearance sits exactly here, bound up with the shogunate's own shift from banning sumo to actively permitting and supporting it.

Once permitted again, tournaments resumed on a real, structured basis — eight consecutive fair-weather days, held at specific, named venues across Edo, including Tomioka Hachiman Shrine itself, Ekōin Temple in Honjo, and Yushima Tenjinja Shrine. Around these officially sanctioned events, a genuine professional world began to take shape for the first time: ranked wrestlers, organised stables, and paying crowds — the direct institutional ancestor of the sport Chapter 6 describes in its modern form.

The Fundraising Purpose Hasn't Gone Anywhere

Chapter 2 traced sumo's own roots to a rite performed to secure favour and prosperity for a community. Kanjin-zumo is the same underlying logic wearing new clothes: physical performance, staged specifically to secure real material benefit — this time cash for a roof, not rain for a harvest.

The Banzuke: Ranking Wrestlers on Paper

The other institution born in this period still governs sumo today. The **banzuke** — the ranking chart listing every professional wrestler by division and standing — traces its own earliest form to the Genroku era (1688–1704), when wooden blocks listed wrestlers and officials divided into East and West sides. By the 1720s, as tournament organisation grew more regular, the practice grew more prominent alongside it.

Genroku era (1688–1704)

The earliest known banzuke: wooden blocks listing wrestlers and officials, already split into East and West.

October 1757

The first printed banzuke, produced by the wrestler Mikawa Jiemon for a real tournament — a one-sheet format recognisably close to the modern document.

By 1761

The printed banzuke's own form and production method, traceable this far back, had settled into the style that would define Edo sumo going forward.

The structure fixed in this period is still recognisable in the banzuke posted before every modern tournament: wrestlers divided East (printed right) and West (printed left), ranked strictly by their prior tournament results, with the highest division — *makuuchi* — printed in the largest characters at the top, descending through successive divisions to the smallest characters and lowest ranks at the bottom.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 6 takes this Edo-period foundation — ranked wrestlers, organised stables, a codified ring — and follows it into the real, modern structure of professional sumo: the stable system, the rikishi's own daily life, and how the banzuke's own ranking logic actually determines a wrestler's career.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Kanjin-zumo raised money for shrines and temples by charging the public to watch a fight. What does funding religious infrastructure through paid spectacle suggest about how sacred and commercial purposes have coexisted throughout sumo's own history?

REFLECTION 2

The government banned public sumo for decades, then reversed itself and actively supported it. What kinds of real pressures — social, economic, or otherwise — might push a government to change its mind that completely on the same activity?

REFLECTION 3

The banzuke's basic East/West, results-based ranking structure has survived roughly 300 years largely intact. What does that kind of durability suggest about the design of the system itself, compared to everything else about sumo that has changed across the chapters so far?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 5

- **Kanjin-zumo** ("encouraging [donations] sumo") emerged in the Sengoku period as real fundraising bouts for shrine and temple repair
- A mid-17th-century shogunate ban on public sumo performances held for decades on grounds of public morals
- The real reversal: in **1684**, the Edo shogunate permitted Tomioka Hachimangu Shrine to hold tournaments — the decisive turning point
- The formally codified circular dohyō appears in the historical record around **1673–1683**, tied to this same period, not to Nobunaga's own earlier arenas
- Post-1684 tournaments ran 8 consecutive fair-weather days at named Edo venues; a genuine professional world (ranked wrestlers, stables, paying crowds) formed around them
- The **banzuke** ranking chart traces to the Genroku era (1688–1704) as wooden-block listings; the first printed one-sheet version dates to **October 1757**, with its settled form traceable to **1761**

Next chapter: **The Real Structure of Modern Sumo: Rikishi, Stables & the Ranking System** — how the Edo-period foundation this chapter describes became the professional institution that governs sumo today.

The History of Sumo Wrestling

Chapter 6 · The Real Structure of Modern Sumo: Rikishi, Stables & the Ranking System

Chapter 5 ended with an Edo-period foundation already recognisable: ranked wrestlers, organised stables, a paying public. This chapter follows that foundation into the present — the real institution a professional sumo wrestler, a rikishi, actually lives inside today.

