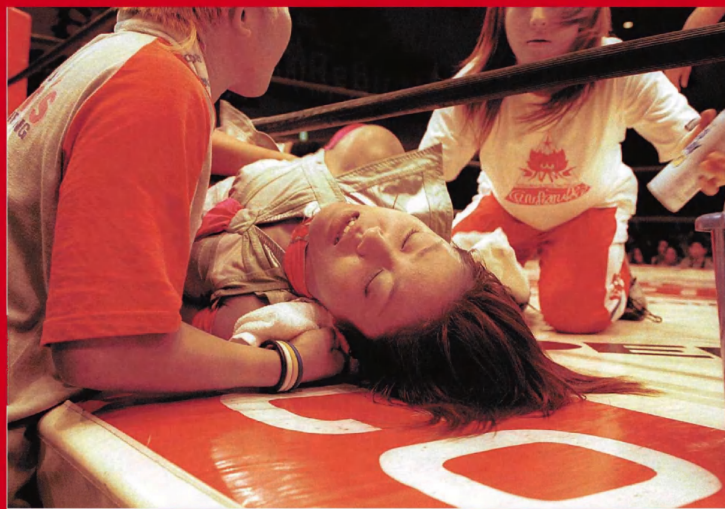




# Girl power

Kicking, screaming, scratching, bellowing out karaoke – Japan's women wrestlers fight dirty and



they'll do anything to be famous. Words by **Leslie Downer** Photographs by **Leticia Valverdes**



IN A wrestling ring in a shabby room on the outskirts of Tokyo, eight young women are working out with grim determination. In pairs they practise throws, then arm locks and neck locks. One knots her legs around the other, who fights, kicks and writhes to escape. They yell, grunt, puff and pant. The room is grubby, the mats mended with brown tape. There is a scuffed mirror along one wall, mounds of weights, some training bikes and a couple of punch balls. A dachshund yaps hysterically in its basket. Above the ring is a shield inscribed with the words, "All Japan Women's Pro Wrestling Promotions: Victory Through Guts". A poster reads "For those who are beautiful and brave."

A couple of the wrestlers are glamorous Valkyries but most are more like beefy, overgrown children. Their legs and arms are bruised. Most have a bandage wound around an elbow, thigh or knee. But they are formidable athletes. Twenty-two-year-old Nanae Takahashi has a round baby face, jutting jaw and snub nose. She has been a professional wrestler for six years and is the veteran of the group. She struts around in T-shirt and track suit trousers, overseeing the others.

The women are practising a punishing routine of break falls. They somersault across the ring with a yell, then crash onto the mat on their stomachs, then on their backs and finally perform a flying somersault from standing, hitting the canvas with a thud. Keiko Hirose, the youngest of the group, is panting, gasping and nearly in tears, her mouth slack with exhaustion. When her turn comes, she hesitates fearfully

before hurling herself into the last, most violent somersault. Takahashi barks at her not to pause.

HIROSE IS 15 and started training as a wrestler just six months ago. Her father was unemployed and disabled by alcoholism. He died a few months ago in a car crash. Her mother works nights, stacking shelves in a supermarket. She has spent her life playing truant from school and dropping out of part time jobs. Then she became a fan of women's wrestling.

"It was so bright and colourful," she says, "and the women looked beautiful and strong."

Finally here was something she really wanted to do. She auditioned and was one of five chosen out of 15 applicants. Three of the other new entrants have already dropped out. She shares a tiny room two floors above the gym and subsists on pot noodles and snacks from the local

**'If men wrestle, it's normal. But to see women hitting each other – that's beautiful'**

corner store. She gets a small wage, just enough to survive.

"I often think of running away," she confesses. She is holding a bag of ice to her bruised, swollen elbow. "I cry. I hate being such a weakling. I'm embarrassed to say this, but I've only once beaten the other new girl. But I've dropped out of everything else I've ever done. I've got to make a go of this."

