

**Professional Wrestling Migration:
Puroresu in America**

**by
Brandon W. Bollom**

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Preface

I grew up watching professional wrestling. More specifically, I grew up watching Paul Boesch's *Houston Wrestling* program, not knowing that there was any wrestling alternative. Every Saturday night at 10 p.m., like clockwork, my father and I would sit in front of the television set and take in the happenings of the wrestling world over the past six days and 23 hours. It always ended in a cliffhanger, cut off in mid match with the World Heavyweight Title on the line no doubt, and would resume, same time, same place, the following Saturday with an update on who won and who lost. The best of times were those when we just could not wait to see the show on Saturday night. My father would pack me into the car and drive to the Sam Houston Coliseum to watch the Friday night television taping unfold live before our very eyes. The next week at school, I was the coolest of the cool. I was the only one who knew how the cliffhanger would end because I was there. I saw it happen!

My first knowledge of the existence of wrestling outside the Houston area was in the early 1980s. Superstar and hero, Ted DiBiase disappeared from the federation for several months. Upon his return, fully bearded and now a dastardly villain, the announcers told the TV audience that he had been wrestling in...Japan? They have wrestling in Japan? I could not quite grasp the concept, but I was intrigued.

I did not really think much about Japanese wrestling after that point until the American wrestling boom of the 1990s. By the time professional wrestling hit its high point, the internet was an established media source. While browsing the web for the latest news and gossip on my favorite wrestlers from World Championship Wrestling, the World Wrestling Federation and Extreme Championship Wrestling, I started picking up

on key words like *puroresu* (Japanese professional wrestling), *enzuigiri* (a kick to the back of an opponent's head), and *ichiban* (number one), which I had never heard before. Names like *Kawada*, *Misawa*, and *Hayabusa* were everywhere with American fans raving about their talents. Chat rooms, message boards and websites were buzzing about talented professional wrestlers, unseen in America.

Then they began to arrive here. Those who had traveled to Japan to train and wrestle were now returning to show off their newly honed skills. Benoit, Jericho, Foley and others, along with Japan's native sons, Ultimo Dragon, Taka Michinoku, The Great Sasuke and many more. American television commentators spoke of great matches, titles and tournaments won and lost by these newcomers. The need to understand was overwhelming. A quick dip into the "underground" wrestling video tape scene produced footage that only served to amplify my curiosity. A little less than a decade later, I have a closet full of poorly labeled video tapes, a head full of puroresu knowledge and still no true understanding of the industry which has offered me hour upon hour of entertainment.

Introduction

Given the opportunity to study any facet of Japanese pop culture, provided by Dr. Susan Napier's course, I took advantage and selected that which I had been interested in learning more about for years. The majority of my research is divided into three main categories.

First, a literature review of the quite limited academic resources available which cover the topic of professional wrestling is included to provide a framework of previously conducted research. This will also present a background of terminology and a basis for studying professional wrestling as a form of popular culture in America and other

countries. Next, a truncated history of professional wrestling in Japan will be included to show its relationship with the same in America. Most important to this section is a look at the influence Rikidozan, the father of Japanese professional wrestling, had on puroresu, as well as how the Japanese wrestling scene changed when his students took over after his death. A brief look at the trends over the past several years in professional wrestling in Japan is also included. The final section includes a look into the influence puroresu has had on professional wrestling in America as well as the impact it has had on American wrestling fans. Each section will build on the ones that come before it so that by the end of the study, a comprehensive analysis of the transfer of the pop culture trends of professional wrestling from America to Japan and back again will be achieved.

Literature Review

For a popular culture phenomenon with as diverse and interesting a history as professional wrestling, there has been surprisingly little academic writing on the topic. While there are numerous websites and several journalistic essays about various aspects of professional wrestling, I was able to uncover a total of three books and just a handful of journal articles of significant relevance to studying it in an academic context. Thankfully, what I did find was quite helpful in discovering how professional wrestling has been previously studied.