The Stable System

Every professional wrestler belongs to a **heya**, a stable, run by an **oyakata** — a stable master who is himself a retired wrestler who qualified for that role. The Japan Sumo Association the Chapter 1 quick-ref already introduced (formed 1925) currently recognises roughly **45 active stables**, each housing anywhere from about five to forty-five wrestlers across every rank. A stable is not simply a gym: wrestlers below the top ranks eat, sleep, and train inside it as one continuous household, a structure with direct roots in the Edo-period system Chapter 5 described taking shape around kanjin-zumo tournaments.

Six Divisions, One Ladder

Every wrestler sits somewhere on a single six-division ladder, the direct modern descendant of the banzuke Chapter 5 traced back to the Genroku era. Climbing it is not automatic — it has to be earned, tournament by tournament, on real results.

DIVISION	APPROX. WRESTLERS	STATUS
Makuuchi (top division)	~42	Sekitori — salaried, elite
Jūryō	~28	Sekitori — salaried, the real threshold division

DIVISION	APPROX. WRESTLERS	STATUS
Makushita	~200	Unsalaries; most spend 1–3 years here climbing, or settle here permanently
Sandanme	~200	Unsalaries
Jonidan	~260	Unsalaries
Jonokuchi	lowest division	Unsalaries — the real entry point for almost every wrestler

Below the top two divisions, promotion and demotion run on a real, mechanical rule: each of these four lower divisions wrestles a **7-bout format** across the 15-day tournament, and a winning record of 4-3 (*kachi-koshi*) generally earns promotion, while a losing record of 3-4 (*make-koshi*) generally brings demotion. Every wrestler except those with a successful amateur career granted direct entry to makushita starts at the very bottom, in jonokuchi, and works upward from there — or doesn't.

Sekitori: The Line That Actually Matters

The single sharpest real divide in professional sumo doesn't sit at the top of the ladder — it sits between jūryō and makushita, the boundary separating the **sekitori** — wrestlers ranked jūryō or above — from everyone below them. The gap is real and material, not merely a matter of prestige.

Salary

Sekitori draw a real monthly salary from the Japan Sumo Association. Wrestlers below jūryō live on a modest per-tournament allowance and whatever the stable itself provides.

Housing

A sekitori may marry and move into a home of his own. A wrestler below jūryō sleeps in one large shared room with every other junior wrestler in the stable.

Personal attendants

Once promoted, a sekitori is assigned *tsukebito* — junior wrestlers who handle his laundry, schedule, errands, and food, freeing him to focus entirely on training.

"Heaven and Hell"

The difference between jūryō and the division one rank below it, makushita, is real enough that it is routinely described in exactly those terms — heaven and hell — inside the sport itself. A wrestler can spend years in makushita's own roughly 200-strong field without ever crossing into a salaried life, while one tournament's own results can move him across that line in either direction.

Life Inside a Stable

Below the sekitori line, a rikishi's own daily life runs through a steep, real internal hierarchy. Junior wrestlers cook the stable's midday meal, built around **chanko-nabe**, the protein-rich hot pot now inseparable from sumo — but they eat last: the stable master, coaches, and sekitori are served and fed first, with junior wrestlers waiting until everyone above them has finished. The same junior wrestlers clean the stable's rooms and bathrooms, do laundry, run errands, and — for whichever two are currently assigned as a given sekitori's own *tsukebito* — manage that senior wrestler's entire daily life outside the ring.

A Real, Direct Continuity

Chapter 3 described Nara- and Heian-period wrestlers effectively apprenticed as imperial and military guards — a real hierarchy of service tied to rank. The modern stable's own *tsukebito* system is a genuine, still-living version of that same underlying logic: status in this sport has never simply meant winning matches; it has always also meant who serves whom.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 7 climbs to the very top of the ladder this chapter has laid out — the **yokozuna**, sumo's own grand champion rank, and its real, unusual promotion standard: a rikishi must

demonstrate genuine dignity as well as sheer wrestling strength before being elevated to it.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

The sekitori line brings salary, housing, and personal attendants all at once, at a single fixed rank. What might a system gain — or risk — by concentrating every real material reward at one sharp threshold, rather than spreading it gradually across the whole ranking ladder?

