

Island Life: Sumo and Dohyo

Amami Oshima probably has more *dohyo* (earthen-floored sumo wrestling rings) per capita than any other part of Japan. There are over 140 of these rings in villages all over the island. Some are more elaborate than others, but most are in excellent condition with a well-made roof overhead, a mark of how popular and deeply entrenched the sport is in the island's culture.

The Traditional Style

Sumo on Amami Oshima once resembled the Okinawan style of wrestling. Much like wrestling traditions from Korea and Mongolia to Turkey, grappling was key, and matches would start with each wrestler gripping his opponent. These days, however, it follows the Japanese *tachiai* style, in which wrestlers burst out of a crouch and try to push their opponent out of the ring or throw them to the ground.

All Contenders Welcome

The island has produced a number of champions, both professional and amateur. The best wrestlers tend to train at one of the local clubs around the island with dedicated coaches. In these clubs, wrestlers as young as five or six years old begin a hard training regimen. But that doesn't stop anyone from trying out their skills in the ring. Sumo matches are an integral part of local festivals, and are open to all—that is, anyone willing to step into the ring and dedicate themselves to the gods. These occasions are especially important to smaller villages as a way of expressing community pride.