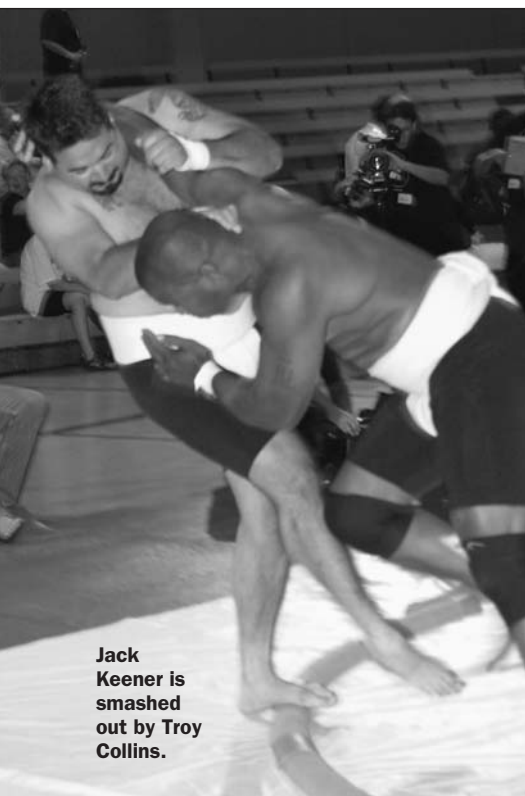




Panayotopoulos (181 pounds) tries to move Barber (460 pounds) in the Openweight round.



Lightweight Jason Maron lifts out Peter Panayotopoulos.



Jack Keener is smashed out by Troy Collins.

2002 U.S. SUMO OPEN

Crash of the Titans

By Adam J. Lee

Photos by K&M Digital Photo

Fans at the second annual U.S. Sumo Open on August 25, 2002 at UCLA, were impressed to see 50 sumo wrestlers from 13 countries crash together in a fierce competition, dominated by foreign teams.

In 2001, visiting champions from three Japanese universities destroyed the field at the first annual competition, but in 2002, the Japanese presence was limited. However, although the large and game American squad gave it their all, the outcome was little changed as they were knocked around by the visiting European teams this time!

There were several upsets in the competition, but the most astounding was the dominance of Estonian middleweight Aap Uspenski, who won both the Middleweight and Openweight competitions, defeating opponents twice his weight in the process. American men did very well in the Lightweight class, but failed to even medal in the Middleweight or Heavyweight, although middleweight Troy Collins did grab the Openweight bronze medal.

While most Americans are familiar with Japanese professional sumo, where there are no weight classes, international amateur sumo has changed the face (and body) of the sport. With three weight classes for men and three for women, we can watch athletes of all sizes and genders compete. Nevertheless, the Openweight class, where all sizes compete together, proved the most entertaining.

Men's Lightweight (85 kg/187 pounds)

Although the Lightweight field was quite diverse, athletes from Japan, Vietnam, Mongolia, Bulgaria, and Australia were eliminated early, leaving four Americans in the semi-finals — Trevor Roberts, Jason Maron, Trent Sabo, and Peter Panayotopoulos, all



833 pounds collide as Madis Ounapuu meets Gyula Bujtas.



Samoan Asi Faoa (right) grabs the belt of LAPD officer Mark Mireles.



U.S. Champion Mahshid Tarazi gives up a belt grip to Estonian Viktoria Kuznetsova.



Estonian Erge Nugis gets a quick belt grip on 108-pound May Chung of Hong Kong.



American Joe Butler grabs the leg of Polish Wojciech Poczta.

2002 U.S. SUMO OPEN

with freestyle wrestling backgrounds. Gold medalist Roberts went undefeated, beating his opponents with lightning-fast thrusting attacks, catching them off balance, and knocking them down and out. He won each match in under 10 seconds.

At 177 pounds, Roberts was followed by 176-pound Maron and 185-pound Sabo. Roberts was philosophical about his victory, "I just went out as hard and fast as possible — there were a lot of close matches."