Probably the most influential and earliest examination of professional wrestling was conducted by Roland Barthes in 1957. His essay, "The World of Wrestling," was published in his book, *Mythologies*. While I was not able to look at this original text, most of the subsequent academic works refer to it, thus it deserves a brief mention here. Barthes' work covered the 1950s French professional wrestling arena and most

importantly, examined it as a morality play. The individual wrestlers were examined for their dramatic efforts and in the end, according to Barthes, it was not about winning or losing, but make the audience believe in the character, just as in other dramatic endeavors.

From this examination of 1950s professional wrestling in France, there is very little academic literature until Michael Ball's book *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture*. Ball observes American professional wrestling in the 1980s and compares it to ritual social activities. He states, "Rituals and their accompanying symbols provide insights into the values, norms, and ideals of the people utilizing them (Ball 1990)." Ball gave four main reasons why he felt that professional wrestling would be a good example in his popular culture studies.

First, the professional wrestling provides the viewer with a unique blending of sports and drama. The predetermined nature of the matches create a world where the winner or loser of the actual match is less important than who has the upper hand in relation to the drama created before, during and after the match. Second, there is an incredibly rich body of symbolism in professional wrestling. Each wrestler plays a certain stereotypical character with well defined traits and characteristics. Whether the attributes or symbols of each character are kept or not relies on the crowd reaction to the character. In this way, more than in other popular culture models, the viewer plays an active role in the outcome and characterization of each participant. The third, and to me most interesting, point by Ball is that professional wrestling requires an immense amount of money to produce. This puts much of the power over this form of popular culture in the hands of the very wealthy. This has had an incredible effect on the product in America as

well as Japan. Fourth, the two unique views the audience has access to, live shows versus televised programming, each provide a unique frame for the viewer (Ball 1990).

Ball also stated that when the formerly participatory ritual of wrestling becomes “professional” wrestling, a re-keying has to be involved. No longer can anyone participate, it is now up to trained “professionals” to compete. This provided a problem because “amateur” wrestling was often tedious to watch, involving long, drawn out holds designed to wear down an opponent. Professional wrestling required an audience to be successful and the shift to gain an audience was away from true competition and toward a more exciting, if less realistic, format. Interestingly, this newly developed format worked well for keeping the attention of an audience, sometimes too well. At times, professional wrestling fans have become so engrossed in the action that they lose that fine line between reality and the staged event. In a testimonial to this emotional fan involvement, former wrestler, “Classy” Freddie Blassie once said, “Twenty-seven people dropped dead watching me one week in Japan...In my whole career 92 people dropped dead of heart attacks. My ambition was to kill 100, and I failed (Ball 63).”

Almost a decade after Ball’s book was published, Sharon Mazer released her book *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. A writer specializing in medieval theatre, Mazer was taking a break from writing and when she turned on the television, what she saw “brought [her] readings in Middle English drama to life (Mazer 1998).” It was the timeless play of virtue and vice, not in an ancient text, but in modern day professional wrestling. This single event directed several years of her life as she spent immense amounts of time studying wrestlers at an American professional wrestling school.

Mazer concurred with Ball's findings that professional wrestling is a ritual filled combination of both sport and drama. "Professional wrestling is a sport that is not, in the literal sense of the word, sporting; a theatrical entertainment that is not theatre. Its display of violence is less a contest than a ritualized encounter between opponents, replayed repeatedly over time for an exceptionally engaged audience (Mazer 1998)." A key point made by Mazer is that professional wrestling is the only sport where the move from amateur to professional eliminates your legitimacy. It becomes a performance rather than an actual sport, and is more about the antics around and out of the ring than the competition inside it.

