



## No future for places that fail to attract talent

Dialogue between Nishiiwa Shinobu, the former sekiwake Wakanosato and Harold G. Meij, Representative Director, President & CEO of Takara Tomy Company, Ltd.

### Cutting a Topknot That Had Been Tied for Twenty-four Years

Meij: You have just had your retirement ceremony and had your topknot cut. Have you gotten used to your new hair style?

Nishiiwa: Not yet, because I had a topknot for twenty-four years (laughs).

Meij: I've read your autobiography (*Tatakiage*). True to the title, you really are a self-made man. What surprised me most is that you had surgery an astonishing nine times. I don't know anyone else who's had so many operations.

Nishiiwa: Me neither, other than me.

Meij: You won nineteen consecutive tournaments at the three highest ranks below yokozuna. That is amazing. Unlike ozeki, there is no *kadoban* for these three ranks. So, you will be demoted if you lose many more than you win, or even stay away from the ring for a tournament. What's even more incredible is that you are seventh all-time in the number of wins. You have my utmost respect.

Nishiiwa: Thank you very much.

Meij: Actually, I've been a big fan of sumo since I was a child. I'm not interested in other sports very much. Between you and me, I don't really like football (soccer), even though I am Dutch (laughs).



Harold G. Meij (left) and Nishiiwa Shinobu  
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*An eight-year-old boy sees sumo wrestlers for the first time...*

Nishiiwa: When did you start watching sumo?

Meij: I came to Japan in 1971 when I was eight because of my father's work. He worked for a Japanese food manufacturer. The foreigners living in Japan at that time were either diplomats or in the US armed forces, so in that sense our family was a rare case. As an eight-year-old boy, I did not speak Japanese or even English. One day, my father took me to the old (Kuramae) Kokugikan. I entered the *hanamichi* by mistake when I was going to the restroom. There I was, a kid from another country seeing sumo wrestlers up close for the first time. It was like...

Nishiiwa: Like a small mountain?

Meij: They look big even in the ring. When you stand right in front of them, it feels simply overwhelming. Much more so for a little boy. Suddenly, I thought they were gods, or they were just like the gods I knew about from Greek myths. Today I brought this illustration for you. The gods from Greek myths are generally large and without clothes (shows him the illustration).

Nishiiwa: They really do look like sumo wrestlers.

Meij: According to the myths, the gods don't get along well with each other and fight all the time. So, I thought it was like the gods were fighting with each other in the ring. That's where it all started for me.

Nishiiwa: That's interesting. Now, I remember how people say that children will grow up healthy after being cuddled by a sumo wrestler, and that babies will be born healthy if a sumo wrestler gently rubs the mothers' tummies. Sumo wrestlers are not like gods, but are regarded as being special to Japanese people.

Meij: They are different from ordinary people. The shrines have rings.

Nishiiwa: Sumo is originally a shrine ritual.

Meij: I think sumo is a special sport because it is a battle that is over in an instant. The average time of a match is...

Nishiiwa: About seven seconds.

Meij: A match is like drawing a sword. Cut down your opponent or be cut down. Sometimes sumo wrestlers collide intensely. When the fight is finished, they sheath their sword and act like nothing happened.

Nishiiwa: You know your stuff, and definitely see things differently. The average time of a match is seven seconds. It finishes in a second or two if it goes quickly. At most it may go on for a minute. Sumo wrestlers practice every day for months, covered in mud, to prepare for a battle that lasts a moment. A match finishes in a few seconds.

Meij: Everything ends when the fighting is done.

Nishiiwa: Even after a fierce bout, the wrestlers bow to each other and leave the ring as if nothing happened. That's the difference from other fighting sports. It sometimes leaves spectators from abroad surprised. Some have even asked me why they don't continue battling it out even after they fall out of the ring (laughs).

Meij: Instead they hold out their hand and help each other up.

Nishiiwa: That's how sumo is supposed to be, different from other sports.

Meij: They don't raise their fists when they win. Well, sometimes they do on rare occasions (laughs).

Nishiiwa: As a human being, it is very difficult to hide your delight when you win or frustration when you lose. However, sumo wrestlers are able to do it.

Meij: Another great thing about sumo is that you never know which person is going to win until the final moment of the match. A wrestler may ultimately pull off *uttchari* even if he is about to be beaten. The only way to find out the winner is to watch until the very end.

Nishiiwa: Sumo is not based on who gets the most points. A win is a win, and a loss is a loss, no matter how the match goes. You get nothing if you lose, even if you wrestle really well. That's what makes sumo difficult. People say that a wrestler can lose the match but win in term of how they wrestle, and vice versa. Basically, the only road to promotion and more money is to win, regardless of how well you actually wrestle. This can be a sensitive issue for sumo wrestlers. You can lose when you're about to win if your big toe goes out of the ring.

