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***SUMO: A Thinking Fan's Guide to Japan's National Sport*  
by David Benjamin (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2010).**

Sumo? Fat guys in diapers, grunting and sweating and groping each other? Why would anyone care about such a sport — if that's what it is — or waste two seconds watching it?

Mr. Benjamin meets these questions head-on (8): “Sumo is, minute for minute, split-second for split-second, the quintessential spectator sport. It's sudden and violent, with almost no rules. One guy against the other and the ref (most of the time) is just another pretty pair of pajamas. The only guy who'll ever blow a whistle is the drunk in the 53<sup>rd</sup> row.”

So next question: Why read *SUMO*? Answer: because David Benjamin wrote it. This is the same in-a-class-by-himself bloke who gave us, among other classics, *The Life and Times of the Last Kid Picked*. Benjamin's every page is a tray of jewels. Line for line, word for word, he's the best sports writer since Red Smith.

Best? *Really?* Really. Benjamin knows his stuff, knows his audience, and knows how to make us laugh out loud at 2:00 a.m.

Benjamin knows the history of sumo, the terminology, the traditions, the rules, the officials, the techniques, the personalities, and the intricate and subtle and sometimes crooked games-within-the-game. He knows all that, and he knows how to make it real for us. By page 133, when he begins his epic narration of the modern era's epic match—Asahifuji vs. Chiyonofuji, in Nagoya, 22 July 1990—we know enough to follow the action, split-second by split-second, through a score of lightning moves and counter-moves. Unlike many a sports writer, Benjamin never delivers lectures from a press-corps box seat. He never belabors us from above with generalities and statistics and clichés. He's always right there with us, at Tokyo's Ryogoku Kokugikan, pit-side, in the roar and thick reek of the crowd (23):

*No other major sports arena in the world seats fans quite so close to the brink of the playing field. . . . The ring, or tawara, is a circle (made of rice bales) inside a square. The edge of the square drops off precipitously to a narrow aisle—and beyond that, in all directions, you got people. Every day, sumo*

*wrestlers fly off the dohyo—300, 400, 500 pounds of hurtling blubber—into the laps of the fans.*

Benjamin knows whom he's writing for: these same fans, "or folks who want to be fans. The game's the thing; it's the joy of sumo. All the showbiz and cultural trappings—whether they're pretty, or strange, or just plain tedious—fade into the background once two *rikishi* [sumo wrestlers] face each other across the ring." He's writing, in other words, for us. He makes us care, makes us want to know more, and helps us along with a good index, a complete glossary of terms, and 16 pages of color photos.

Finally, he helps us along with his cheerful, never-failing, irreverent humor. That's what keeps us barking and snorting and telling ourselves, *Okay, just one more chapter* — long after decent folks are asleep. Here he is on the uselessness of sumo referees, each of whom "has his silk pajamas, of course, and a hat that makes him look like a bellhop balancing a flat-iron on his head, *tabi* (socks) and *zori* (sandals) on his feet, plus his *goombai* [fan] and a long silk rope he trips over during matches—and all these come in colors that tell you his rank, his family, his blood type, the year he first got laid..."

And here he is on Ozutsu, "The Goldfish," an obscure and aging second-rate wrestler, whose "dubious distinction was that a disproportionate share of the fat in his body had migrated to his face, puffing it up like a terminal case of mumps and squeezing his lips into a permanent, pudgy, protuberant 'O'." And the Benjamin version of a traditional post-match TV interview is in itself worth the price of *SUMO*.

(Traditionally, the announcer does 99.9% of the talking; the wrestler, after his five seconds of exertion, grunts and sweats and towels himself, gasping and roaring into the mike, trying to catch his breath.) This interview is the sort of dialogue that will cause you to punch your partner awake at 2:30 and say, "Oh, sweetheart, listen to this."

Benjamin knows sumo and loves it, love-handles and all. He relishes the pre-match "screwing around" and staring-contests almost as much as the matches themselves. He relishes the sheer mass of the wrestlers—"like ambulatory roadblocks"—and the gorgeousness of the sumo spectacle, and the goofiness and politics and back-stage machinations of the "old farts in the Sumo Association." He may even enjoy the pontifications of his nemeses, the Sumo Nerds, who apparently want to turn sumo into a religion, and a joyless one at that. But, as he

points out, sumo began as entertainment (“to amuse the captive royal court in Kyoto”, and, as he demonstrates for 256 pages, it is essentially entertainment still. Sumo’s fun.

So read *Sumo*. It will probably turn you into a sumo fan; it will certainly (if you aren’t one already) turn you into a fan of David Benjamin.

— **F.J. Logan**