One point that Mazer makes that I did not find in any other literature review was that because of its inherent goal of being a morality play, professional wrestling outcomes have to be controlled. The sports clichés like "It's not whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game" are most relevant here. The playing of the game is what is most important, while wins and losses are predetermined and therefore virtually irrelevant. Also of import by Mazer is her discovery that while the finishes to most wrestling matches are fixed, the actual maneuvers between the start of the match and the end are not choreographed. There are typically a certain set of key moves that are planned ahead of time, but everything in between is created on-the-fly between the performers. This, again, leads to the idea that professional wrestling is a hybrid of sport and theatre. It can be seen as the sporting equivalent to improvisational theatre where the reactions of the audience factors into the direction the artists steer their performance. "The familiar patterning of virtue and vice, of loss and recovery, of victory justly or unjustly snatched from the jaws of defeat, of revenge for previous atrocities, along with the opportunity to

play with and to judge the playing and players as they perform, seems to satisfy the audience in the same way that a favorite story (or play or movie) never fails to excite and reassure (Mazer 28).”

The third academically executed book covering professional wrestling that I reviewed was *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity* by Patrice Oppliger, published in 2004. This very recent example of an academic text on professional wrestling had a few informative notes, especially about Japan. First, Oppliger stated that fans of puroresu in Japan are generally extremely well versed in the intricacies of their chosen form of entertainment. A statement that is made without statistics to back it up is that the dedicated fans of New Japan Professional Wrestling have made it as popular as baseball is in America. Another that can be more easily verified is that most of the Japanese wrestling styles have found ways to integrate martial arts techniques into the choreography of professional wrestling matches. This is not surprising when similar mock contests can be seen at martial arts practices and some competitions.

One unfortunate connection that Oppliger makes between American professional wrestling and puroresu is that some of the extremely violent elements found today in professional wrestling originated in the Japan version. While this may be true, though little data in support of the statement is given, Oppliger does not discuss the other, more positive aspects of professional wrestling in America that have been influenced by puroresu. From her statement, Oppliger makes it appear that “the most violent elements, such as thumbtacks, barbed wire, and explosives (Oppliger 2004)” are all that Japan has to offer American professional wrestling.

One final literature review was that of a key journal article re-published in the book *SportCult*. The article focuses on professional wrestling in Mexico, but makes very relevant points about professional wrestling in general. “On Mexican Pro Wrestling: Sport as Melodrama” by Heather Levi explains that professional wrestling follows a precise set of conventions:

It is a struggle between two or more wrestlers, in which a wide range of tactics are considered legitimate. Wrestlers compete not as themselves, but as characters that they (or their promoters) invent. The characters are morally coded, so that normally each match features one good guy (or team of good guys) and one bad guy (or team of bad guys). A wrestler enacting the role of bad guy cheats, uses unnecessary roughness, and displays cowardice and trickery. There are referees who, out of corruption and/or incompetence, are unwilling or unable to enforce the rules against the bad guys. To call such wrestling corrupt indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the genre. It is not corrupt, but can be (among other things) a drama about corruption. As such, its relationship to other kinds of sport is unsettling (Levi 173).

Levi continues by comparing professional wrestling to the other popular ring sport, boxing. She explains that they do not differ because one is “real” while the other is “fake” but instead it is about the narrative of the matches. In boxing, the two competitors are constantly moving toward the finish of the match, while in professional wrestling, each individual move is important. It is the performance more than the outcome that matters. This, rather than removing professional wrestling from being a sport, instead promotes it to a form of theatre (Levi 1999).

Puroresu History: The Early Years

Just as there has been so little academic research on professional wrestling, there is next to nothing published in English about puroresu. Most books on professional wrestling mention that there is wrestling in Japan, but do not give many details about it. The most important resource for uncovering the history of puroresu is the internet. As

such, it is difficult to fact check and ensure that all details are accurate. The majority of the information on puroresu history comes from the very informative website titled “Great Hisa’s Puroresu Dojo.” It is available in both English and Japanese and is the most comprehensive and respected puroresu history website available.