Women's pro-wrestling reached Japan 40 years ago. Originally it followed the American pattern with plenty of drama and excitement for the spectators and a rigged ending. In the Eighties, legendary characters like Dump Matsumoto, a massive dump truck of a woman with a spiky orange-dyed Mohican haircut and painted devil face, pounded slender women in tights like pantomime Prince Charmings. Every time, Dump would very nearly win. But at the last minute Prince Charming would defeat her; then grab a microphone and belt out a sob-in-the-voice karaoke ballad. The most celebrated of the Prince Charmings was Chigusa Nagayo. She was a heartthrob, adored by legions of teenage girls, who shrieked and screamed through her performance.

But now women's pro-wrestling has been through a sea change. It still has its showbiz side. But it has another aspect too. It has become a real sport – and a dangerous, violent one. Occasional deaths ensure that there are far fewer applicants than in the past.

Nevertheless it is still a path to fame, though a bloody one. Above the gym at the All Japan Women's stable, there is a shop selling CDs of the women singing, videos of fights,



## READY TO RUMBLE

**Previous pages, clockwise from top left:** hung out to dry on the ropes; the all-powerful body slam; Kayo Noumi collapses in the ring – she is usually singled out by other wrestlers on account of her looks; Satomura of the breakaway Gaea Tournament, known for its violence; Kayo Nomi is cracked over the head with a chair as the action continues outside the ring; veteran Nanae Takahashi after her face was smashed against a wall by her two opponents

**Clockwise from far left:** 15-year-old apprentice wrestler, Keiko Hirose, prepares for a rare night out; most of the audience at the All Japan tournament in Korakuen Hall is male; a female wrestler looks for her own image on the 2003 All Japan Women's calendar; massages are part of the training and healing process; living legend Chigusa Nagayo; some of the memorabilia that's available to fans of women wrestling



T-shirts and pin-up posters. There is also a volume of tasteful soft-porn photographs of the prettiest, 26-year-old Kayo Nomi. Slender rather than chunky, she has a lovely heart-shaped face, huge eyes and long dark hair.

"Pretty women can be good wrestlers too," she says. "It's good to be pretty and strong. I get fan mail every day, especially after tournaments. I like the fame. When I'm out, everyone recognises me."

Chigusa Nagayo, the great heartthrob of the Eighties, is now 38 and nearly as large and butch as her great antagonist, Dump. She is enormously charismatic, with long black hair cut short on top and a disarmingly sweet smile. When she and her fellow wrestlers stride into Velfarre, Tokyo's largest, glitziest club, the crowd parts and a ripple of voices gasps, "It's Chigusa!" People swarm to have their photographs taken alongside her.

CHIGUSA NAGAYO was a teenager when her family went bankrupt. She saw a newspaper advert which read, "Why not become a pro-wrestler and be famous?" In her time she has wrestled in Las Vegas and Los Angeles and has made enough money to repay all her family's debts. She drives a black Mercedes with individually heated seats and a television in the front. Eight years ago she broke away from All Japan Women's to form her own wrestling group, Gaea Japan. There are currently five or six splinter groups in Japanese women's wrestling, with no overall governing body and no overall champion. Each group arranges its own tournaments with another group or with freelance wrestlers.

Some of the tournaments veer towards entertainment. Others are deadly earnest.

The Gaea Japan tournament takes place at the venue Zepp Tokyo. The auditorium is in darkness while the ring is spotlit. The audience is evenly divided between men and women. Rays of light bounce off a revolving disco ball and Bon Jovi thunders from the speakers as the wrestlers strut in. Ticker tape showers through the air.

Hirota, the youngest of the Gaea wrestlers, shimmies into the ring in a pink cowboy outfit with suspenders and chaps, wriggling her hips seductively. Satomura, one of the favourites, wears a shiny red PVC outfit and boots. Yamada, tall and impassive, is in white, black and gold chaps. Among their opponents are a formidable blond giant named Diamond Kansai in a spangly green, white and gold outfit and the witch-like Devil Masami, with unkempt waist-length black tresses and a black leather bondage suit, who brandishes a whip.

