Telling the story of the first foreigner to reach the top rank in Japan’s national sport—sumo—has been an act as complex as the story itself, as I found out after several failed attempts at what wound up looking like the novelized version of the adventures of Chad Rowan. My straight third-person narrative depicted well the cultural challenges he faced upon arriving in Tokyo, but left me little room for analysis, often lacked immediacy, and obscured my sources. In a word, it came off as “definitive”—a narrative stance at odds with my own understanding of the very personal nature of my research quest and what it yielded.

I’ve addressed the limits of the pure-biography voice by adding a frame to ground the telling of Rowan’s life as an autobiographical exercise—a tangible experience itself that is certainly not “definitive.” Many readers of early drafts have been grateful for the “I” and the immediacy it lends to the strange world of professional sumo. A few, though, have found it getting in the way of their search for the history of Chad Rowan. I am a character in this book for a number of reasons explained in greater detail in the “Biographer’s Note,” one of the most important being my wish to emphasize that any biography is a biography, not the biography.

This particular take on Rowan’s life was born of an idea that only took off when I flew to Tokyo in June 1998, because I’d somehow managed to secure an interview with Jesse Kuhaulua after simply calling him. Kuhaulua was the first foreigner to retire into sumo elderhood and open his own training facility, and the first foreigner to cultivate not only a yokozuna—sumo’s highest-ranked competitor—but the very first foreign yokozuna: Rowan, or as he became known in Japan, Akebono. Having lived a year in Japan back in 1992, I’d become fascinated at how Kuhaulua, Rowan, and several other men from Hawai’i appeared to have assimilated into Japanese culture as a condition for succeeding in sumo. In 1992, I’d found everything from using a pay phone to
buying food a huge challenge. And once the excitement of living abroad wore off, many of the cultural adjustments I had to make annoyed me. But then I would turn on the TV and see Chad Rowan from Waimānalo bantering away fluently in Japanese, his hair styled in a samurai topknot, and I would think, “What must he have had to go through? And what must he be going through now?”

The extent of Rowan’s cultural-athletic success came down to the powerful image that appeared on my TV screen a few months before my phone call to Kūhaulua. The winter Olympics were held in Japan that year, and like all Olympic opening ceremonies, Nagano’s included strong visual definitions of the host country’s unique culture. In this case, a kimono-clad sumo wrestler led each delegation of athletes. Sumo was a natural choice for the Nagano organizers as a cultural symbol, stretching back in its current form more than a hundred years, and in one form or another all the way back to Japanese creation myths. Once the athletes were assembled, the yokozuna entered to purify the grounds by performing the steps of his sacred ring-entering ceremony.

What amazed me about this deeply moving scene was that the yokozuna lifting his legs high and pounding his feet into the ground was not some descendent of ancient samurai who had spent his youth being drilled in the ways of Bushido. No, the man ordained to chase away the demons by performing this detailed ritual dating back more than two hundred years was born an American. In a country whose aversion to foreigners is well documented, the man picked to personify “Japanese” to one of the largest television audiences in history was Chad Rowan, now Yokozuna Akebono Taro, a citizen of the Land of the Rising Sun for less than two years.

“Come Wednesday,” his boss told me over the phone. “You know where my stable is?”

Less than two hours after landing at Narita International Airport, I stood in front of the Kokugikan, in awe and full of energy despite the long trip. There it was, right in front of me: The Hall of National Sport—kokugi. Built exclusively for sumo. Not ovular, like a hockey arena used for basketball and circuses and concerts and everything else. No, it was square, because the dohyō is square, so every seat must face it head on. A grand entrance fronted by a perfectly landscaped courtyard and wide stairways on either side up to a second-level terrace. A tower in the front where the taiko drummer sits to announce the openings and closings of each tournament day. A soft green crown of a roof sloping on each of four sides meeting in perfect angles, evoking some kind of futuristic temple. This is where Jesse Kūhaulua had his retirement ceremony. Where Konishiki, the second man from Hawai’i to impact Japan’s national sport, made waves as the first foreigner to approach sumo’s top rank. Where Akebono
defeated his strongest rival to do what Konishiki could not. I could hear it all from inside the big empty building: Akebono no yūshō! Akebono no yūshō! Akebono no yūshō!