Men's Middleweight (115 kg/253 pounds)

With 16 competitors, the Middleweight class featured some intense bouts. Former U.S. freestyle wrestling champion and local favorite Joe Butler didn't even advance to the quarter-finals, but American newcomers Joe Davis (215 pounds), Jack Keener (253 pounds), and Troy Collins (245 pounds) did. Only Keener made it to the semi-finals, where he lost to eventual champion Aap Uspenski. Samoan Asi Faoa faced Marek Paczkow of Poland in the other semi-final match. Faoa, the only Samoan in the tournament, drew enormous crowd support for his fierce stares, wild hair, and pre-bout psyche-out screams. Uspenski, who went 12-1 for the day, later said that Faoa was his biggest fear, and it was an accurate assessment, as his only loss all day was to

Peter Debelak (left) gets slammed back by Lightweight champion Trevor Roberts.



Heavyweight Champion Petar Stoyanov (340 pounds) clashes with Juri Uustalu (430 pounds).



Faoa, in the preliminary rounds.

Faoa, despite his speed, strength, and physical prowess, lacked experience and it cost him against Paczkow, the former World Championship bronze medalist. At the start, Paczkow went in low, grabbing Faoa's right leg. Faoa managed to keep his balance as they struggled around the ring, but Paczkow wouldn't let go and soon forced Faoa out. Faoa went on to win the third place match against Jack Keener, the current U.S. Sumo Middleweight Champion.

Middleweight finalists Uspenski and Paczkow knew each other's styles and had fought many times before. All day long at the U.S. Sumo Open, Uspenski defeated opponents by getting both hands inside on his opponents' belts as soon as the matches began. Keeping elbows in and head low, Uspenski would force his foes back. Try as they might, his opponents couldn't escape once he got his grip on their belts. As the current World Sumo Championship silver medalist, his experience and consistent strategy proved very effective.

Paczow, on the other hand, favored a more football-like charge, thrusting forward and knocking his opponents out before they could grab his belt. He obviously knew what Uspenski would try, so at the start he lunged forward, elbows tucked in, keeping Uspenski's arms away from his belt. Uspenski, unable to get inside, took



May Chung of Hong Kong celebrates her Lightweight gold medal.

Paczow's onslaught by stepping back and to the side. Paczkow, off-balance, fell forward and hit the ground, giving Uspenski his first gold medal of the day.

Men's Heavyweight (over 115 kg/253 pounds)