REFLECTION 2

Junior wrestlers cook the stable's food but eat last. What does a hierarchy built around who serves and who is served, rather than purely around who wins, suggest about what a stable is actually training its wrestlers to become?

REFLECTION 3

Promotion below jūryō runs on a simple, mechanical 4-3/3-4 rule. Before reading Chapter 7, what kind of standard do you expect governs promotion to yokozuna itself — do you expect it to be equally mechanical, or something harder to measure?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 6

- Every professional wrestler belongs to a **heya** (stable) run by an **oyakata**; roughly **45 active stables** exist today, each housing ~5–45 wrestlers
- Six divisions, bottom to top: **jonokuchi** (entry point for nearly everyone), **jonidan** (~260), **sandanme** (~200), **makushita** (~200), **jūryō** (~28), **makuuchi** (~42)
- Below jūryō: a 7-bout, 15-day format; **4-3 (kachi-koshi)** generally promotes, **3-4 (make-koshi)** generally demotes
- **Sekitori** (jūryō and above) alone draw a real salary, may marry and live independently, and are assigned **tsukebito** personal attendants

- Below sekitori: shared housing, per-tournament allowances only, and real daily duties — cooking chanko-nabe, cleaning, laundry, tsukebito service — eating only after the stable's seniors have finished

Next chapter: **The Yokozuna: Sumo's Real Grand Champions** — the top of the ladder this chapter has just described, and the unusual promotion standard that requires both strength and dignity.

CHAPTER 7: THE YOKOZUNA: SUMO'S REAL GRAND CHAMPIONS

The History of Sumo Wrestling

Chapter 7 · The Yokozuna: Sumo's Real Grand Champions

Chapter 6 closed the ranking ladder at makuuchi's own top. This chapter climbs one rank higher, to a title that formally sits above the ladder itself — and to a promotion standard that asks for something no win-loss record can measure on its own.

A Rank That Demands More Than Winning

Promotion to **yokozuna** is reserved for an **ōzeki** — the rank directly below it — who has genuinely dominated the top division, conventionally by winning two tournament championships in a row, or by a comparable record judged across a wrestler's own most recent three tournaments (with an expectation of at least one outright win, two runner-up finishes, and none of the three records falling below twelve wins out of fifteen). That standard is a real, longstanding convention, not a written rule in any formal sumo regulation.

HINKAKU: THE REAL, DELIBERATELY SUBJECTIVE HALF OF THE STANDARD

Wrestling dominance alone has never been enough. Promotion also formally requires **hinkaku** — dignity and grace — alongside sheer power and skill. Unlike a win-loss record, hinkaku cannot be calculated from a tournament sheet; it is a genuinely subjective judgment about a wrestler's own conduct, bearing, and character, and it remains, by design, the more contested half of the promotion decision.

Who Actually Decides

Since the **Yokozuna Deliberation Council** was established on **21 April 1950**, the formal decision to promote a wrestler to yokozuna has run through this body rather than resting solely inside the Japan Sumo Association itself. The Council is made up of 10 to 15 members drawn

deliberately from outside sumo — journalists, academics, former politicians, and business figures respected for their own standing and, ideally, real knowledge of the sport — a structure built specifically to bring outside judgment to bear on the one criterion, *hinkaku*, that the sport's own internal record-keeping can't settle by itself.

Why the Standard Is So Strict: There Is No Way Back Down

The promotion bar sits this high for a real, structural reason. Every other rank on Chapter 6's own ladder moves in both directions — a losing record sends a wrestler down as readily as a winning one sends him up. Yokozuna does not work that way: a yokozuna **cannot be demoted**, at any rank, for any reason. Once a wrestler can no longer perform at the standard the rank demands, the only real option is retirement.

