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**Wrestling with Globalisation:
Amateur sumo as a nascent global sport**

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ABSTRACT

In the past century, amateur sumo has grown from being a Japanese sport to one which aspires to be recognised on the global sporting landscape.

Amateur sumo began in the early 20th century, building upon the sumo performed in local communities throughout Japan and on the model that professional sumo provided. Sumo was also performed by Japanese immigrants in parts of North and South America as one of their cultural links to the Japanese homeland. However, it was not until the 1980s that amateur sumo emerged as an international sport. Buoyed by a general wave of internationalisation (*kokusaika*) in Japanese society, foreign sumo teams were invited to train and compete in Japan in the mid-1980s. Although invited mainly from the Japanese diaspora, increasingly participants came from countries with no ethnic links to Japan. This practice ultimately led to the first Sumo World Championships being held in 1992. The International Sumo Federation (IFS) was inaugurated at the same time, guided and controlled by Japanese sumo administrators.

As IFS membership grew, the administrative model of international sumo expanded. In 1995 continental sumo unions were formed to relieve pressure from the IFS having to run the sport from the centre. These continental unions were given relative autonomy to develop the sport within their regions, and this allowed the national sumo federations a degree of flexibility as well. The sport began to be reterritorialised in different locations, where each added their own meaning and practices to amateur sumo. At the same time, the IFS sought recognition from the International Olympic Committee so that it might become an official Olympic sport. This alignment put the onus on amateur sumo to transform itself to adhere to Olympic ideals. The resultant changes, most notably the inclusion of women into the sport, have aligned amateur sumo with global standards adhered to by other Olympic sports. Furthermore, the developments and interactions within the amateur sumo community demonstrate aspects of a “complex connectivity” that suggests the emergence of a nascent global sport. It is this contemporary face of amateur sumo that is explored here.

Through participant observation and a series of interviews with key amateur sumo participants in Europe and Oceania, this thesis argues that the transformation within amateur sumo from internationalisation to its current global aspirations can be traced through understanding the history and practice of the sport both in Japan and overseas, and it demonstrates how globalisation processes are contingent on the agency of individuals and small groups.

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CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Contents	v
Introduction	1
1. Positioning Amateur Sumo	34
2. Taking Amateur Sumo to the World	59
3. Olympic Dreams: The quest for 2008 and beyond	93
4. Including Women: The creation of <i>shinsumō</i>	116
5. Localisation and Authenticity in Amateur Sumo	153
6. Beyond the IFS: Resistance, agency and control in amateur sumo	192
Conclusion	220
Appendix I – Demographic information of interviewees	228
Appendix II – Questions guiding the interviews in this study	231
Bibliography	234