Wrestling in some form or fashion has been in Japan as far back as to be included in the first known example of Japanese writing, the *Kojiki* (approx. 500 B.C.). The winner of the match depicted in the *Kojiki* gained control of the Izumo territory and went on to not only lead the Japanese people but also to launch the imperial family to which the current emperor traces back. Most “wrestling” matches throughout early Japanese history were sumo or martial arts style until after World War II.

The year 1951 holds the earliest known appearance of professional wrestling in Japan. The U.S. servicemen stationed in Japan were in constant need of amusement during their leisure time. The Shriner’s Club of Tokyo hosted an entertainment event for the troops that included not only former boxing champion, Joe Louis, but also brought along seven professional wrestlers. The matches held at Ryogoku Memorial Hall in Tokyo inspired some professional judo athletes as well as one former sumo wrestler, Rikidozan, to begin training as professional wrestlers.

Rikidozan wrestled a few matches throughout the rest of the year and in 1952, he decided to travel to America for additional training. He first stopped in Hawaii to train with Hawaiian professional wrestling legend, Oki Shikina, but soon continued on to mainland America. After only about 13 months in the U.S., Rikidozan returned to Japan having wrestled in over 250 matches with only a total of five losses including singles and tag-team matches combined. Upon his arrival in Japan, Rikidozan founded the Japan Pro

Wrestling Alliance (JWA). Within a few months of his return, Rikidozan made a return trip to Hawaii to wrestle in a tournament where the winner would receive a match against Lou Thez, the reigning World Heavyweight Champion. Rikidozan did win the tournament, but was unable to defeat Thez. His return to Japan was followed shortly in 1954 by the arrival of the World Tag-Team Champions Ben and “Iron” Mike Sharpe. What happened upon the arrival of the Sharpe Brothers would change the face of professional wrestling in Japan forever.

Rikidozan: The Father of Puroresu

Professional wrestling played an important role in the revitalization of the morale of Japan after World War II, due in no small part to the work of Rikidozan. Until this point, he was a popular wrestler but not much more so than other native Japanese professionals in the game. One match on February 19, 1954 would create a legend, inspire pride in a nation and jumpstart an industry (Whiting 1999).

The Sharpe Brothers were not only World Tag-Team Champions hailing from America, but they were also 6 feet, 6 inches tall and approximately 250 pounds each. Though these may not seem to be extraordinary statistics, when compared to their Japanese competition, they were mountains of men almost a foot taller and well over 50 pounds heavier than either Rikidozan or his tag-team partner Masahiko Kimura. A Japanese journalist even noted in his writing of the match, “The difference in physical size, especially in Kimura’s case, triggered painful memories among the spectators of Japan’s devastating loss in the Pacific War. It was a reminder of the very deep complex Japanese felt toward the Americans (Whiting 1999).”

When the match began, the unexpected happened. Rikidozan began destroying Mike Sharpe with a martial arts styled attack. The crowd exploded into cheers, even as Rikidozan's opponent made it to his corner to tag in his partner. When Ben Sharpe entered the ring, the beatings continued. Rikidozan could not and did not stop until the second Sharpe brother collapsed. He was quickly pinned by Rikidozan and after a count of three, the first of this "best-of-three-falls" match was over. "The fans shot to their feet in mass hysteria, tossing seat cushions, hats, and other objects into the air (Whiting 50)."

This excitement was echoed by thousands of fans watching on television sets around Japan. To promote the match, outdoor sets were even installed in highly trafficked areas where during the match, huge crowds had gathered and went into near riot mode upon the defeat of the Americans. One outdoor crowd consisted of 20,000 viewers watching a single 27-inch television which grew so large that it blocked all traffic. Drivers unable to maneuver through the mass of bodies instead got out and joined them. An estimated 10-14 million Japanese watched that match and could not wait for the re-match the next night. Entrepreneurial restaurant owners with televisions sold admission tickets and when those tickets were gone, everyone left empty handed squeezed into homes of friends and neighbors with sets. The audience doubled from the first match to an estimated 24 million viewers, over one-third of the Japanese population (Whiting 1999), and did not let up after that. A match two years later that pitted Rikidozan against still World Heavyweight Champion, Lou Thesz garnered an 87 percent Japanese Nielsen rating.