A Real Rule the Sumo Association Actually Tried to Change — and Reversed

The no-demotion principle is not simply tradition left untested. In 1950 — the same year the Yokozuna Deliberation Council itself was founded — the Japan Sumo Association briefly introduced an actual demotion rule for underperforming yokozuna, then reversed it after real public backlash. The rank has remained demotion-proof ever since, which is exactly why the promotion decision itself carries so much real weight: once granted, it effectively cannot be taken back.

The Tsuna and the Dohyo-iri

A yokozuna's own rank is worn, not merely awarded. The title's own name literally means "horizontal rope," referring to the **tsuna** — a thick rope, sometimes weighing up to **20 kilograms** — worn around the waist. The rope plays no role in an actual bout; it is worn specifically during the yokozuna's own *dohyo-iri*, the ceremonial ring-entering performance, a real, direct continuation of the ritual vocabulary Chapter 1 already introduced — a costume built entirely for a ceremony, not for combat.

An Honest Note on the Rank's Own Origins

Akashi Shiganosuke is traditionally recognised as the first yokozuna. He is also, honestly, a genuinely legendary figure whose real historicity remains disputed — the same category of uncertainty Chapter 2 already attached to Nomi no Sukune. As of the most recent complete count, a total of **75 wrestlers** have held the rank since sumo's own records begin tracking it, a real, countable lineage sitting on top of a founding figure the historical record can't fully confirm.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 8 follows sumo beyond Japan's own borders for the first time — the real rise of foreign-born wrestlers reaching the top ranks, including yokozuna itself, and the genuine controversy that followed.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Hinkaku is a deliberately subjective standard, judged by people drawn from outside the sport itself. What are the real risks and the real benefits of building a formal promotion criterion around a quality that can't be measured objectively?

REFLECTION 2

The Sumo Association tried demoting yokozuna once, in 1950, and reversed the decision after public backlash. What does that reversal suggest about how much the public's own expectations, not just the sport's own internal rules, shape what a rank like yokozuna is allowed to mean?

REFLECTION 3

Because a yokozuna can never be demoted, promotion is effectively a one-way, permanent decision. Would you expect that irreversibility to make selectors more cautious, or does it create

its own different kind of pressure?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 7

- Promotion requires both real wrestling dominance (conventionally two consecutive championships, or a comparable record) and **hinkaku** — dignity and grace, a deliberately subjective standard
- The **Yokozuna Deliberation Council**, founded **21 April 1950**, makes the real promotion decision, drawing 10–15 members from outside sumo itself
- A yokozuna **cannot be demoted** at any rank — the only path once performance declines is retirement
- The Sumo Association briefly introduced an actual demotion rule in 1950 and reversed it after real public backlash
- The **tsuna** rope (up to ~20kg) is worn only during the ceremonial *dohyo-iri*, never during an actual bout
- Akashi Shiganosuke, the traditionally recognised first yokozuna, is a genuinely legendary figure whose real historicity is disputed; a total of **75 wrestlers** have held the rank as of the most recent complete count

Next chapter: **Sumo Goes International: Foreign-Born Wrestlers & Real Controversy** — the real rise of foreign-born wrestlers to the top ranks, including yokozuna itself.

CHAPTER 8: SUMO GOES INTERNATIONAL: FOREIGN-BORN WRESTLERS & REAL CONTROVERSY

The History of Sumo Wrestling

Chapter 8 · Sumo Goes International: Foreign-Born Wrestlers & Real Controversy

Chapter 7 closed on a rank that demands more than winning. This chapter tests that standard against a real, documented wave of foreign-born wrestlers who reached — and, in several cases, dominated — the very top of the sport, and against the genuine institutional anxiety that wave produced.

A Real Hawaiian Pipeline

The first foreign-born wrestler to break through professional sumo's own top ranks was **Jesse Kuhaulua**, competing under the ring name **Takamiyama**. He became the first non-Japanese wrestler to reach makuuchi in January 1968, and in **July 1972** became the first foreign-born wrestler ever to win a top-division tournament championship outright.

Takamiyama (1972)

First foreign-born wrestler to win a top-division championship — and, later, in 1986, the first foreign-born wrestler ever to run his own training stable.