My friend David Meisenzahl was a Tokyo computer specialist, a Hawai‘i transplant, and a sumo fanatic who’d become close to most of the Hawai‘i rikishi over the course of his eight years in Japan. He met me later that evening in an Ueno bar and invited me to spend the week at his apartment, which turned out to be only a couple of blocks from Azumazeki-Beya—Kuhaulua’s sumo stable—and filled me with stories of nights out drinking with Konishiki, Akebono, Yamato, and the rest of the boys from Hawai‘i.

After a two-hour search the following morning, I found the Takasago-Beya where I’d hoped to meet Konishiki empty, its occupants having packed up and headed for the upcoming July tournament in Nagoya. By the time my taxi driver picked out nondescript Magaki-Beya from a row of similar-looking buildings on a narrow side street, morning practice was already over.

“You’re late,” the foreign rikishi said as I walked in. He was wearing a faded white practice mawashi—the belt-like apparel that makes up the sumo uniform. I’d seen pictures of Yamato, but here in person he was big, and he was intimidating: more than three hundred pounds of him spread around in perfect proportion, hair styled in a topknot combed to a point and just off center. His dark eyes, set deeply beneath his prominent forehead, gave me the feeling that George Kalima from Hawai‘i had little patience with anything that wasn’t done right.

I apologized as best I could and then explained my project to him, how I had an appointment with Kuhaulua, how I hoped to interview the other local rikishi, how I was staying with David.

He toweled off and listened to me with a who-is-this-haole-and-what-does-he-want-from-me look on his face and then said, “We’re all pretty busy this week.”

“How about right now? Twenty minutes or so would be enough.”

“Okay.” He went on for closer to thirty while the tokoyama washed and oiled his hair and resculpted his topknot. The gruff suspicion disappeared and he actually seemed pleased with the attention. I kept the focus on him as much as I could for two reasons: he had made great accomplishments in his own right and immediately saw the cultural context I wanted to put them in, so he gave a great interview. But more important, I could sense that despite the fact that Akebono was his best friend, he resented living in his fellow Hawaiian’s shadow. George Kalima should have been a star in Hawai‘i for what he had done. Instead, people who knew little about sumo were wondering why he wasn’t a yokozuna, too—a ridiculous assumption when taken in its full context.
On the third day I stood on a quiet, narrow street before a brown three-story building, a wooden sign depicting the Chinese characters for “azuma” and “zeki” next to its double doors. I walked down a hallway past the floor-to-ceiling portrait of Takamiyama—Kuhaulua’s ring name before he retired into the elder name Azumazeki Oyakata—that had hung from the Kokugikan rafters following his 1972 Nagoya championship. On the left through sliding doors on the way to the public viewing area, I saw a bronze bust of the man and a glass display case. Inside the case, tied in a circle with an elaborate loop and adorned with five zigzag strips of white paper, was the brilliant white rope worn during the sacred dohyō-iri ritual by Yokozuna Akebono.

I sat on a hardwood floor area raised about two feet above the training room floor, where some of the young boys were already working themselves up into a sweat, lifting their muscled legs high in the air and stomping their bare feet into the hardened clay. From here I proceeded to watch the banzuke—the complete list of sumo’s more than eight hundred competitors written according to rank—come to life before my eyes. A copy of the most recent banzuke hung above my desk; it is updated bimonthly to determine match-ups before each of sumo’s six annual tournaments, listing in headline-black brushstrokes Yokozuna Wakanohana, Yokozuna Takanohana, Yokozuna Akebono, Ōzeki Musashimaru. The list then stretched down into smaller writing, and still smaller, and finally to scrawls the width of a single hair of a brushstroke. I was now watching the boys whose names were depicted in such comparative insignificance to Akebono’s, and the banzuke suddenly made sense, just as a deep and meaningful painting would: they were small, they were unknown, and they had to serve him. Way down at the bottom of, say, the golf rankings, you may have to give golf lessons on the side to make ends meet. But you’ll never have to carry Tiger Woods’ bags, or do his laundry, or attend to him in the bath, or stand on call to run errands for him, or iron his red shirt on Sundays.

The training area door opened and for a moment practice came to a stop as the boys all fell to bowing and shouting a military-style greeting to Azumazeki Oyakata, whose presence filled all corners of the room his massive body failed to cover. Although now well into his fifties, the Oyakata could have passed for an active rikishi and even continued to adorn his full, round face with the seventies-style pork-chop sideburns that had been his trademark back before his own topknot had been cut. He could certainly have thrown these boys around the ring at will had he so chosen, and when he sat down on a cushion at the center of the viewing platform, the mood in the room changed. Bodies now crashed into one another with the sound of a loud handclap. Faces grimaced in effort to stave off defeat at ring’s edge. Challengers immediately rushed to surround the previous bout’s winner, shouting eagerly. Those not
fighting busied themselves with foot-stomping shiko exercises or push-ups. No one merely stood around, as some of them had been before his entrance.