Sales of television sets after the matches in 1954 skyrocketed from just 17,000 per year to 4.5 million sets per year just five years later, due in no small part to the *Mitsubishi*

Faitoman Awa (Mitsubishi Fightman Hour) starring Rikidozan (Whiting 1999). The matches on this new program continued the successful theme of smaller, heroic Japanese professional wrestlers defeating larger, villainous American opponents. Fans watching at home were known to become so enthralled with the matches that the evil deeds of the Americans could result in a smashed set. The American professional wrestlers were well compensated for playing their role in the matches and some even greatly enjoyed their purposefully exaggerated traits. As noted previously, one who was overjoyed with his ability to induce a response from the crowd was “Classy” Freddie Blassie. During one match against Rikidozan early in the color TV era, Blassie bit his opponent on the forehead drawing a fair amount of blood. It was reported at the time that this display “caused five elderly men and three elderly women watching at home around the country to die from the shock (Whiting 1999).”

Rikidozan, the “Father of Puroresu,” only lived for a decade after his fateful match against the Sharpe Brothers. He spent those remaining years living the fast life of a superstar as well as establishing deep roots into the world of the Yakuza – the Japanese Mafia. These ties would eventually lead to Rikidozan’s death. On December 8, 1963, he was stabbed in an Akasaka nightclub by a member of a gang that Rikidozan had left out of a the professional wrestling money making racket. Rikidozan survived the initial stabbing, even staying at the club long enough to joke about it with fellow patrons and ordering the band to play “Mack the Knife (Whiting 1999).” He was taken in for first aid at a clinic and then to St. Luke’s Hospital for surgery. He seemed to be in good spirits several days later, but an emergency second surgery, combined with a miscalculated dose of anesthesia lead to his death mere hours after the surgery was complete (Whiting 1999).

In his final years, Rikidozan had become very concerned about the fate of professional wrestling in Japan should anything happen to him. With his Yakuza connections, there was a constant danger that he could be killed by rivals and he did not want his beloved industry to collapse along with him. Rikidozan had even put off a planned retirement because he did not feel that puroresu would survive without him. He set out to train several students to carry on in his stead, two of whom gained notoriety which equaled or surpassed their teacher.

The Students of Rikidozan

The first of Rikidozan's students to become a breakout star after the death of the Father of Puroresu was Shohei "Giant" Baba. Given the nickname "Giant" for good reason, the 6 foot 10 inch, 330 pound Baba was well known around the entire wrestling world. He was not a scientific or technical wrestler, but his strength and especially his size was enough to intimidate and defeat almost any opponent. Baba was able to prove that wrestlers other than Rikidozan could draw enormous audiences in Japan.

The only Japanese wrestler to win the National Wrestling Alliance World Heavyweight Championship on three separate occasions, Baba's appeal spanned the continents. Throughout his career, he won 16 annual professional wrestling tournaments in Japan, often winning 8 or more matches in a single night (Slagle 2004). A series of disagreements with Rikidozan's professional wrestling federation, the JWA, in 1971, lead Baba to start his own organization. In 1972, All Japan Pro Wrestling (AJPW) was formed and on February 27th, Baba completed one of his biggest tournament victories by defeating 8 men to be crowned AJPW's first PWF (Pacific Wrestling Federation) Heavyweight Champion.

Baba was known as a patient man, a leader, a teacher, and one of the best promoters that puroresu has ever known. He picked up right where Rikidozan left off and lead puroresu to becoming a top spectator sport in Japan (Slagle 2004). Unfortunately, his death in 1999 lead to a fractioning of the Japanese wrestling world. Baba's wife, Motoko, took over the reigns of AJPW. Her managerial strategies, much different from her late, highly respected husband's, kept the AJPW wrestlers content for less than two years. In March of 2000, Mitsuharu Misawa was removed from his position as president of AJPW. Two weeks later, at an AJPW board meeting, Misawa, along with six other board members, resign from their positions. Three days later, 24 former AJPW wrestlers lead by Misawa hold a press conference and announce the formation of their own promotion, which they called Pro Wrestling NOAH.