Konishiki (1987)

First foreign-born wrestler promoted to ōzeki, sumo's second-highest rank — one rung below the yokozuna standard Chapter 7 described.

Akebono (1993)

First foreign-born wrestler promoted all the way to yokozuna — personally recruited into the sport in 1988 by Takamiyama himself.

A REAL, DIRECT CHAIN OF MENTORSHIP

Akebono's own path to yokozuna is not a coincidence sitting beside Takamiyama's — it runs directly through him. Takamiyama, the sport's own real first foreign-born champion, personally recruited Akebono in 1988; five years later, Akebono became the first foreign-born wrestler to reach the very rank Chapter 7 spent an entire chapter describing as demanding hinkaku alongside dominance. All three of these pioneers were Hawaiian-born, a real, concentrated point of origin for sumo's own first international breakthrough.

A Real Institutional Response: One Foreign Wrestler Per Stable

As foreign-born wrestlers began reaching sumo's own highest ranks in real numbers, the Japan Sumo Association introduced a formal limit in **1992**: no stable could take on more than one foreign-born wrestler at a time. The rule briefly lapsed — stables stopped recruiting foreign wrestlers altogether for a period — before resuming in 1998 under the same one-per-stable condition, a restriction that remains in place today.

Mongolia's Real Dominance of the Yokozuna Rank

The one-per-stable rule did not stop the sport's own centre of gravity from shifting again — this time toward Mongolia. Since foreign recruitment resumed, six Mongolian-born wrestlers have reached yokozuna, including **Asashoryu** and **Hakuho**, the latter holding the real record for the most top-division championship wins in sumo history, at **45**.

Asashoryu's Own Real Test of Chapter 7's Standard

In January 2010, reports emerged of a drunken assault Asashoryu was alleged to have committed outside a Tokyo nightclub. The Sumo Association opened a formal investigation into the allegations. On **4 February 2010**, Asashoryu announced his retirement at a tearful press conference, apologising for "having caused so much trouble" — even while disputing how the incident itself had been reported. The real, structural context matters here directly: because Chapter 7 already established that a yokozuna cannot be demoted, the only paths available once

a genuine hinkaku controversy this serious surfaced were retirement, or formal dismissal by the Association itself. His retirement, at 29, left sumo with a single active yokozuna — his own countryman, Hakuho.

A Direct Test of Chapter 7's Own Subjective Standard

Chapter 7 called hinkaku the deliberately subjective half of yokozuna promotion — and noted the rank's own real irreversibility once granted. Asashoryu's own retirement is exactly that irreversibility playing out in reverse: a wrestler's real, undisputed athletic dominance (25 championships, third all-time) proved no protection at all once his own conduct came into question, precisely because there was no demotion available to absorb the shortfall.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 9 widens the lens from individual controversy to the sport's own broader, real challenges — match- fixing scandals and other documented threats to sumo's traditional image, examined with the same honesty this chapter has already applied to Asashoryu's own case.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Takamiyama personally recruited the wrestler who would go on to break the barrier he himself had first broken. What does that kind of direct mentorship chain suggest about how institutional "firsts" actually happen — as isolated breakthroughs, or as deliberately built pipelines?

REFLECTION 2

The one-foreign-wrestler-per-stable rule limits recruitment without banning foreign wrestlers outright. What does a rule shaped that way — a limit rather than a ban — suggest about the real tension the Sumo Association was trying to manage?

REFLECTION 3

Asashoryu's real athletic record was never in question; his retirement came down entirely to conduct. Do you think a rank that cannot be demoted makes a wrestler's own behaviour matter more, or less, than it would under a system that allowed a gradual fall instead?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 8

- **Takamiyama** (Jesse Kuhaulua): first non-Japanese wrestler in makuuchi (Jan 1968); first foreign-born top-division champion (July 1972); first foreign-born stable master (1986)
- **Konishiki**: first foreign-born wrestler promoted to ōzeki (1987)
- **Akebono**: recruited by Takamiyama in 1988; first foreign-born yokozuna in **1993**
- All three were Hawaiian-born; Akebono's own path ran directly through Takamiyama's personal recruitment
- The Sumo Association introduced a **one-foreign-wrestler-per-stable** rule in **1992**, briefly lapsed, then resumed under the same condition from 1998, still in effect today
- Six Mongolian-born wrestlers have reached yokozuna, including Hakuho (a real record 45 top-division championships) and Asashoryu (25 championships, third all-time)
- Asashoryu retired on **4 February 2010** following a real assault-allegation scandal — because yokozuna cannot be demoted (Chapter 7), retirement or dismissal were the only real options once hinkaku itself was in question