The Oyakata turned to me and I quietly thanked him and introduced myself.

“Two of my boys are sick today,” he said so softly. I had to concentrate just to get what he was saying, his voice having been altered to a raspy whisper by a blow to the throat years ago. “So today we only have six. We usually have eight.” He said nothing about the Yokozuna. I couldn’t see how Akebono could get any kind of workout throwing around the likes of what resembled a bunch of junior high and high school kids, and later learned that he did indeed usually visit other stables to practice against rikishi closer to his rank. “We can talk after practice is over, at about ten o’clock,” the Oyakata said.

Some thirty minutes later I could hear movement from down the stairs that enter the training area from the left, just below the clock that marked the progress of practice, protected in front by a chest-high wall. A couple of the youngest boys had finished their training and headed downstairs. I could only hope that it was to help the Yokozuna into his mawashi. The footsteps that then lumbered up the stairs were far heavier than those of the two boys’ combined. And finally Akebono’s head emerged, several steps before he reached the hard clay floor, his topknot combed into a point rather than the upturned flower shape I’d seen on TV when he did battle.

He continued to rise, and rise, two full steps after I was sure he’d already reached the top. He towered over everyone as they stopped to shout the same military greeting they had given the Oyakata. The Yokozuna paid them no attention. He bowed to his boss, firmly, respectfully greeting him. He then walked around to the other side of the ring and began lifting his legs and pounding his bare feet into the hard clay of the practice dohyō. His feet had to be twice the size of anyone’s in the room, and as they slapped against the clay floor, the muscles in his legs would ripple like those of a power lifter. In the many matches I’d seen on TV, he had looked tall, but not as big as this. His legs had even looked skinny on television, which they were when compared to his wide upper body and his big stomach. But up close they were rocks as wide as my own waist, bulging with muscle.

Most of all, he was real, and he was sitting right there in the same room, offering occasional bits of advice, nodding approval, all like I’d tried to imagine it, but now in up-close, living, breathing detail. His Hawaiian face did not in any way match the Japanese words that spilled out. From time to time he would smile, which on his expressive face had the effect of nearly changing his identity—he could look frighteningly mean, and then he could look almost babbyish, smiling warmly with his entire face rather than just his mouth and eyes. For
years my impressions of him on television and in print had conveyed a kind of abstract notion of "foreign yokozuna," but now as I sat in the same room with him, Akebono looked more like some of the big local guys I'd seen back in Hawai'i than anyone in Japan—a comparison that made his accomplishment concrete and all the more amazing to me.

And he was big. Nothing I'd read or even seen on TV had adequately captured the man's size. Six-eight, five hundred—those were big numbers. But numbers mean little when compared to a thigh, rippling with muscle, wider than my waist. I wondered what kind of workout he could possibly get against these small boys. As it turned out, not much at all. Today was a light day for him. After completing his shiko, he offered his chest for a few of them to charge into in comical attempts that didn't budge him, despite his powerful baritone shouts of encouragement. I was sure I'd get to talk to him now, but even if I didn't, the simple hour of being in the same room as he worked would deepen tenfold whatever I would end up writing.

“Okay,” the Oyakata said, turning to me, “we can talk now.” As the boys, and the Yokozuna, finished practice they bowed to him and filed downstairs for their baths.

I began by thanking Kuhaulua again and congratulating him on his incredible career as both a rikishi and an oyakata. I then explained my interest in sumo as a cultural institution. “I basically want to find out how much you had to become Japanese, or act Japanese, in order to succeed in sumo. I'd also like to talk to the Yokozuna about it if I could and if he has time, since he's now going through it along with you.”

“Sure, you can talk to him,” he said, just like that.

I struggled in my rush of excitement for a second to concentrate on the task at hand, but in light of Azumazeki Oyakata’s own significant career, this wasn’t difficult. Azumazeki Oyakata was in the position to help me the most with my cultural questions, since he had broken the ground for the rest of the local boys. His ghosted autobiography, which had come out following his 1972 Nagoya championship and long gone out of print, had at least illustrated that much. I’d brought the book along and handed it to him as a way to get the conversation going.