This was not the first time such a split had occurred. In 1972, Rikidozan student and former tag-team partner of Giant Baba, Antonio Inoki decided to go his own way and form New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW). Dubbed the "King of Sports" by Inoki, NJPW would be AJPW's biggest competition for years after the split.

Inoki was born Kanji Inoki but Rikidozan gave him the nickname "Antonio" in an homage to professional wrestling legend Antonio Rocca. He trained and wrestled under Rikidozan in the JWA until the 1972 separation. Inoki's career highlights include 19 annual professional wrestling tournament wins, but more importantly was his role as puroresu's world ambassador.

He was determined to bring professional wrestling to countries that did not have this form of entertainment. In one of his most successful world tours, Inoki promoted two cards in Korea which drew attendance figures of 150,000 and 190,000 (Slagle 2004).

Additionally, Inoki became known for challenging the top professionals in other sports in an attempt to reestablish the integrity of professional wrestling. Over the years, he fought judo gold medal winners, world karate champions and, most memorably, a 1976 match against boxing legend Mohammed Ali (Slagle 2004). Inoki has been a success outside the wrestling ring as well, winning a seat in Japan's House of Council in 1989 becoming the first professional wrestler to achieve such a high political position.

Influence of Puroresu in America

Though the previous section was a brief look at the early days of professional wrestling in Japan, puroresu continues to be a popular form of entertainment there to this day. The intense training that professional wrestlers in Japan endure and the high quality matches that are produced lead some American professional wrestlers to travel there in an attempt to hone their skills. Japan has become not only a place that adopted this American form of popular culture as their own, but has now surpassed the originating country as the place to look for the highest quality participants and matches.

In an effort to understand how this unique shift in power has influenced the American wrestling world, I decided to conduct a survey of fans of puroresu in America. Due to the unique nature of a study of this particular form of popular culture, most notably that it is not generally available for viewing by the general public without first going through steps to acquire footage from Japan, the only feasible method for distributing the survey to puroresu viewers was to conduct it online. In order to get responses from the most possible puroresu fans, I posted the survey on the message boards of three websites dedicated either partially or in whole to discussions of Japanese professional wrestling. The websites used were *DeathValleyDriver.com*,

AIWrestling.com and *Puroresu.com*. Through the posting on these websites, I received 39 responses to the survey. The survey utilized both quantitative and qualitative questions in order to allow for numerical data analysis of the quantitative responses as well as content analysis of the qualitative responses.

Before the internet was a popular media source, the only ways to obtain footage of puroresu in America were to know someone in Japan willing to send video tapes to America or to discover one of the few “underground” tape distribution markets and either buy or trade for tapes from these people. With the introduction of the internet to the equation in the 1990s, the possibility of becoming informed about puroresu and to find outlets for acquiring video tapes of puroresu was made much simpler. With the more recent addition of high speed internet connections, there is now the ability for someone in Japan to digitize footage of puroresu and make it almost instantly available for download by those fans in America.

This introduction of the internet spawned two main survey questions which I have selected for analysis because of their importance in determining how American fans of Japanese professional wrestling discovered and acquired their selected form of entertainment. My hypothesis was that by this point in 2004, most fans of puroresu in America were discovering it via the internet, and many were acquiring footage via internet downloads.