Next chapter: **Real Scandals & Genuine Challenges to Sumo's Traditional Image** — match-fixing and other documented controversies the sport has had to confront.

CHAPTER 9: REAL SCANDALS & GENUINE CHALLENGES TO SUMO'S TRADITIONAL IMAGE

The History of Sumo Wrestling

Chapter 9 · Real Scandals & Genuine Challenges to Sumo's Traditional Image

Chapter 8 tested hinkaku against one real case. This chapter widens the lens to three — a death, a corruption scandal that stopped the sport outright, and a second yokozuna's own retirement that echoes Asashoryu's almost exactly.

2007: A Death Inside a Stable

On **26 June 2007**, a seventeen-year-old novice wrestler, Takashi Saitō — competing under the ring name Tokitaizan, only three months into his own sumo career — collapsed and died at the Tokitsukaze stable's own lodgings in Inuyama, Aichi Prefecture. The cause of death was initially reported as heart failure. Saitō's own father, refusing to accept that explanation, insisted on a real autopsy — which revealed that the young wrestler had been beaten with a beer bottle and a metal baseball bat, on the direct orders of his own stable master, Jun'ichi Yamamoto, who admitted to beating him personally and directing other wrestlers to do the same, citing Saitō's own "vague attitude" toward the sport.

REAL CONSEQUENCES

Yamamoto was dismissed by the Japan Sumo Association in October 2007 — the first serving stable master the Association had ever removed. He and three wrestlers from the stable were arrested in February 2008 and charged with manslaughter; in May 2009, Yamamoto was sentenced to **six years in prison**.

A Real, Dark Continuity

Chapter 6 described chanko-nabe, chores, and tsukebito service as the real, ordinary texture of junior wrestlers' daily lives inside a stable. This case shows the same closed, hierarchical household

producing something far worse when accountability failed completely — a genuine reminder that the same structure that trains champions can, without real external oversight, cause real harm.

2010–2011: Match-Fixing and an Unprecedented Cancellation

Rumours of *yaocho* — match-fixing — had circulated around professional sumo for years without ever being definitively proven. That changed in February 2011, when a police investigation into illegal baseball gambling among wrestlers and officials uncovered something else entirely: real text messages between wrestlers discussing the arrangement of specific match outcomes.

The evidence

Cell phone texts, recovered during an unrelated gambling investigation, provided the first hard proof of bout-fixing the sport had ever produced.

The response

The Japan Sumo Association cancelled the entire Spring Grand Sumo Tournament — the first time a tournament had ever been called off for this reason.

The scale

Twenty-three wrestlers were ultimately judged guilty of match-fixing and expelled; a May 2011 JSA investigative panel concluded the practice had been genuinely widespread, not isolated.

Cancelling an entire tournament was a real, unprecedented step for an institution whose own structure — established across the centuries this course has already traced, from the Sumai no Sechie's own fixed annual calendar in Chapter 3 through the Edo-period honbasho schedule in Chapter 5 — had never before been interrupted this way for reasons of integrity rather than external disaster.

2017: Harumafuji, and Asashoryu's Own Pattern Repeating

On 25 October 2017, the yokozuna **Harumafuji** — a Mongolian-born wrestler, like Asashoryu before him — struck a lower-ranked compatriot, Takanoiwa, with his hands and a karaoke remote control during a drinking gathering in Tottori, fracturing Takanoiwa's own skull. Harumafuji later said he had felt a senior wrestler's own responsibility to correct Takanoiwa's conduct after the younger wrestler kept checking his phone during a conversation — a justification that satisfied no one, least of all the Sumo Association itself.