The early Heavyweight rounds separated the men from the boys, as only one

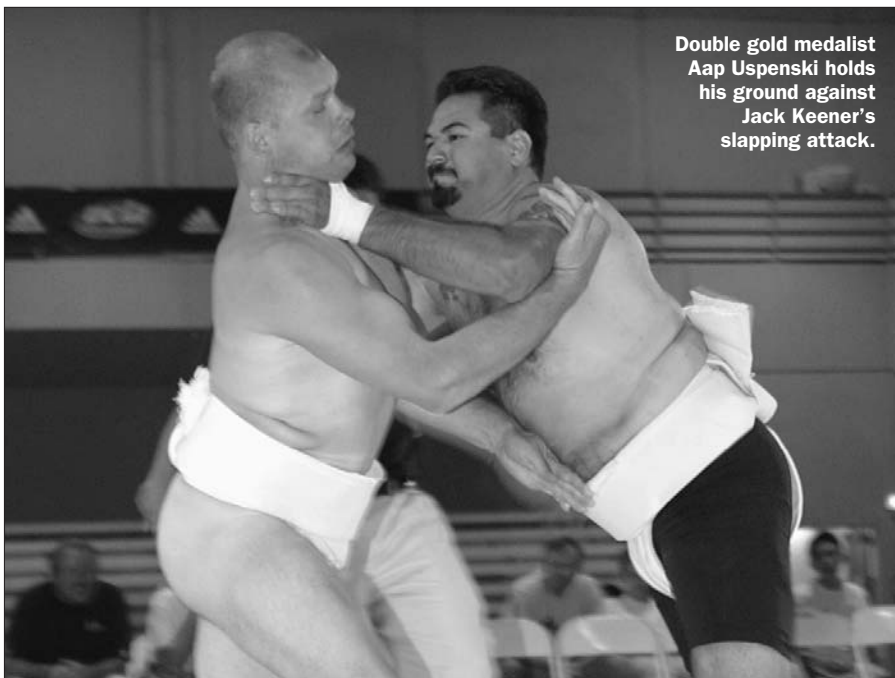
of seven Americans made it to the semi-finals. Jeff Haywood, a 350-pound football standout, hurt his knee against Bulgarian Petar Stoyanov in his semi-final match, and so missed the only chance for an American Heavyweight medal. In the other semi-final match, 357-pound Barnabas Toth of Hungary put up an incredible fight against 460-pound Madis Ounapuu of Estonia. Toth, at 5'9", was dwarfed by 6'5" Ounapuu, but Toth smashed him back at the start. Moving constantly, Toth caught the larger man off balance, grabbed the belt and struggled to push Ounapuu out. Ounapuu, trying for a belt grip, side-stepped and avoided the attack, but Toth kept him going back and almost forced him out again. For nearly a minute, Toth fought relentlessly, grabbing, pushing, and smashing with his head, while Ounapuu struggled to stay alive. Finally, the bigger man got a belt grip, got his balance, and bumped Toth out.

This set up a final match between long-time rivals Ounapuu and Stoyanov of Bulgaria. Stoyanov, the current European champion, weighed in at "only" 340 pounds, but at 6'6" he was even taller than Ounapuu, and very muscular. Stoyanov kept a low center of balance, with legs wide and knees bent. Getting a good belt grip, he pushed upward and forced

Continued on page 96



U.S. Sumo Open director Andrew Freund announces pre-event ceremonies.



Double gold medalist Aap Uspenski holds his ground against Jack Keener's slapping attack.

2002 U.S. SUMO OPEN

Continued from page 39

Ounapuu back and out. After a controversial earlier victory against Ounapuu's countryman, 430-pound Juri Uustalu, the Bulgarian Stoyanov was fortunate to avoid Estonian revenge.

Men's Openweight

Heavyweight champion Petar Stoyanov was upset, though, in the Openweight competition by "little" Joe Davis, a former college football player, 5'9" and 215 pounds. Davis, however, was matched up against Uspenski for the second time and lost to him again. The funniest Openweight match was 157-pound Hiroshi Yamashita of Japan and

maintained an outside belt grip. Uspenski, in a superior position, forced Collins back slowly. Collins struggled to keep low as he back-pedaled, but Uspenski kept him by the edge and Collins finally fell straight back with Uspenski's weight on top.

Meanwhile, Barnabas Toth defeated his Hungarian countryman Gyula Bujtas in the other semi-final match, so 245-pound Collins faced the 377-pound Bujtas in the third place match. This time, Collins stayed low, got inside, and forced Bujtas out. So Collins, an LAPD officer and long-time freestyle wrestler, managed to get the only male American medal outside of the Lightweight class.

The Openweight final match was truly the icing on the cake. Middleweight



460-pound American Marcus Barber. Yamashita made a valiant charge, struggling to topple Barber, but Barber held his ground and soon swept Yamashita to the ground. Yamashita did get his share of cheers, though, for his ferocious attempt. He had vowed to topple a "big man" before the event, but offered a gracious "I did my best," in defeat.

While not all of the athletes entered the Openweight, a lot of the top athletes did. Four American hopefuls — 460-pound Barber, 253-pound Keener, 220-pound Francis Deramos, and 215-pound Davis — were eliminated in the quarter-finals, leaving Troy Collins as the sole American with Openweight medal hopes.

