



JAPAN INFORMATION
AND CULTURE CENTER
在米国日本大使館広報文化センター

TEACHING TUESDAY

SUMO

Sumo is the national sport of Japan, and has a history dating back over 1500 years. It is a competitive full-contact wrestling sport where one rikishi (力士 wrestler) attempts to force a second rikishi out of a circular ring (土俵 dohyou) or to touch the ground with anything other than the soles of their feet. The characters for sumo, 相撲, literally mean “striking one another”. Sumo was mentioned as far back as the Nihonshoki and the Kojiki, and was originally used as a way to entertain the kami, or gods. Farmers and others would use a version of sumo to pray for a bountiful crop or to predict whether that year’s harvest would be good around rice planting season. In the Nara and Heian periods, sumo became an event conducted at the imperial court, and bouts were performed in front of the emperor.

Present day sumo comes from the Edo period, when organizers of sumo codified a set of rules, including the 48 legal moves and the use of the dohyou. The sport grew in popularity due to the sale of ukiyo-e, or woodblock prints, which featured sumo and rikishi and were easily available to the masses. However many traditional aspects remain, including the sumo topknot, the tradition of throwing purifying salt into the ring before a match, the referee dressing like a Shinto priest, and the rikishi clapping their hands when they enter the ring to summon the gods.