“John Wheeler wrote this book,” he said, opening it at random to find a half-page photo of eighteen-year-old Jesse James Kuhaulua, tall and lean, his hair too short yet for a topknot, wearing a black practice mawashi and an uncertain look. The photo was thirty-four years old. He stared at it in silence, the room disappearing around him. I could only imagine all the places Jesse and Takamiyama and Azumazeki Oyakata had to visit before finding himself back in the keikoba facing me. From rural Maui to Tokyo, in winter, 1964. If
my 165 pounds could draw stares in Narita Airport two days ago, what must this man have gone through? No Yamato or Konishiki or Musashimaru. Learn Japanese or die of loneliness. Having to make excuses for being the first foreigner to win a championship. 1,231 consecutive top-division bouts. Becoming the only foreign-born oyakata running his own stable that sumo will likely ever see. Thirty-four years.

A full minute later the Oyakata was back and talking to me. He gave me a good half-hour of thoughtful answers—a mix of history, Japan Sumo Association party-line sound bytes, and keen cultural insight along the lines of, “You have to think Japanese, and that’s the difficult part.” He would certainly have gone on longer, but Akebono emerged from the stairway again so he stood to leave. “You can talk to him now.”

The Yokozuna shook my hand and sat down next to me. He listened with pride as I thanked him for his time and congratulated him on his career. His T-shirt and shorts now covered most of the bulk that had impressed me earlier, and had the effect of making his topknot look out of place, as it would on some big local guy on the beach in Waimānalo. And up close now, he looked even bigger. The biceps bulging from his sleeves could have been another person’s thighs. Even in this sitting position he was more than a head taller than me. The hand that had enveloped mine when he greeted me could easily have palmed a basketball; I couldn’t imagine how it would feel to be slapped with one of his tsuppari hand thrusts, let alone have this giant charge at me in the ring. But then his face and manner did nothing but welcome me, communicating that he was happy to sit and talk story for as long as I wanted.

I turned on my tape recorder and explained the cultural aim of the questions I would be asking, with some examples of what I’d learned so far: from Yamato, on his own private and public selves, from Kuhaulua, on thinking Japanese. Part of his own success, I explained, was in the perfect way he had handled the press over the years. I wanted to see how much he had performed his answers—a difficult prospect considering the chance that he would be performing for me, too. I also believe that grounding my thesis made him more candid, and certainly more thoughtful. At no point did he answer a question without a distinct pause. And to be sure, many of his perfect, humbly delivered lines to the press had been sincere. But then I called him on an instance of having hidden his arrogance—arrogance natural to American sports that has no place in sumo.

“What was your goal when you got on the plane to come up here?” I asked.

He thought for a moment, and then, “Just like you. I wanted to learn about
the culture, about the people. I wanted to be one hotel manager back in Hawai‘i
and I figured it would be better if I knew Japanese. It was one free trip.”

“What about in sumo? Did you ever think you’d make it this high?”

He thought again, and then said, “No. I was never good in sports or any-
thing like that. I just wanted to try my best.”

“A few years ago I took a biography class at UH where I wrote a 25-page
paper about you. I interviewed your mom and your brother for that paper, and
your brother told me that when you left, you said you wouldn’t come home till
you were yokozuna.” Something happened in the course of these few lines.
When I said the word “biography,” the Yokozuna tilted his head just a fraction,
as if instantly intrigued. And he became more intent with what I was saying as
I went on from there. Just in that look I could tell somehow that he was decid-
ing that this wasn’t just another interview.

“Well, that’s not something you put on your forehead and walk around
with,” he said of his bold statement, with a big smile. Every eighteen-year-old
has practical goals and less practical dreams. But to this point in Akebono’s
career, his humble thoughts and opinions had been, as required by his position,
at the center of all of his interviews. From here on, I began to get a more com-
plete picture of the range of his opinion than I had ever seen in print, as well
as a much better idea of the complexity of his identity than what I had been
imagining over the years. The Yokozuna opened up, sprinkling his normal
praise for his adopted country and his sport with ways Japan could irritate
him, and moving into cultural observations best left unsaid by a yokozuna.

When we finished I turned off my tape recorder and did what I only
became sure I would do at the turning point of our interview, when he had
tilted his head at the mention of the word “biography.” I asked him if he would
be interested in working on a book about his life with me.