Meij: You may have to work as a *tsukebito* if you lose more than you win and then may even be demoted. This kind of demotion is rarely seen in other sports. There is no mercy in the sumo world.

Nishiiwa: The ranking is updated every two months. The wrestlers at or above a certain rank (*juryo*) get paid, but those below them don't. The percentage of wrestlers actually eligible for remuneration is as low as 10%.

Meij: The ritual is surprising, bowing before entering the ring, and then throwing salt. Many things take place, but most of them cannot be seen on television. There are many things not known to the public.

### *The depth of sumo is found in the simplicity of the rules*

Nishiiwa: The rules of sumo are simple. The ring is 4.55 meters in diameter. If you get pushed out, you lose.

Meij: Simple and clear.

Nishiiwa: Having wrestled for twenty-four years, I became keenly aware of how the simplicity of sumo actually makes it really deep.

Meij: If you are aware of the depth, you can enjoy it ten times or even 1,000 times more. In addition to the sumo elements, such as bouts that last an instant, the ranking, and number of victories, each sumo wrestler has his own story. For example, you underwent a lot of operations. The average person doesn't know that story.

Nishiiwa: The spectators actually only see sumo wrestlers for a few minutes, including the time they take getting ready for the match.

Meij: If you know more about the back story of each wrestler, you grow to like sumo even more.

Nishiiwa: Indeed. For example, during a tournament a sumo wrestler watches videos to get ready for the next opponent, training in the morning, eating and resting based on the tournament schedule, getting his hair done, putting on his kimono, and then going to Ryogoku Kokugikan. After he arrives, he warms up together with an assistant, gets himself fired up, and then battles it out in the ring. When the match is done, he goes home, thinks about his opponent for the next day, and then goes to sleep. His day starts and ends with sumo.

Meij: But spectators only get to watch him for seven seconds.

Nishiiwa: Seven seconds a day. Or seven seconds a month or year if he has surgery, is hospitalized, or goes out for training. They only catch a few fleeting seconds of his life as a sumo wrestler.

Meij: I am also interested in the variety of symbolism. One well-known example is that of four tassel colors on the roof over the ring that signify the four seasons. Gyoji are ranked, with the lower ranking individuals not wearing *tabi* on their feet while those ranked above them do.

Nishiiwa: The highest ranking gyoji wear sandals called *zori*.

Meij: I explain that whenever I take someone to sumo, and they're always surprised to hear that. And the *hakkeyoi* (or *hakkiyoi*) was originally meant for good luck. Oh, I wanted to ask you something. I

heard that the gesture wrestlers make when they receive prize money draws out the kanji for “heart.” Is that true?

Nishiiwa: No. The gesture they do is called *tegatana*. It’s a chopping motion to three gods on the left, on the right, and in the center before receiving money.

Meij: Right.

Nishiiwa: I explain this at sumo school.

### *Professional sumo is a sport that involves spectator participation*

Meij: I would like to talk about the characteristics of the Ryogoku Kokugikan. I think sumo is a type of sport that involves spectator participation. What I mean is that spectators naturally jeer or yell for wrestlers from close by.

Nishiiwa: Wrestlers concentrate too much to pay much attention to the jeering or yelling while wrestling. They can hear spectators while they’re walking down the *hanamichi*, heading for or leaving the ring, and when they’re getting ready on the ring.

Meij: It is interesting that spectators usually eat and drink as they watch matches.

Nishiiwa: It is great. Spectators watch sumo in the *masuseki* box seats, much in the same way they would view the cherry blossoms outside.

Meij: Eating and drinking is a form of entertainment because there are intervals between matches. Spectators eat, drink, and even talk while watching sumo. So, sumo is kind of a participatory event. I entertain clients by taking them out to see sumo. Normally people in Japan entertain business clients by going out for golf because they can keep them in one place for six hours or so and talk as they play. Watching sumo is like playing golf, but sumo might be better. You only have a couple of hours with clients, but you remain much closer in the *masuseki*.

Nishiiwa: The *masuseki* is a really small space.

Meij: In the *masuseki*, you have to sit right next to another person. You can even smell the cologne or perfume they’re wearing. It’s a friendlier and more relaxed atmosphere than playing golf. Sumo is very useful for business negotiations and entertainment because you can see the different traits of your clients.

Nishiiwa: The *masuseki* is often used to entertain people.

