

John Jacques: Roots of American Sumo

My body lay sprawled out atop a mattress in a guestroom far away from where I live. This is my 12th, and final, day in Oahu, Hawaii. Right outside the window to the East the repetition of Pacific Ocean waves reflect in my mind. I'm half awake, lying face down, with two pillows bracing my head and neck. I'm trying to catch a few more ZZZs before my flight back to Albuquerque from Honolulu late that evening.

Somewhat fidgety, my right arm, which had been draped over the right side of the bed, fumbles for what may lie underneath. Instantly I feel canvas. *Oh man*, I think. *He's even got sumo tucked and hidden away in the crevices.* Not wanting to wake myself up fully, I do just enough inspection to validate my initial conclusion. It's another mawashi. *There's probably more than one under here*, my mind continues to ponder, but I'm too lazy to satisfy any more curiosities.



The man's house is that of 75-year old John Jacques, by every historical account from anyone who has been around that long, (and certainly in my mind) the Father of modern-day American Sumo. And even though American Sumo has taken political twists and turns, yet here we are as athletes and as a Federation, continuing to surge forward, continuing to send to the World Championships the best USA can offer. Should we not know our roots?

Although John (a white guy) has lived in Hawaii for over 50 years—since 1969—sumo hasn't been his only fascination, but time will prove his greatest. He came to Hawaii to surf, thinking it would be temporary, and

he would go back to Long Island, NY where he was born and spent his childhood.

"I made a promise to myself that my life wouldn't be boring." He said to me on more than one occasion.

Rugby and surfing had taken up much of his life prior to sumo. And in truth, the lure of the majestic ocean and the beautiful Hawaiian landscape has kept him, and John has managed a full 37-year career teaching and coaching, mostly at Kahuku High School—a public school known to produce astronomically high NFL as well as Amateur and Pro Sumo athletes per capita, despite the area’s low population of less than 19,000. The Kahuku High Red Raiders serves approximately 1,800 students enrolled from the communities of Kaaawa, Hauula, Laie, Kahuku, and Sunset Beach which span a twenty-six mile stretch along the Northeast Shore of the island of Oahu. One can hardly follow John into a grocery store along this stretch, without hearing half the people yell out, “Hey Coach!” “Good afternoon John! It’s good to see you.”



As a tour-guide during my stay, John’s mind is quick and alert, and it’s readily evident that John carries with him a wealth of knowledge, experience and wisdom. Time has definitely treated him well in this regard.

Unable to drown the day away with sleep, I walk upstairs to the main living room and kitchen area of John’s house. Right in front of me is a statue of a crouched sumo wrestler, made to be a coffee table, only without the table. To my right, up on the wall is a drawing rendition of Kitanoumi Toshimitsu, John’s favorite Sumo wrestler. I see John in his chair watching NHK’s televised delivery of Day 15 of the November Sumo Basho.

Moments later, John mutters, “C’mon Hakuho, that kind of stuff isn’t needed. I hope somebody talks with him about that” referring to the sumo wrestler’s over-dramatized pre-match theatrics with Takakeisho, which Hakuho is known to do on occasion.

Hakuho wins the bout, and the tournament for his 43rd career title. “I like Hakuho, but that kind of stuff isn’t good.”

As it happens so often in history, John’s sumo fate, and the eventual rise of American Sumo, was decided not by John himself, but by his wife Kathy, the love of his life since age 24, and with whom two daughters would come.

The year is 1975. John received an invite from a friend to compete for a chance to join an already planned tour to Japan with others in the Hawaii Amateur Sumo Association. The trip would entail three weeks of competition at goodwill tournaments throughout Japan. (the Japanese people & their culture are very representative in Hawaii, and has been since the late 1800’s). Two of their wrestlers had to pull out due to injury, and they were looking for their best replacements. The invite came from a phone call explaining that a tournament is underway, and the winners would decide who would receive the all-expense paid trip. Money was tight for John. Although the trip would be paid for, John still considered such a venture irresponsible, and declined the invitation. After hanging up the phone he immediately turned to Kathy—his then girlfriend, for confirmation he had made the right decision.

“Why don’t you just go?” She muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Because I don’t have any money at all.” John replied.

“Okay, so how much money do you think you need?”

John thought for a moment, “Probably \$400.”