He took a moment and then said, “Yeah, you know I’ve been looking for
somebody to do that.” He held out his hand for me to shake, saying, “Let’s
make some money.” We spoke excitedly for a few minutes on the book’s pos-
sibilities. “Sumo’s real popular in Spain you know,” he said, evoking the 1995
Madrid exhibition tour. “I like get ’em translated into ten different languages,
sell ’em all around the world.” He then stood, saying, “I’ll call you before you
go, and we can keep in touch by e-mail when you get back to Hawai‘i.”

I walked back to David’s wondering if it had all really happened, just like
that.

That evening David arranged to have Yamato and his girlfriend, Naoko,
over for dinner. Even dressed in a T-shirt and baggy shorts that reached his
knees, George Kalima cut as imposing a figure as he had the day before, with
the full bulk of his muscled arms on display. And though he moved with a
smooth sense of grace, it was impossible to look at him without knowing he
could throw you through the wall at any moment. Despite the fact that George
was now clearly as much a foreigner as David or me, his topknot made him
look Japanese in a deeper, more far-reaching way than the salarymen out on
the street, just as the long, flowing hair on Naoko—a Japanese hula instruc-
tor—made her look more “local” than many women in Hawai‘i.

“Haole boy here is now Chad’s biographer,” David announced.

“How, I thought you were just writing one paper,” George said with a smile
and a handshake, and without a trace of so that’s why you wanted to talk to me
yesterday. “What happened?”

I told him the whole story. “He said he was going to call me tonight so we
could talk about it before I go back to Hawai‘i. I’m ready to stay here, or go
home and move out of my apartment and come back here for good.”

“Let’s try call him right now,” he said, taking out his cell phone. He let it
ring a few times and then put it away. “See, that’s the thing about Hawaiian: he
neva answers his phone. You lucky you got to talk to him at all.” The suspicion
with which Yamato had held me in our first meeting had not followed him to
David’s apartment. He had recently dropped from stardom for missed time
resulting from a bout with pneumonia that had almost killed him, and he
would find himself out of sumo’s paid ranks when the next banzuke came out.
He talked excitedly about what appeared to be his latest in a continuous flow
of money-making schemes that led us to believe he was thinking of getting out
of sumo. His recent frustration on the dohyō also led to one Japan Sumo Asso-
ciation–related complaint after the next, further underscoring the difference
between “George” and “Yamato” he had pointed out in our first meeting. He
talked of the way sumo dealt with injuries, of course, and went on to discuss its
politics and his opinions of some of the oyakata and other rikishi, punctuating
every story with a smile and the words, “but you neva heard that from me.”

By Friday morning most stables had packed up for Nagoya, including Azu-
mazeki-Beya, but Yamato still had one day of practice. This time I arrived at
Magaki-Beya on time. The man running practice was no longer the big Hawai-
ian, or Yamato, or simply a sumo wrestler. He was George. I’d eaten with him,
drank with him, laughed with him. Watching him seemed stranger now: how
could someone like George ever end up in a building like this, advising young
rikishi on grips and throws in Japan’s national sport?

“You heard from Hawaiian yet?” he asked me when practice ended.

“No yet.”

“Wait here,” he said and went off into the bath.

He soon came out. “We go,” he said. We got in a taxi and he asked if I’d
eaten yet. “You cooked for me last night,” he said, “so why not let me cook you
some lunch?” He insisted on paying for the taxi, too, which stopped in front of a red-brick building about twice the height of the surrounding buildings. A huge, maroon Hummer was parked outside, half on the sidewalk, with the Yokozuna’s name airbrushed onto its tailgate. George welcomed me to his eighth-floor apartment and chatted as he cooked, about practice, the guys in his stable, his boss. Then the phone rang.

“Yeah, he’s here eating with me right now,” George said. “Okay, we’ll come up when we’re done.”

We walked up two floors into a large three-room apartment, in all ways like any other Western-style apartment except for the huge basketball shoes and snowshoe-like zori slippers next to the door. The floors were of hardwood and not tatami. The doors swung on hinges instead of sliding. The only reminder of Japan was the apartment’s centerpiece: a 3 x 5 foot enlargement of Akebono’s Day-Fifteen victory over fellow Yokozuna Takanohana that clinched the foreigner’s most recent tournament victory. Both men are airborne in the photo, but the outcome that will follow the frozen moment is clear: Takanohana’s face is pure panic; Akebono’s a kind of delighted menace.

In real time the Yokozuna sat on the living room couch in front of the TV with an expression that never shows up anywhere near the dohyō, whether before or after a bout: he was totally relaxed and smiling, lounging in a pair of boxer shorts. His wife, Christine, and their newborn daughter sat next to him on a kitchen chair.

