

Debra Miceli, formerly of Robbinsdale, is Japan's women's professional wrestling champion. As a symbol of the West, she's developed a devoted following and a six-figure income.

Japan falls for U.S. export

By Dan Wascoe Jr.
Staff Writer

Nervous about the Japanese hammerlock on Rockefeller Center?

Upset over Japan's body slam on the U.S. electronics market?

Worried about the Japanese toehold on U.S. automakers?

Cheer up. A 26-year-old former Robbinsdale woman, flexing her well-developed U.S. muscles and budding acting skills, is exporting to Japan part of American culture at its brashiest.

Debra Miceli — known professionally as Madusa — won the women's professional wrestling championship in Japan in September and has

defended it once since then. At 5 feet 9 and about 145 pounds she has become a musical, female Hulk Hogan: an American-style pro wrestler who also cuts videos and recordings and whose fans give her little peace, even at her Tokyo apartment.

And now her Japanese promoters want her to try kick boxing.

Madusa is not invading Japan's traditionally men-only sumo wrestling ring. She practices the dramatically exaggerated U.S. style — excruciating grimaces, revealing costumes, tumbles out of

Madusa continued on page 12A

Staff Photo by Mike Zerby

Debra Miceli, or Madusa.



the ring, flying rebounds off the ropes.

And the marketing of Madusa fairly screams U.S.A.

"She's blond and well-endowed," said Verne Gagne, the former pro wrestling champ for whose American Wrestling Association Madusa once worked.

"People here thought she was some movie star," said Fumi Saito, a freelance sportswriter in Tokyo. "She's very good-looking and big and strong. She's 120 percent American."

Even Miceli's stage name carries patriotic overtones. Although the mythological Medusa is remembered for hair that turned into serpents, that was Medusa with an "e." Madusa with an "a" says her alias is a contraction of "Made in U.S.A."

Her popularity also may have sociological roots, said March Krotee, an associate professor of physical education and recreation at the University of Minnesota. Krotee, who studies sports sociology, said that many Japanese "love Western material things" as well as American cultural trends, and that Madusa may be well positioned to ride that tide.

Although U.S. companies face trade restrictions in cracking the Japanese market, stardom by American athletes such as baseball players has "broken down the barrier."

"It's kind of a nonthreatening inclusion (of Western phenomena) into their culture which they can control," Krotee said. It's unlike rock music, which older Japanese regard as a distasteful, uncontrollable influence, he said.

Despite her six-figure, yearlong contract with All-Japan Women's Pro Wrestling, Madusa aims to be a movie actress, and her Twin Cities business managers are working on two film opportunities — one a police action flick, the other a martial arts epic.

"I want to be a starving actress," she said jauntily during a recent trip back home. "I can see myself accepting the Oscar."

Paul Moe, one of her business managers, said he turned down one movie deal when he determined that the script offered too many opportunities for exploitation. "It was a hard R, not a PG as promised," said Moe, referring to movie industry ratings. "It wouldn't be good for her career."

Although Madusa appreciated his concern ("Paul's like a Dad," she said), "I could have punched him through the wall" after he rejected the offer.

Like other Japanese women wrestlers, Madusa has developed a following that hangs on every performance, every magazine spread and the more recent videos. A photo book about her is in the works. She receives a fee and potential royalties

from a record contract and flat fees for the picture book. She also will appear on Japanese billboards promoting a line of sportswear and will promote a VCR game that includes footage of her matches.

Moe said he expects her income by the end of 1990 to be between \$200,000 and \$300,000.

Suzanne Budofsky, her other business manager, said that the All-Japan organization has asked Madusa to train with one of its expert kick boxers and to participate in national championships. Moe said that Madusa regards the invitation as a challenge and that she probably will participate in spite of the faster pace and potential for injury.

Even as a wrestler in a sport some consider to have a high sham quotient, Madusa has taken her lumps. In the past three years she has had a broken nose and a broken finger, and has undergone knee surgery that required her to wear a brace.

Sportswriter Saito, who once attended Cooper High School in New Hope as an exchange student, said Miceli is part of a phenomenon that blossomed later than men's wrestling but branched off successfully in a unique direction.

A typical evening of Japanese women's wrestling begins with five or six preliminary bouts followed by a half-hour singing interlude led by the night's main event wrestling stars.



Staff Photo by Mike Zerby

Despite a yearlong contract with All-Japan Women's Pro Wrestling, Madusa aims to be an actress: "I can see myself accepting the Oscar."

"They set up loudspeakers and confetti and make a stage in the ring," Saito said by telephone from Tokyo. "The main event wrestlers walk in in their singing costumes. The arena is dark with laser beams and colored lighting and music. They walk in the ring with spotlights on them. They talk a little bit and sing their own songs. Some sing duets. Tag team partners cut albums together. Every team and star has some cult fans who come to every single match."

Madusa favors a pink sequined tuxedo for part of her singing outfit. Her glitzy wrestling togs feature one bare

arm and one bare leg.

Do such trappings erode the respect that Madusa said she expected by agreeing to go to Japan?

"It is a respected sport," Saito said. "Parents encourage their kids to go to the shows. All the wrestlers are good gymnasts and conditioned athletes. They are stars."

But, he said, there's a "very thin line between entertainment and sport. . . . Going to a sumo match is like attending Shakespeare and the opera. Wrestling is more like going to a rock

concert or the movies."

Sumo wrestling has been a national passion for centuries, Saito said, and American-style wrestling didn't reach Japan until 1951, popularized by a former sumo wrestler.

"It was the first professional sport introduced in Japan from America after the war," he said. "Women's wrestling started about 10 years later. . . . In the early '70s they started to have those girls start singing in the ring. Some girls got so popular that record companies discovered them."

To become a pro wrestler, about 400 young women compete in annual try-outs, from which five are selected, Saito said.

Like these winners, Madusa received three weeks of intense training before her first bout. It included running in sand and up mountains, she said, and "It was really hard."

The road to Japan began in elementary and junior high school, where she showed talent in gymnastics and track. Along the way, her father taught her how to box. She did not participate in athletics at Robbinsdale High School because she worked a lot — so much so that she did not graduate with her class in 1980. Instead she earned a graduation equivalency diploma.

After stints as a model, beauty pageant contestant, nursing home worker and jazz dancer, producer friends suggested she consider pro wrestling. That led to a start with Gagne's American Wrestling Association.

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"They brought their champion over, and did I get the dickens beat out of me," she recalled. "We both ended up outside the ring." But she said the Japanese "respected my ability" and negotiations led to her decision to give Japan a try.

Gagne described her athletic ability as "just so-so," adding, "I'd say she kind of ran her course" in the AWA. But Madusa said she was attracted by the Japanese approach of marketing wrestlers as pop stars.

Saito said that Madusa has made an impression not only because of her Western looks but because of her personality and her commitment to spend substantial time in Japan.

"Athletic abilitywise, some Japanese girls are better," he said, despite Madusa's hold on the championship. He based his judgment on Madusa's relative lack of experience.

Budofsky said Madusa might extend her contract when it expires in August, although that would mean a continued long-distance relationship with boyfriend Al Noga, Minnesota Vikings defensive lineman.

Saito said that if she leaves, her fans will be disappointed but not angry. "We had American women before . . . But they just came in and stayed for four weeks and then they'd go.

"She's the first real (American) star, not a guest who comes and goes," he said. "She is one of us now."