“Okay, well, I’ll buy your stereo for \$400.”

I was one of the sweetest deals of John’s lifetime, since in the end, John (who won the tournament) kept the trip, he kept the girl, and he kept the stereo.



Jacques now weans big Polynesian boys away from football and into sumo.

there's also a tradition of honor and respect among fighters. They know how to control that violence, and they bring that respect and control into their daily lives."

A turning point came in 1976. Jacques' dedication—he was even studying Japanese—impressed Takamiyama, a native Hawaiian who had become a legendary sumo champion in Japan. He helped arrange for Jacques to spend the summer living with and working for a group of Japanese professionals.

"It was a unique experience. Here I was, a man in my 30s, living like a young apprentice, running errands, doing the wash, wearing native clothes. But I don't know any other white man who's trained with them. It taught me a lot as a wrestler and gave me even more to bring back as a coach."

Six feet tall and puffed up to 275 lbs. for matches, Jacques is of average height for a professional sumo wrestler but low in weight. "We've got a few 150-lb. amateurs in Hawaii; the Japanese love to see a small man do well, but in the pros they go 300 lbs. and up, and it's not fat."

In Japan, professionals train daily between five and six hours, two hours on leg exercises alone ("That's one of the reasons they look so squat; they've got legs twice the thickness of mine"). Even high school athletes work out six days a week. In contrast, Jacques normally trains twice weekly, then three or four times as a match nears. But he has his teaching and coaching duties to attend to, as well as

back and show people what I'd learned." But in an early match, he popped his knee and had to spend the rest of the tour in a cast. Remarkable as his career had been, especially for a man in his 30s—and a non-Oriental at that—Jacques wondered if he was finished as a wrestler.

"Now I'm coming back," he says, "but slowly. Maybe I'll try another year." Regardless of whether he continues fighting, Jacques is certain to go on as a sumo coach. "Hawaii is filled with big kids from Samoa and Tonga, kids who've traditionally gone for rugby, football, freestyle wrestling. Some of them go on to colleges on the mainland. I'm trying to set up another pipeline, one to Japan, as an alternative."

Already one of Jacques' protégés has been accepted as the first non-Japanese to wrestle for the University of Osaka. "His career could be made. The Japanese will give him a free education and get him a good job after he graduates. We found him working as a parking lot attendant."

Jacques discovered sumo at a time when he had soured on rugby. "To the players here, even the fans, it was too violent, almost like war. Sometimes I see a strain of that in the kids. What I want to pass on to them is the respect, honor and control that sumo's taught me." Us

his wife of five years, Cathy, and their two young daughters. And it's an hour's drive from Jacques' home to the sumo ring in Honolulu.

"Cathy and the kids are enthusiastic about the tournaments, even practices," says Jacques. Adds Cathy: "We understand that it's really important to John, although I worry when he puts on 25 to 30 lbs. for a match, because it's such a strain on his body."

Last summer, Jacques returned to Japan with another touring Hawaiian team of amateurs. "I'd spent six years working so I could come

His wife Cathy and their two daughters support his passion for sumo, but she worries when he strains his body by gaining 25 to 30 lbs. for a big match.



What John would experience during those three weeks was a mere precursor to the following summer, when the Japanese asked him to come back and remain during his entire summer break, away from teaching and coaching at Kahuku High. The Japanese delivered to John a crash course few Americans outside of pro sumo, if any, have endured. John was to begin as a pro sumo low-ranker for a month—letting the lashes, menial tasks, and servitude dispensed by the high rankers fall upon him. This was followed by a month as a middle-ranker; and then for his final month, falling in with the enjoyments of the highest

ranking sumotori.

The intent for the Japanese in providing John this experience was to provide sumo leadership in Hawaii, which eventually extended to the rest of the United States—creating the United States Sumo Federation. That purpose was well-served, fueled by his passion for sumo and respect for Hawaiian Sekiwake Jesse James Wailani Kuhaulua (pro sumo name, Takamiyama Daigorō, 1964-1984) who is the same age as John. At one point John had 80 Hawaiian sumo athletes involved in his program, and practices were held 2-3 times per week in John's backyard, with 20-50 showing up! This has amounted to many hundreds of sumo practitioners over the decades. From personal experience, I can attest that guys bigger than me (6'0, 420-lbs) are everywhere in the Kahuku High service area! Some of the athletes, like Wayne Vierra who now lives a few houses down from John, went pro.