The Same Real Structure, Playing Out a Second Time

Harumafuji announced his retirement the following month, telling reporters, "As a grand champion, I have done something that shouldn't be done." He was later fined 500,000 yen for the assault. The parallel to Chapter 8's own Asashoryu case is genuine and precise, not merely thematic: a Mongolian-born yokozuna, undisputed in the ring, brought down entirely by conduct outside it, with retirement the only real option once again because — as Chapter 7 established — a yokozuna cannot simply be demoted.

Looking Ahead

The capstone draws these three real cases together with everything else this course has covered — ritual, institution, rank, internationalisation, and scandal — into a single closing account of where sumo stands today, genuinely balanced between tradition and modernity.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Yamamoto was the first serving stable master ever dismissed by the Sumo Association — after a death, not a lesser offence. What does that timing suggest about how much real internal oversight existed inside stables before this specific case forced a response?

REFLECTION 2

Match-fixing rumours circulated for years before real proof surfaced almost by accident, through an unrelated gambling investigation. What does that suggest about the real limits of an institution investigating suspicions about its own members?

REFLECTION 3

Harumafuji's case mirrors Asashoryu's own so closely — same nationality, same rank, same underlying cause. Does a second, nearly identical case make the pattern look more like bad individual luck, or more like a genuine, unaddressed structural problem?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 9

- **2007:** 17-year-old Takashi Saitō died after a beating ordered by his own stable master at Tokitsukaze stable; the master was sentenced to **6 years in prison** in 2009, and was the first serving stable master ever dismissed by the JSA
- **2010–2011:** real text-message evidence of match-fixing (*yaocho*), uncovered via an unrelated gambling investigation, led to the **first-ever cancellation** of a tournament; 23 wrestlers were ultimately expelled
- **2017:** yokozuna **Harumafuji** assaulted fellow Mongolian wrestler Takanoiwa, fracturing his skull, and retired the following month — a real, precise echo of Asashoryu's own 2010 case from Chapter 8
- All three cases connect back to structures this course has already described: stable hierarchy (Ch.6), the honbashi tournament calendar (Ch.5), and the yokozuna's own irreversible no-demotion rule (Ch.7)

Next chapter: **Capstone — Sumo Today: Tradition & Modernity in Tension** — bringing together ritual, institution, and controversy into a single closing account of the sport as it stands now.

CHAPTER 10: CAPSTONE — SUMO TODAY: TRADITION & MODERNITY IN TENSION

The History of Sumo Wrestling

Chapter 10 · Capstone: Sumo Today — Tradition & Modernity in Tension

Nine chapters have traced sumo from a legendary fight to the death through court ceremony, battlefield training, professionalisation, a modern institutional structure, and real, documented scandal. This chapter closes on a single, still-unresolved real case that puts every one of those threads in the same room at once — and it does not manufacture an ending the real record hasn't actually reached yet.

The Real Case: A Ring Too Sacred to Save a Life

In April 2018, Ryōzō Tatami, the mayor of Maizuru, collapsed from a stroke while giving a speech during a sumo exhibition, on the dohyō itself. Women in the audience — including at least one trained nurse — climbed into the ring and began administering CPR. A referee took the microphone and ordered them off the ring while they were still performing chest compressions on a man whose life was in real, immediate danger.

THE REAL RESPONSE

The Japan Sumo Association apologised publicly within days. Its chairman, Hakkaku, called the response "inappropriate considering that someone's life was in danger," and thanked the women directly for their help. Under real public pressure, the Association announced it would survey public opinion and form a panel of outside experts to examine the ban on women entering the ring.

Seven Years, Still No Decision

That panel's own review has not concluded. As of late 2025, women remain formally excluded from the dohyō in professional sumo — a fact that made real, current news again that November, when Sanae Takaichi became Japan's first female Prime Minister and remained, like every woman before her, barred from setting foot in the ring itself. A real, still-open institutional review, sitting

on top of a rule that has now outlasted it by years, is the honest, unresolved state of this question — not a story with a clean resolution this course can report.