“Eh, you big prick!” he said to George. “You always off this early? Ho, I lucky if I can get home by dinner. I usually not back until after eleven. This my first day off in I can’t remember how long.”

“Yeah, but that’s business,” George told him, stopping to greet Christine and the baby. And then, “That’s why you live on the top floor and I stay downstairs.” He sat down on the floor across from the Yokozuna.

“Eh, sorry I neva call you,” the Yokozuna said to me. “Ever since I talked to you, I been running around like one chicken widdout one head. This my wife, Christine.” He turned to her, “He writing one book about me.”

We introduced ourselves and George launched into a detailed plan he’d been considering about opening a restaurant. He went on for a while, his best friend smiling in approval, before excusing himself to keep a doctor’s appointment. Christine then took the baby into the bedroom for a nap, leaving me alone with Yokozuna Akebono.

“Why did you choose me to do this?”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to ask you since Wednesday,” I told him. “There have to be hundreds of people who want to write your book. Why me?”

He thought for a moment and said, “When you do what I do for a living
and get to where I am, you learn how to read people. Plenty people want this or that. They like you when you’re winning, ’cause you doing good, ’cause you ’Akebono!’ When I was talking to you I could tell right away that you were sincere.” A few people around the Yokozuna would conclude that “I’m writing a book about Chad Rowan” means “I’m out to make money off of Chad Rowan’s celebrity as Akebono”—the subject of another book entirely—but I was relieved to know that the most important person knew my intentions were honorable.

“So what do you want me to do?” Again, it seemed like my question, but he was the one asking it. I told him I had to go back and move out of my apartment in Hawai’i, quit my job.

“I’d like to go on the jungyō,” I said. Jungyō was what the Sumo Association called its exhibition tours, the longest of which snaked back and forth across northern Japan through the month of August. “I think if I go on the jungyō, I should be able to get most of the information I need. After that I’d just have to be able to reach you to clear up any questions that come up.”

“We’re going home to Hawai’i after the Nagoya-Basho,” he said. Rikishi were given five days off following each major tournament, or hon-basho. “You could come back up with us when we come back. You could travel with us on the jungyō, stay with the boys. Or you could just crash in my room if you don’t mind sleeping on the floor. Let me give you my e-mail address so we can keep in touch that way. Eh, Chris!” He waited. “She must be asleep already. Try wait—I’ll go get ’um myself.” It’s no small feat for a 6’8”, 510-pound man to lift his body out of a couch, but he did and then walked across the kitchen into the bedroom.

One would think that as I got to know Chad Rowan, the question as to how a foreigner could wind up defining “Japanese” for a worldwide television audience would begin to answer itself. But the opposite proved true. There seemed nothing miraculous about Chad from Hawai’i, nothing that set him apart as some expert on how to read cultural situations and act accordingly. If anything, Chad reminded me of his cousin Nathan—a kind and articulate man who took care of his family, took pride in his job, and loved nothing more than to spend his weekends having a few beers with his friends. Yokozuna Akebono struck me, in this way, as more typical than remarkable, leading me to wonder over and over again: How did he do it?

The answer could only come from a research quest I began in earnest that afternoon. Hours of interviews with family members, former and current riki-shi, former coaches and teachers, close friends, and Chad Rowan himself. Hours of immersion in my subject’s life as Yokozuna Akebono. Volumes of secondary source material. The summer jungyō, parts of three succeeding
tours, daily attendance at two *hon-basho* and parts of four others, hours back in Hawai‘i talking story with Rowan’s mother, who had become a close friend over the years, or golfing with Nathan. It would all add up to a very personal story far more complex than the obvious sports narrative a cursory look at Rowan’s life suggests. The best way to tell *this* version of the man’s life would be to weave many sources directly into the narrative, to be as honest as I could about what I felt it added up to. That afternoon in his apartment, the Yokozuna returned from the bedroom with one of the most important sources.

“Maybe you can use this stuff,” he said, handing me a stack of papers. There was a sumo glossary downloaded from a sumophile’s Web site and several generic pieces on sumo history downloaded from some other site, much of it highlighted in yellow or pink marker.

And there were four other typed, single-spaced pages that began like this: “It’s a late night in Japan. It’s September 25, 1997 and we just got through with a *basho*. I had a rough time during this *basho* due to a leg injury. I just got a new computer so I decided to write down some of the things that happened in my life here in Japan (maybe someday I might get lucky and someone might want to write and actually read my story).”