

Japanese women have fighting spirit

Real or rehearsed? It doesn't matter for fans of these women who wrestle with their jobs.

By REENA SHAH

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TOKYO They giggled with their hands covering their mouths, they bowed to each other, and they gave each other neck rubs. Then, when the the neon lights began to swirl around the gymnasium and the crowd of spectators clapped to the disco tunes pounding loudly, they all jogged into the floodlit ring and stood, hands clasped, in a neat circle.

Bull Nakano clenched her hands and fixed her pudgy face, a blue lightning streak running down its length, into a sneer. "I am going to do my best not to disappoint you," she said. "And I promise I will qualify for an international challenge in the future," she growled, raising her fist as schoolgirls screamed and cheered for her. Her hair, terrorized by hairspray into a straight tower, swayed menacingly.



RING STARS: Making the cover of the *Ring Star* program is one mark of a champion wrestler.

"I will work hard and prove to you that my team is the strongest," said Toshiyo Yamada, as camera flashbulbs exploded and the clapping audience stomped the ground approvingly.

One by one, all the women stepped forward, pledging hard work and promising to achieve goals. Then they earnestly got to work, delighting their neatly-dressed fans by kicking and grabbing each other, pulling hair, biting wrists and stomping fallen rivals.

When a woman has to live up to a name like Bull Nakano, Bison Kimura, Aja Kong or Bat Yoshinaga, she has the license to misbehave seriously in a society that values politeness to such a degree that people frequently pepper their conversations with "Excuse me" and "Forgive my rudeness," and women especially always must be demure and submissive.

But being a professional wrestler here mostly means hard work, a slender paycheck and the likelihood of remaining chunky and unmarried for the rest of your life.

Still, the All Japan Women's Wrestling Promotion has been surprised by its own surging popularity in the last 10 years.

First, the Crush Gals ruled the ring. Then, it was the Beauty Pair. And women's professional wrestling

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became the rage.

"I think it was the singing that really did it," says Lioness Asuka, one of the Crush Gals duo, and a 1985 champion who drew huge crowds. The promoters decided that before every match, the Crush Gals should croon sentimental songs and then get down to pounding another pair of "evil" wrestlers. The gimmick worked, packing stadium after stadium with thousands of fans.

What surprised Lioness and women's wrestling promoter Kenji Matsunaga was that among the usual crowds of "salarymen" — white-collar workers — were throngs of housewives and schoolgirls.

"Women's wrestling is much more interesting than men's," said Oka Yumiko, an 18-year-old high school student who spent \$50 on her ticket and another \$20 on Bull Nakano souvenirs. "Men are supposed to have strength, but to see a woman kicking and toppling others — I like it because I never imagined women could be so strong."

"The best part is when they leap out of the ring and keep on beating each other up," said 17-year-old Atsuko Nagata. She is outraged at the suggestion that much of this exaggerated ferocity could be staged. "It is all real," she insisted. "They bleed so much and they still fight!" she said admiringly.

Fighting in singles and pairs, bouncing across the ring, rebounding from the ropes, the women let out grunts of dubious ferocity. Aaaaaaah! Aayiiiiii! A television camera man sprints around the ring, not missing any of the action. Two men holding an extension cord scuttle behind him.

"Ma-na-mi," a part of the crowd chants, naming their winner. "Yo-shi-da, Yo-shi-da," roots another faction.

"Go for it! We support you 100 percent!"

A shaken Yoshida wipes her bloody mouth and steadies herself. "I am going to go back and try to win," she says to her fans and bows. The fight continues.

Kenji Matsunaga, the company's president, says that when the Crush Gals and the Beauty Pair reigned until a few years ago, he received 2,000 letters from schoolgirls who begged to be recruited. "This is my dream," one wrote. "If I don't get this chance, I will have no other purpose in life."



Photo by REENA SHAH

WAITING: The wrestlers wait for introductions. Women's pro wrestling in Japan has surged in popularity in the last 10 years.

The handful of women he recruits each year range in age from junior high school to college. They have some aptitude for martial arts and they all look similar, like cheerleaders trapped in pillars of cellulite. Their careers are short. Retirement usually comes at 25.

Lioness, who retired three years ago at 25, now works as a television actress. Her dream is to become a fine dramatic star, but she only gets to play manly women in slapstick shows.

"People assume that Japanese women are delicate creatures in kimonos," explained Matsunaga about the popularity of wrestling as a career option. "But deep inside the Japanese women is a strong will to get anything she wants. It is like a snake sleeping inside her."

"They never give up. I've trained many. They get hit or kicked and they never give up even when they're bleeding at the mouth and have bandages all over. They are asked if they are ready to give up and they just get up and continue fighting!"

Everywhere in Japanese society, the domination of men is apparent. At work, even college-educated women are expected to fill positions as "office ladies" who make photocopies, answer telephones and pour tea for male workers. This is a country where the borrowed tradition of Valentine's Day is practiced with a twist. Women buy gifts for men and are obligated to present

their male co-workers with what are called "duty chocolates."

After a few years at a company, these "office flowers" are expected to retire, preferably with a husband culled from the company's pool of eligible men. Advertisements show girls or women who are dressed like adolescents in smocks and ponytails giggling and waiting on men. The popular "manga" comics that are the reading staple of subway riders show women and even schoolgirls stripped of their clothes, raped and slashed.

Women's wrestling is a clever amalgam of cuteness and violence. Women get a chance to stomp on each other and draw blood in a controlled environment, and their behavior isn't seen as threatening because they are picking on other women instead of men.

Like most women's jobs in Japan, though, wrestling doesn't pay much. The women get an allowance of about \$600 to \$1,000 a month. They share dormitories and cook their own meals. They have to train all day and polish their act. They are piled into buses for engagements around the country. If they get unexpectedly popular like the Crush Gals did, they can make some money on the side by selling T-shirts or cassettes.

But female wrestling has yet to earn the respect and glamor sumo wrestling enjoys, Matsunaga says. Every so often, a swaddling sumo wrestler marries a Lolita-like singer or actress and the Japanese media coos about such romances. No such happy endings are in store for female wrestlers. After a flash of stardom, many of the women move to jobs like office clerks or martial arts trainers. "Some of them try to lose weight and find a husband," he says.

Still, wrestling is an ideal job for women, Lioness says. "It doesn't matter if you are overweight. In fact, it is better if you are heavy," she says, smiling. "You can be angry in public, and people will cheer you instead of scolding you for being bad. I am so glad I got chosen."

The best wrestlers get to visit the United States for exhibition matches. "They are far, far ahead in showmanship," Matsunaga said of American professional wrestlers. "They know how to dress more colorfully, to paint their faces to build a certain image, to make the whole spectacle entertaining."

"All this jumping out of the ring and thrashing the opponent that is so popular — we learned it from the Americans."