Collins, at 245 pounds, faced the indomitable 231-pound Uspenski in the semi-finals. Uspenski got his usual inside grip in a split-second, while Collins

champion Aap Uspenski (231 pounds) faced Heavyweight bronze medalist Barnabas Toth (357 pounds). Toth displayed tremendous energy and balance against several heavyweight behemoths, but he was facing a superb technician in Uspenski. While most athletes had been taking just a minute for pre-bout rituals and stare-downs, Uspenski took over 3 minutes, slowly stretching, facing his opponent, and focusing. Some creative American fans began a chant of "Beat him, Aap!" but the pun may have been lost on the Estonian contingent.

At the get-go, both men went for the belt, and each managed one hand inside and one hand outside. Uspenski, however, stayed lower, forcing his head into the much broader Toth, and leaned on him. Toth also leaned forward and tried to reach

Continued on page 98

2002 U.S. SUMO OPEN

Continued from page 96

inside Uspenski's grip, but the Estonian tightened his elbows and kept his iron hold on the belt. For a few moments, both men stood their ground, until Uspenski slowly made his move, forcing Toth back inch by inch with superior leverage. Finally, Toth backed out of the ring, and Uspenski walked away with his second gold medal of the day.

Significantly, two of the three Openweight medalists were middleweights, showing that there is definitely a place for the "little" man in international sumo. After the event, the modest Uspenski commented, "I just tried to use the technique that I know from (freestyle) wrestling, to get inside. I was able to get good belt grips early."

Women's Matches

While women's sumo is very new, there were several impressive fights, including Heavyweight and Openweight final matches between top members of the Estonian team — Millie Sang and Viktoria Kuznetsova, who both defeated all their other opponents. Sang won the Heavyweight and Kuznetsova the Openweight, with each of their epic duels against each other lasting almost two minutes, as they clung tightly together, trying judo-like throws and trips.

U.S. Sumo Champion Mahshid Tarazi managed third place in the Heavyweight class, and American Ashlee Irish was second in the Lightweight. Crowd favorite May Chung of Hong Kong, at only 108 pounds, won the Lightweight division with superior strength, speed, and technique. Chung, definitely not your typical sumo wrestler, medaled at last year's event, and was proud to get the gold this year: "I'm in good shape, so I feel I can beat bigger opponents," she stated.

As with American men, the American women lagged behind the international teams, but there is hope for the future.

The Growth of American Sumo

U.S. Sumo Open director and announcer, Andrew Freund, was impressed by the rapid development of

the Americans, and especially the California Sumo Association athletes, in the last couple years. "CSA started practicing here at UCLA in 1998 with three members. Since then, the program has grown to over 30 members."


A lot of this is thanks to the presence of Svetoslav Binev, the two-time World Sumo



Openweight medalists Toth (silver), Uspenski (gold), and Collins (bronze).

Champion, who has been coaching the CSA team since 2000. At the first U.S. Sumo Open in 2001, after just a few months of training, several of Binev's students beat much bigger visiting sumo wrestlers from Japan. "I see a lot of potential here in Los Angeles," says Binev, formerly the Bulgarian Sumo Team coach, and an international sumo phenomenon himself. "With the right training, some of these guys have potential to medal in the World Sumo Championships."

But there is still a long way to go. Sumo here doesn't have the same kind of sponsorship and media coverage like more traditional American pastimes. "We definitely need to develop a regular fan base, stronger athletes, and serious sponsors to bring the competition to the next level," says Freund. "There are a lot of interested people out there, so I think it's just a matter of time."

While pro Japanese sumo has no weight classes, the new weight divisions and the addition of women's sumo in international competition have made the sport more accessible to athletes and fans alike. Sumo has been put up for Olympic consideration, so we'll see if it becomes a new Olympic sport in years to come. For American fans, though, the U.S. Sumo Open is a great and exciting start. 

For more information on the U.S. Sumo Open and other sumo events and demonstrations, call (310) 288-3641 or visit www.usasumo.com.