The first question to analyze was, “How did you first hear about puroresu?” Of the 39 responses received, only 25.6% said that they first learned of Japanese professional wrestling via the internet. This percentage went completely against what I expected to discover, especially given the popularity of internet use and of wrestling

websites for discussion among fans. With a form of popular culture as specific as “professional wrestling from Japan” and with no regular availability of this type of entertainment in America, the internet seemed to be a likely source for first exposure. What I discovered was that many of the fans surveyed were aware of puroresu before they began to look for internet news and discussions of it. Through the professional wrestlers such as Ted DiBiase, Terry Funk, Chris Benoit, Mick Foley and many others that had traveled to Japan and returned to become superstars in American professional wrestling, the fans learned little by little of the world of wrestling outside the U.S. borders. The response percentages to this question were fairly evenly divided between “read about it on the internet,” “from seeing puroresu wrestlers in an American wrestling promotion,” and “read about it in magazines or other print media.”

The unexpected response to the first question lead me to doubt my hypothesis about the second question. The second question I chose to analyze was “What is your preferred method of acquiring puroresu footage for viewing?” In this case, I also expected the majority of responses to relate to the internet. In one way, the internet did prove essential for this distribution of footage, but not in the expected way of “by downloading/streaming matches or entire shows from the internet.” Instead, 84.6% of the respondents said that they preferred to own some form of DVD or video tape of the footage. The means of acquisition differed between trading dubbed footage with other fans, buying “bootleg” footage from American distributors and buying original DVDs and VHS tapes from retailers in Japan, but by a large margin, American fans preferred to own this footage than to simply download it.

Discovering the fan response to this question lead me down an interesting path of related research. In the book *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins, there is a chapter titled “How Texts Become Real.” In this chapter, Jenkins discusses the importance that the development of reasonably priced home video recorders had on fans of video related popular culture. According to Jenkins, this development “makes the rereading process far simpler not only for fans but for all viewers. Most fans now can own copies of the complete episodes of their favorite series and watch them whenever they wish (Jenkins 1992).” This introduction into the American puroresu fandom allows that which was once a “throw away” entertainment form in Japan to become a commodity. When taken out of its original context as a television program broadcast in Japan and transferred to America in video tape form, what was once just watched can now be collected. Jenkins continues on this theme stating, “The exchange of videotapes has become a central ritual of fandom, one of the practices helping to bind it together as a distinctive community (Jenkins 1992).” The response to the second survey becomes the logical choice when seen in this framework of the fandom mentality.

Though I asked many qualitative questions relating to being a puroresu fan in America, one stood out immediately as the most important to discuss in this study. The question was, “What attracts an American audience to puroresu?” Because the question was asked in an open-ended format, I made no formal hypothesis about the responses that it would generate other than that a general dissatisfaction with the quality of American professional wrestling would lead fans to look elsewhere for their wrestling “fix.” This did end up as one of the many types of response the question generated. For this section, I

will present the responses as they were sent to me in order to retain the emphasis on particular points provided by the survey respondents.

Josh Nibert, a 21-year-old Radford University student currently studying communications and philosophy, said, “The way the sport is treated as an actual sport and not simply entertainment. The level of athleticism and the incredible moves not seen by much of the mainstream American audience [is what attracts them to puroresu].” Another respondent who elected not to be identified by name agreed saying, “It is treated as an athletic contest as opposed to choreographed sports...it treats its competitors as real athletes, which they are.”

Jeff Casey, a 21-year-old animal handler, said, “There are some people who watch it for a very shallow reason (e.g., the more dangerous/spectacular/whatever moves or because it’s considered some elite thing on the internet message boards I can’t stand to read anymore). Some people are simply sick of the Jerry Springer-esque style of today’s American pro-wrestling, which doesn’t even resemble wrestling at all anymore, so this becomes their alternative.” Similarly, 19-year-old University of Louisville nursing student, Sam Allen states, “I feel that western audiences are looking for an alternative to a stale US market for pro-wrestling. I also feel that puroresu has certain exotic qualities, and seems more “real” to fans because it’s stiffer, meaning that wrestlers often take the full force of a move they are executing, or a move that is being executed on them.”