They are like characters from a manga cartoon come to life. Long hair flying, they break every rule in the book. They pull each other's hair, kickbox, bite and wallop each other with chairs, wooden boards and a giant white oil can. The fights are choreographed but not rigged. It doesn't matter who wins. The point is entertainment.

The All Japan Women's tournament is different. It takes place in the daytime in drab Korakuen Hall. Hirose scuttles back and forth across the mats, scrubbing frantically before the tournament begins. She is still the dogsbody. It will be months before she can take part in a proper fight.

The audience is largely male, a strange unshaven collection of youthful obsessives. Hiroaki Fukushima, 28, is one of them. Dressed in a fuzzy blue and grey sleeveless jumper and striped T-shirt, Fukushima has come to watch the wrestling on his own. He describes himself as a worker in a railway company. He claims that has attended every All Japan Women's tournament for the last three years. He boasts that he has all their CDs, all their videos, all their T-shirts and all their volumes of photographs, several of each. He clutches rolls of blue, orange and silver ticker tape ready to throw.

"The matches are violent," he says, licking his lips. "If men wrestle, it's normal. But to see women hit each other – that's beautiful. I like Nomi-san. She's the most popular."

The opponents include fighters from Arson, a rival group, and freelance wrestlers, some of the most formidable in the profession. The early matches feature less experienced fighters. But already it is clear that these fights are for real. These women batter their opponent's faces, kick each other in the throat and head and spring back from the ropes to lam into the opponent's chest with their feet.

Then comes the second half. Takahashi, plump and baby-faced in a white and red fringed outfit, comes roaring into the ring with her beefy partner. But before the referee has time to announce them, their opponents, glamorous in leather, leap on them and hurl them out. The audience scatters as they rampage through, grabbing chairs to whack them over the head. The leather girls drag Takahashi to the side of the hall and smash her face against the wall. Then they pull her back into the ring and wrench her neck against the ropes. She is dazed and covered in blood. Her partner takes over while she recovers her breath. Then she charges back into the ring like a fury, snarling and clapping her hands as she punches again and again. The bout lasts a good twenty minutes. But then her partner is pinned, shoulders to the floor, for the count of three. Our side have lost.

Fukushima is ready with his ticker tape as pretty Nomi enters the ring for the last bout, dressed in pink and silver. She is sexy and visibly heterosexual, unlike some of the other wrestlers. But prettiness and popularity have their drawbacks. The opponents – large and butch – drag her out of the ring, pull her hair and kick her chest, back and mouth. The audience, who were largely impassive while Takahashi took her beating, are on the edge of their seats, screaming.

In its way, the wrestling is beautiful to watch. The women are brilliant athletes, graceful and balletic. Nomi backflips across the ring like the replicant in the movie *Blade Runner*, grabs her burly opponent around the neck with her legs and hurls her down onto her back. Her partner Nakanishi, small and ferocious, climbs the post at the corner of the ring, somersaults backwards, twists in the air, and lands with one foot in the middle of each opponent's chest, winding them.

But by the end of the match Nomi is in bad shape. She staggers about, her eyes rolling. When she is knocked down she can hardly get back on her feet. But somehow she continues till the full 30 minutes is played out. The other side wins on points. Nomi is prone on the canvas, unable to move. The seconds roll her off and carry her away slumped on their shoulders.

Backstage, Takahashi appears with a blood-stained towel around her head. Her face is pale and puffy.

"It was particularly tough today," she says. "We need to study their form better."

But there is no chance of a rest. There is another tournament the next day.

"Sometimes I feel like giving up," she confesses. "But not today. When I've been beaten like this I want to get straight back in the ring and get my own back."

The ring is being dismantled. Hirose pants by, with three long planks of wood on her shoulder. It will be her turn soon in the ring. It seems a hard price to pay for fame. \*