Meij: The newspapers often write about the possibility of a Japanese yokozuna emerging. Why are

there no Japanese yokozuna? There are no clear answers. In my opinion, part of it is that wrestlers don't get paid well. Even if a yokozuna gets paid lots of money, many wrestlers don't receive any remuneration. That's not very much motivation to try. Foreign wrestlers may be motivated to work hard in Japan due to the difference in monetary value.

Nishiiwa: It's a difficult issue. In professional sumo, the Nihon Sumo Kyokai is a public interest corporation that does not aim to make profit. Sumo is essentially a professional sport that does not intend to make profit.

Meij: However, sumo wrestlers practice from morning to night as hard if not harder than other athletes. I'm afraid their salaries don't match the effort they put in, and the current system fails to provide adequate compensation for injuries.

Nishiiwa: Those are the very things we need to think about. Otherwise, sumo stables will not be able to attract new understudies. When I became an understudy around the time of the spring tournament in 1992, nearly 150 out of 160 applicants passed the test for new understudies. Now, only about thirty to forty applicants become new understudies even around the spring tournament, which is the time the most applicants are tested.

Meij: That's not a good sign. If things remain as the yare, sumo will fall into decline or only be able to attract foreign wrestlers.

Nishiiwa: There is no future for places that fail to attract talent.

Meij: The same is true for companies. People choose a place to work based on the salary, bonus and position.

Nishiiwa: I'm from Hirosaki, Aomori. When I was in elementary school and middle school, which was twenty-five to thirty years ago, the elementary schools and middle schools had sumo clubs and sumo rings. When I went to Hirosaki after retirement, I didn't find any elementary or middle high schools that had a sumo club. There are no sumo practice halls either. That means there are no children who do sumo.

Meij: Many sumo wrestlers are from Aomori.

Nishiiwa: I heard there are communities that didn't have any place for children to experience sumo. So, I held the Wakanosato Sumo Kyoshitsu in Hirosaki this May. The idea was to get children to try sumo, have fun while wrestling, and experience the joy of doing sumo. That's the starting point for us.

Meij: I see.

Nishiiwa: We have to plow first before we sow the seeds. That's what we need to do now.

Meij: As a toy company, we have to get the next-generation children interested in Tomica and Plarail so that our products will continue to live on, so we create manga and anime that promote the coolness of the toys. There are many manga and anime works about baseball and football. What about sumo?

Nishiiwa: There is sumo manga called *Bachi Bachi* that's running right now.

Meij: That's good. Hopefully it will inspire people to take an active interest in sumo.

Nishiiwa: We need to give more opportunities for children to experience sumo.

### *Fostering the next generation of fans*

Meij: The Nihon Sumo Kyokai needs to make some drastic changes. For example, one of the big changes I made after joining the company was to introduce Twitter. At that time there were a few Twitter accounts for our products, so we created a Twitter account for Licca-chan, and it now has over 90,000 followers. I haven't seen that many Twitter accounts of active sumo wrestlers.

Nishiiwa: I've used Instagram for a year.

Meij: That's the kind of technology you should use. My 11-year-old daughter hardly watches the television. She checks Twitter and YouTube on iPad. Getting information faster than I do, she always tells me about something new. You need to step into that world if you want to foster the next generation of fans.

Nishiiwa: That's right. Kyokai uses Twitter and Line.

Meij: I follow Kyokai's Twitter account. However, the content is a little too serious. They only tweet official announcements. Tweets would be more interesting if you showed your true colors. For example, it would be fun to have a sekitori tweet what he eats on any given day.

Nishiiwa: Well, professional sumo has some good old aspects too. Although I've already cut my topknot, it might impair the image of sumo wrestlers if they tweet a picture of themselves with a topknot and kimono on Twitter. I think we need to introduce new things while keeping certain traditional elements.

Meij: Right. I expect the sumo world to be more successful in the future. Well it's time for us to close. I'd really love to talk more.

Nishiiwa: I've really enjoyed talking with you. You're definitely passionate about sumo.

Meij: Please feel free to drop by any time. We'll continue this discussion again.

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**NISHIIWA Shinobu**, the former sekiwake Wakanosato

Born in Aomori in 1976. Made his debut at the spring tournament in 1992. Promoted to the *makuuchi* division at the summer tournament in 1993. Retired in 2015 and took the name of Nishiiwa as a *toshiyori*. Made 1691 appearances, and won a total of 914 matches in total. Currently serves as the master at the Tagonoura Sumo Stable training wrestlers. Wrote and published his autobiography *Tatakiage* in May 2016.

**Harold G. Meij**

Born in Netherlands in 1963. Appointed CEO of Tomy Company, Ltd. after working for Heineken Japan K.K., Nippon Lever K.K. (currently, Unilever Japan K.K.), Sunstar Inc., and Coca-Cola (Japan) Company, Limited.

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