27-year-old Lockheed Martin engineer, Brian Gladney, gives an example of the how the American product has changed and why that leads some American fans to turn to puroresu. “When you watch the NFL you expect to see hard-hitting action, a few interviews here and there, etc. The main selling point is the action, the competition, the

rivalry. Imagine if the NFL turned into Playmakers and instead of focusing on the action on the field, the cameras followed Randy Moss as he talked with Dante Cullpepper about last night's party. Pro-wrestling in the U.S. used to be about issues between people and how they settled it in the ring. Now it is more concerned with skits than the action which should be the selling point. People are drawn to puro because it focuses on the action in the ring in a believable manner.”

Ryan Moore, a 26-year-old editor, agrees, but with a twist. “The wrestling is obviously superior to what’s happening in the US. Furthermore, Japanese culture is making inroads into all manner of entertainment in the States, and Japanese stuff is ‘cool’ at the moment. I think the biggest reason, though, is the internet. Twenty years ago, it would have been far more difficult to find tapes and discussion. These days, anyone who looks around the internet for talk about last night’s [WWE] Raw is likely to be exposed to puro in one way or another.”

One 20-year-old only identifying himself as Omar said, “...puroresu is rather addictive. I remember when I bought my first tape (All Japan), that I instantly became hooked. I had spent the majority of my wrestling time watching WWF, WCW, and ECW, then puroresu added an interesting change to the way I watch wrestling. Now I prefer watching a long, well fought out wrestling match than the boredom of WWE.”

This is just a sample of the many responses this question generated. As can be discerned by reading these sample responses, there is no definitive answer to the question of why Americans are drawn to puroresu, but some common themes can be discovered. American professional wrestling fans are looking for an alternative to what they perceive as a poor quality local product. In relation to that is the idea that Japanese professional

wrestling is treated with more respect and generally consists of more realistic or athletic matches which contrast with the more entertainment or skit oriented American version. The inherent “Japanese-ness” of puroresu appeals to those who consider Japan to be creators of “cool” popular culture. Finally, as was seen in the previous, quantitative question, anything which becomes a commodity can then be seen as collectible and fan addictions or infatuations can occur. Any and all of these are viable reasons for an American professional wrestling fan to turn to the Japanese product for their entertainment. Puroresu is unique and different enough that American fans will go the extra mile to obtain and watch footage but still familiar enough in relation to the local version that even without understanding the language, the matches can be read. The universal appeal of an epic contest of good versus evil knows no borders or language barriers.

Conclusions

Over the course of this study, I was able to answer many of the questions I have long wondered about the world of Japanese professional wrestling. Though its rich history is only touched upon here, one of the most interesting aspects of it is that all of puroresu can be traced back to Rikidozan. He truly is the Father of Puroresu. Currently in Japan, a fourth generation is starting to emerge. Those taught by Rikidozan have retired and their students are now teachers of this new generation of athletes. His fear of puroresu disappearing after his death was unnecessary. Though the popularity of puroresu cycles through good years and bad, it has survived. It is now entertaining fans far beyond the borders of Japan.

As my survey has shown, puroresu has not only become a popular culture entertainment form in America, it has become a hot commodity. Video tapes are bought, sold and traded daily among fans and distributors. There have even been a few attempts at bringing puroresu to America in a legally licensed format, though it has not completely caught on thus far. Video footage from Japan's Frontier Martial Arts Wrestling (FMW) was licensed by Tokyo Pop and distributed in America in DVD and VHS tape form. Though Tokyo Pop has not released a new volume in the FMW series in several years, they will probably not be the last company to attempt to enter the American market.

Though the internet was not as integral to its success in America as I first hypothesized, puroresu has been shown, through the American fan survey, to be a popular alternative to the less wrestling oriented local product. Fans tired of Vince McMahon's WWE have turned to puroresu for their entertainment. The Japanese professional wrestlers consistently offer the highest quality performance available in the world of professional wrestling. Many other reasons were also given as to why American fans might look overseas for an alternative, and that was most interesting to me. Every individual puroresu fan in America has his or her own reasons for enjoying it, and they are all valid.

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