

I smile confidently, anticipating a chorus of agreement when I say that no library is complete without a generous portfolio of books on sumo. And I can hear shouts of “Banzai!” as I step up to highlight a few favored volumes from my own collection:

In 1995, when I still had hair for a ponytail, I found myself on the streets of Tokyo with my nephew, who said, “Don’t worry about what you do. They think you’re crazy already.” So for all you crazy barbarians out there, you hapless *gaijin*, I begin with *The Joy of Sumo: A Fan’s Notes* by David Benjamin (Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo, Japan; Charles E. Tuttle Company; 1991). More than a great sumo book, more than a great sports book, this is a great book. The world would be a better place if this book had as wide a distribution as the Gideon Bible.

But this is not the book for the sumo nerd. It is the book for those who want to laugh all the way to understanding and enjoying the sport without worrying whether the referee is barefoot, wearing socks, or wearing socks and sandals, and what that means. Benjamin loves and knows sumo, and by the end of the book, you will know and love sumo, and Benjamin’s writing.

— **Kihm Winship, “My Sumo Library”**

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What a weird, wacky, terrific book this is. Yes, you’ll enjoy it if you’re curious about sumo. But if you love sports in general, you’ll be thoroughly drawn in by David Benjamin’s musings on the strange, funny battlefield that is sumo. A quick summary of the ground he covers:

- Sumo looks bizarre on the surface, but to know it is to love it! A weird lens on Japanese thinking, playing and being.
- The kooky crowd scene.
- The fun of christening the wrestlers (*rikishi*) with a memorable, fitting nickname (the “Goldfish”, the “Sweaty One”)
- The four main “species” of *rikishi* (“Jocks,” “Hippos,” “Butterballs,” “Cabdrivers”)
- The tournament structure, including the backroom politics
- The ritualistic behaviors before combat — foot stomping, salt tossing, etc.
- Why *rikishi* sometimes throw a match, and why it’s OK!
- The explosive moment of combat (at last)! The nifty parallels to a Western gunfight and football linemen.

- The ornamental, pajama-clad referees.
- The importance of concealing emotions — in victory or defeat!
- Career highs and lows of a *rikishi*.
- The lame use of statistics, and Benjamin’s own creative ideas of how to invigorate sumo with new stats.

Above all, if you’re interested in Asian culture, and Japanese culture especially, I think you’ll love this book. It’s really like no other sports book I’ve read, in the best of ways.

— **Len (Amazon review)**

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Sumo, as a sport, too often gets deified and lost in the Shinto ceremonies that are blatantly evident to all who watch, from the throwing of salt to the traditional *mawashi* (loincloth) the wrestlers wear. David Benjamin does a great job in smashing down the ivory tower of Japanese culture in order to reveal sumo as what it truly is, a fascinating sport. Irreverent and stocked with colorful antidotes from sumo history, this book is great for anyone wanting to learn more about Japan's national sport.

Truly a thinking fan's guide as the title suggests, the book focuses on the in-match techniques as well as the pre-match preparation of the wrestlers. Benjamin is keen on emphasizing those elements which make sumo a great sport to watch (in person or on the couch) and is quick to bash the Japanophiles who, in his opinion, get too caught up in the Shinto rites, the cultural niceties, and the “honorable” way in which the sport is presented to the public.

What Benjamin helps to reveal is the true humanity of the sport by uncovering the real attitudes and intentions of its participants (wrestlers and administrators). By the time you finish you'll look at each sumo match with more clarity and with more overall enjoyment. You'll become a fan of a sport seeped in history, masked in culture, and performed by fascinating “athletes” who are still venerated in Japan but looked at with skepticism/mockery by the West.

— **David Hallman**

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In this revised edition of his classic book, David Benjamin gives the newbie sumo fan everything they need to know to enjoy Japan's most famous sport.

Benjamin's approach is this — strip away the culture and mystic and sumo is a sport where two fat guys try to push each other down. So what does all that

mystic and culture do for the game and which bits of it are important and what does it all mean anyway?

By using gently mocking nicknames for the wrestlers, and by constant comparison to other sports, Benjamin gives us an insiders look at how sumo works, why it works, and what there is to be gained by watching it. He gives a brief history, political insights, and peeks backstage all while maintaining a friendly, guy-at-the-bar, manner.

Best of all, and although this isn't really mentioned in the book we can assume the author knows, in this day and age, every match mentioned is on YouTube! Benjamin's writing is clear and easy to understand and he paints a great picture, but there is something to be said for putting the book down to watch the match the author describes and to then go back and read how the author saw the same match.

One bit of advice for the Japanophile, this book is irreverent and heartily mocks a lot of the institutions and mystery surrounding the sport. Further, this is not a book about Japan, this is a book that is unapologetically about sumo and little else.

This is a perfect read for fans of the sport or for those who want to delve deeper into Japan's national pastime.

— **Joel Neff**

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David Benjamin is my kind of *gaijin*. He does not come to Narita International airport in Tokyo bowing and scraping at everything Japanese. Neither is he needlessly reckless, or out to “make a point” of how Westerners differ from the Japanese. He is just a regular guy, with great humor, who has fallen in love with the sport (yes, sport and not “cultural relic” or “holy” Shinto ritual) of sumo.

Unlike so many of foreign sumo fans who gasp and oohh and aahhh at the drop of a hat in faux-Japanese flattery at the huge fat guys in colorful diapers fighting on a hill of mud, Benjamin simply enjoys the sport, laughs when he ought to laugh, and gets swept away with the fantastic sweaty exhaustive attempts of one big fat man trying to outmuscle another big fat man in front of thousands of screaming fans. Sumo is fun. Sumo is a kick. Sumo is the kind of sport that as a foreigner you either titter on the sidelines researching the most miniscule details of how the sumo wrestlers names have roots stemming back from the Yayoi era or how the tassels of the judges kimono must swirl in a counter-clockwise direction for fear of upsetting the Shinto gods, or you sit back like Benjamin with a Kirin beer in one hand, sit back on your cushions, and enjoy the sheer monstrosity of it all.

Even if you know nothing about sumo, this is a great book for you to read. It is fun and Benjamin has a very conversational style of writing. He is right there with you while you watch sumo, not like the NHK “sumo nerds” who are basically Japanese propaganda spin doctors (particularly when there is blatant cheating going on!), but with a wonderful sense of humor that is friendly and likeable.

Although this book is somewhat dated, focusing primarily on the Chiyonofuji era, it is still a great read which sets the backdrop for the awful Takanohana era (of which at present date we are still sadly enduring). This book also explains everything that you need to know about sumo, its rules, its customs, its nefarious dealings, and all the fun stuff that goes with it. Watching sumo is much like watching baseball. There is a lot of hanging around, standing, staring, scratching and wiping various parts of the body, spitting, and generally being borderline gross until there is a flurry of action, after which follows more crotch-adjusting, sweating, and standing around. In short, sumo has everything foreigners need to really enjoy watching sports.

— **Mark Groenewold**