And so, this is how it began. The tenures of Yonezuka Yoshisada (RIP) and Andrew Freund would begin several years later. During my extended stay with John, I marveled at stories John related to me which were conveyed to him from the Japanese—stories of sumo springing up in Hawaii in the late 1800s in and around the Pineapple and Sugar Cane plantations, simply because there was dirt and rice bags available, along with a relatively high Japanese citizenry. In fact, there had been an annual Hawaiian State tournament held almost every year since the late 1800s. As well, non-state championship tournaments were an almost monthly occurrence prior to World War II. Imagine each year in the 1920s and 30s, between ten and twenty thousand people showing up to cheer on their favorite sumo athlete, with up to \$5,000 going to the Hawaii State Champion!

This kind of excitement stalled during World War II, but reignited in around 1948, to a lesser degree, and in the 1960s, 70s and 80s involved Hawaiians as well as the OZUMO from Japan. John, himself, at 6'0, 320-lbs (during his prime) is a 6-time Hawaiian Champion in an era without weight categories—only OPEN.

I especially liked John's story of competing against Asashio, a collegiate Yokozuna, who went on to attain Ozeki status in pro-sumo, and is currently still very much involved in pro-sumo as an administrator. Asashio had been undefeated throughout high school and college. The Hawaiian championship match was between Asashio and John. John lost, but the match was so close that during the after-tournament party fellow athletes were laughing it up, wide-eyed telling each other that they couldn't recall the last time Asashio had received a "scare" like that!



For his efforts, the Japanese eventually awarded John the rank of Yondan. Deservingly so. Because of John's high turnout of sumo athletes, the Japanese even honored him with his own stable name, complete with traditional Japanese-lettered sign (see picture). John has been not only a coach, teacher, *the original* promoter, father, and friend to American Sumo, he is also just a damn nice guy who deserves the recognition and respect for bringing an ancient martial art to the United States! His achievement of migrating sumo to the U.S. is monumental, and

yet natural to a person who has spent his whole life teaching and coaching. John epitomizes the person leaning over the North Rim of the Grand Canyon staring at the beauty and wonder below with the only thought being, *how can I get as many people as possible to see this?* There has been no other object for John in his life's effort to put on display a thousand-year-old martial art than the idea that others may see, perceive, appreciate and ultimately enjoy, what he has.

John opened up to me his house, his food, his stacks of photo albums, and his memorabilia. Several times, when diving into his sumo archives, John would suddenly smile wide and exclaim, "Oh, I forgot I had that! Thank you." He says that to her credit, every year a little more "disappears" from view thanks to his wife. All of his trophies, medals, and awards clearly visible in pictures, have, in fact, disappeared forever. As

have the barrage of athletes I viewed in pictures spread out, in, and around his house and dohyo.

In 2001 John was involved in an accident where an oncoming driver fell asleep and veered into his lane, creating a near head-on collision, which should have cost John his lower left leg below the knee. By a miracle, he was able to keep the leg but has no feeling on his extensively-scarred calf, ankle or feet. Currently, the only remaining active sumo athlete under John's once-leadership is Kena Heffernan. Thank you, Kena, for honoring your mentor.

As John and I talked and shared pictures in photo albums, one by one, I understood that the many hundreds of athletes, and thousands of stories, are all but a memory now. However, I also know that history has a way of repeating itself, and perhaps—just perhaps—since the foundation has been laid, and the stage firmly set, the storm will once again replace the calm. I personally see the storm's underpinnings.

In my 20-years involved as an athlete, coach, and trustee in the United States Sumo Federation, I've often reflected with amazement how Amateur Sumo anywhere in the world tends to draw—yes, great athletes—but also a certain type of non-mainstream personality. It's like all of us made promises to ourselves that our lives wouldn't be boring.

I must believe that if there's a guy like John at our beginning, there must be hundreds of others willing to continue this legacy. American Sumo, be prepared to welcome in the hurricane.

Kelly Gneiting

Note: Currently, I'm trying to get John Jacques and his wife to make a special appearance at our FitCon 2020 event taking place on May 1st and 2nd in Salt Lake City. John has a daughter who lives in Salt Lake City, and so I remain optimistic. See AmericanSumo.org for more details.