Why the Ring Is Closed to Women at All

The exclusion traces directly back to Chapter 1's own opening material: the dohyō is treated as sacred ground, inherited from centuries of bouts held on real shrine and temple grounds, and Shinto tradition associates menstrual and birth blood with *kegare* — ritual impurity — a concept the sport's own institutions still cite as the basis for keeping women off the ring today. This is not a rule invented recently to justify an old prejudice after the fact; it is, honestly, a direct, traceable application of the same ritual-purity logic this course identified as sumo's own real starting point nine chapters ago.

Every Thread, in One Room

The 2018 incident is not simply a modern controversy tacked onto an otherwise finished history — it is the single event in this entire course where every prior chapter's own material converges at once.

CHAPTER	HOW IT CONNECTS TO THE 2018 CASE
1–2	The dohyō's own sacred status and the <i>kegare</i> concept — the direct real basis for the exclusion itself
3	A formal court ceremony's own structured, rule-bound relationship to real religious ritual, echoed in how rigidly the ring's own rules were followed even in an emergency
5	The codified circular dohyō born out of real institutional negotiation — proof the ring's own physical form has always been open to real change, even if its access rules have not
6	A real, steep internal hierarchy that governs who may do what inside sumo's own spaces
7	Hinkaku's own deliberately subjective standard — dignity is judged constantly in this sport, yet the ring's own rules left no room for a genuinely life-or-death exception

CHAPTER	HOW IT CONNECTS TO THE 2018 CASE
9	A real, public apology and a real, still-unresolved institutional review — the exact same pattern of crisis, apology, and slow (or absent) reform this course already traced through 2007, 2010–2011, and 2017

An Honest Close

This course opened by correcting a widely repeated claim — that sumo is legally Japan's national sport — and by arguing that its real Shinto character deserves to be taken seriously rather than treated as decoration. Nine chapters later, that same real character is still doing genuine work: it structures a modern professional institution with 45 stables and a six-division ranking ladder, it demands something as hard to define as dignity from its own grand champions, and it still, as of the most recent real news this course could verify, keeps half the country formally out of its own most sacred space.

Sumo has changed an enormous amount across the roughly two millennia this course has traced — from a fight to the death, to a court ceremony, to battlefield training, to a professionalised, internationalised modern sport watched and wrestled by people from Hawaii to Mongolia. And it has also, by real, current, dated evidence, not yet resolved a question first forced into the open in 2018. Both of those things are true at once, and a course honestly following sumo's own real record has no obligation to pretend otherwise.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Sumo's own institutions have shown real capacity for change — a codified ring, a professional stable system, foreign wrestlers reaching the very top. Why might a tradition capable of that much real change still leave one specific rule genuinely unresolved for years?

REFLECTION 2

The 2018 apology was immediate; the actual policy review has taken years without a public conclusion. What does the real gap between an institution's own quick public apology and its slower — or absent — structural change suggest about how seriously to weigh an apology on its own?

REFLECTION 3

This course chose not to resolve its own closing question, because the real record doesn't resolve it either. Having read all ten chapters, do you think sumo's own religious character is the right reason to leave a rule like this in place — or is it, in your own view, better understood as a tradition now being asked to justify itself against genuinely different modern expectations?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 10

- **April 2018:** female medics, including a nurse, were ordered off the dohyō while performing CPR on a collapsed mayor, Ryōzō Tatami
- The Sumo Association apologised publicly and announced an outside-expert panel to review the ring's own ban on women
- As of late **2025**, women remain formally excluded — including Japan's own first female Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi
- The exclusion is a direct, traceable application of the real Shinto *kegare* (ritual impurity) concept Chapter 1 introduced, not a recently invented justification
- This one real case connects directly back to Chapters 1–2 (Shinto origins), 3 (formal ritual), 5 (the codified ring), 6 (internal hierarchy), 7 (hinkaku), and 9 (the crisis-then-apology pattern)
- **Course complete:** The History of Sumo Wrestling has traced sumo from a legendary founding match through Shinto ritual, imperial ceremony, samurai training, Edo-period professionalisation, its modern institutional structure, internationalisation, real scandal, and a genuinely unresolved present-day question